THE EXPERIENCES OF REFUGEE STUDENTS IN
UNITED STATES POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the essence of the lived experience of six students from refugee backgrounds who have navigated postsecondary education in the United States. The researcher used phenomenology to explore and identify the essence of navigating postsecondary education in the U.S. as a refugee because of its focus on participants’ understanding of their lived experiences. The participants of this study represented a range of ages, ethnic and national backgrounds, and academic experiences. Each participant contributed to the full data collection process, which consisted of one journal entry and two semi-structured interviews. The interview sessions and journal entries allowed the researcher to generate biographical profiles for each participant and discover five key themes. Those themes were mobility and higher education; U.S. English language acquisition; negotiating a bicultural identity; connections to a community of national origin; and sources of support for persisting in higher education.

The themes summarizing participants’ collective experiences highlight specific challenges encountered when navigating higher education in the U.S. In doing so, this study expands scholarly and practitioner understanding of the diversity of the U.S. postsecondary environment. However, further research is needed to deepen understanding of how colleges and universities can best support the needs of these students. Those findings shaped the recommendations for future scholarly research. Researchers must continue to clarify policies and practices pertaining to the postsecondary access of students born outside the United States, and
especially those students who are from refugee backgrounds. The study concludes with suggestions for professional practice in higher education and student affairs.
In loving memory of my great-aunt, Doreen Rowena Kersellius:

My friend, advocate, and champion, you gave light to all dreams.

Your love will not be forgotten and your memory will always be cherished.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my mother, Eileen Evadne Glasgow Felix:

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- Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION OF STUDY

In the United States, traditional discourse pertaining to the intersection of diversity and education has been largely limited to the binary of Black and White domestic students (Barton & Coley, 2010; Hartney & Flavin, 2014; Ogbu, 2004; Tyson & Darity, 2005), or race and ethnicity (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Kim, 2011). Some view the growing presence of Native American, Asian American, and Hispanic and Latino student enrollment as the leading cause of demographic shifts within higher education (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). Such rapidly changing demographics have captured the attention of practitioners, researchers, and scholars alike. Yet, in spite of heightened awareness of the racial and ethnic diversity of college students, relatively little attention is applied to the multifaceted scope of students born outside the United States. In fact, much of the literature about students born outside the U.S. discusses immigration status (Roy, 2015; Zota, 2009), the growing presence of international students (Ngo & Lumadue, 2014), and discriminatory experiences and practices directed towards international students (Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Lockwood (2010), in a study of the educational experiences specific to refugee youth, noticed the latter and commented on the growing diversity of United States education. Lockwood stated, “the dichotomy of racism is no longer just black and white, but now includes people from all over the world who are a multitude of colors” (p. 66). The impact of these students’ participation in the education landscape is profound, as students born outside the United States are a diverse group that is growing in size.

In general, students born outside the United States exist on the margins of current dialogue pertaining to the composition of higher education in the U.S. For that reason, this research examined diversity within the higher and postsecondary environment in the United
States, and applied its attention exclusively to those students who come from refugee backgrounds (SRBs). On a global scale, there is some concern that refugee students might be under-enrolled in the higher education environment. This perception of under-enrollment stems from the number of refugee youth who fail to complete their secondary schooling due to the disruption that precedes refugee resettlement. To that end, Brownell’s (2013) report of the many challenges faced by refugees shared, “The United Nations refugee agency estimates that fewer than 1 percent of refugees globally are enrolled in higher education programs” (para. 4). This concern for the enrollment of refugees in higher education has likely led the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees to include higher and tertiary education as a key priority of the 2012-2016 education plan (United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, 2012a). Based on these facts, in addition to extant scholarly literature, it is evident that we know little about SRBs’ actual experiences as they navigate higher education. This study then, is in a position to deepen practitioner and scholar awareness of the nature of refugee students’ college experiences.

**Statement of the Problem**

The undergraduate experience is highly transformative and can constitute one of the greatest milestones of one’s life. In fall 2010, there were approximately 21 million people enrolled in colleges and universities across the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Between fall 2001 and fall 2011, the percentage of adults who had earned a bachelor’s degree increased from 26% to 30%. Current trends suggest that by fall 2020, the number of students enrolled in postsecondary education will increase by at least 15%. These enrollment and degree attainment trends suggest that enrollment in higher education is growing, yet, hidden within the diversity of the college student population are refugees. Even though refugee status can be challenging to the undergraduate experience, very little research has delved
into the unique circumstances faced by SRBs. For many, refugee status can complicate the postsecondary experience due to adjusting to the language, a new culture, and a new academic system (Morrice, 2013; Silburn, Earnest, Butcher, & de Mori, 2008; Tobenkin, 2006).

Defining Refugee Status

By law, persons categorized as refugees are of special humanitarian concern to the United States (Haines, 1996). Eligibility for refugee status is regulated based on predetermined criteria detailed in the McCarran-Walter Act, which replaced race-based quotas with quotas based on nationality in 1952 (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2013). Most people refer to the McCarran-Walter Act as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. According to USCIS (2013), section 101(a) (42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1952 contains the legal definition of a refugee. This act defined a refugee as:

any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. (Immigration and Nationality Act, 1952, §101(a) 42)

A vital component of the definition of refugee is the ability to prove an experience of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution. Forced to flee their country of birth, refugees resettle to countries perceived to be safer than their home countries.

Purpose of the Study

This research addressed the gap in the awareness and knowledge of students from refugee
backgrounds in the United States. Fears pertaining to persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion are at the very core of the definition of a refugee provided by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. It is precisely those fears that shape the process leading to refugee status. With that in mind, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the essence of the lived experience of six students from refugee backgrounds (SRBs) who have navigated, or continue to navigate, postsecondary education in the United States. The experience of navigating postsecondary education in the United States was not limited to a narrow focus on only the specific time that students from refugee backgrounds spent as students on a particular campus. Rather, in this study, I have considered the postsecondary experience as comprised of 1) access to and motivations to pursue higher education; 2) the college choice process; 3) campus involvement and support; and, 4) persistence and graduation. Incorporation and acculturation, resilience and grit, and self-efficacy created the framework for understanding these experiences; those concepts touch on the driving factors that shaped SRBs’ experiences within higher education.

As a body of theoretical perspectives, incorporation and acculturation, resilience and grit, and self-efficacy worked together to make meaning of the complexity of the educational experiences of SRBs as they navigate U.S. higher education. Incorporation and acculturation offer insight into what happens when different cultures encounter each other. Whereas incorporation argues that the dominant group absorbs less dominant groups (Rong & Preissle, 2009), according to Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits (1936), per the definition of acculturation, there are changes to one or both groups. The American Psychological Association (2014) defined resilience, a strengths based construct, as “the process of adapting well in the face of
adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress (para. 4).” To
Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, Kelly and Peterson (2007), grit is a predictor of success as it
relates to establishing long-term goals. The concept of self-efficacy refers to people's
judgements about their own ability to achieve a specific goal or outcome (Bandura, 1997).
Collectively, these perspectives shed light on different aspects of the essence of the experience of
students from refugee backgrounds in U.S. postsecondary education.

Background to the Problem

In order to understand the essence of the experiences of SRBs in U.S. higher education, it
is important to understand the categorization of people born outside the United States. Called
“foreign-born” by both Kandel (2011) and the U.S. Census (Grieco et al., 2012), the language
pertaining to people born outside the U.S. is filled with nuance and informed by U.S. laws.
According to Kandel (2011), the term “foreign-born” refers to individuals born outside the
United States who do not automatically acquire citizenship at birth. Based on that definition, the
label “foreign-born” divides people living within U.S. borders into two nativity statuses: native
born and foreign born. The definition offered by Kandel (2011) and utilized by the U.S. Census
(Grieco et al., 2012), guided this dissertation research, which is strictly focused on a specific
group of “foreign-born” people – students from refugee backgrounds (SRBs). Although some
studies have included both refugee and asylum-seeking students within the same body of work,
this study did not.

Students from refugee backgrounds are distinct from other categories of students born
outside the United States because of the factors that led them to relocate. The forced migration
of SRBs is an experience that fundamentally distinguishes them from other categories of students
born outside the U.S. For example, in contrast to SRBs, international students have freely
chosen to study in the U.S. for a predetermined length of time. To facilitate access to postsecondary education in the U.S., international students receive a temporary visa and must abide by employment restrictions (Hazen & Alberts, 2006; Kandel, 2011). In this regard, international students differ significantly from immigrant students. Whereas international students are studying in the United States on a temporary basis, immigrant students permanently reside in the U.S. and may legally work without restriction (Kandel, 2011).

**Immigration in the United States**

Even though immigration does not physically redraw nations or shift geographic boundaries, to some extent, immigration can redraw a nation by changing its population. Based on historical trends, it is appropriate to view the United States as a nation of immigrants. Anderson (2010) commented, “there is no way to tell the story of immigration without retelling parts of American history. . . those who came to America and stayed in the years before and after the nation’s founding were immigrants” (p. 1). Similarly, USCIS (2004) asserted, “The United States of America is a nation of immigrants, people who have come from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds, speaking many languages and bringing diverse talents to the United States” (p. v). With the exception of Native Americans, all United States citizens are able to claim some experience of voluntary or involuntary immigration. In contrast, colonization, coercion, and immigration transformed Native American life and forged a space for the emergence of a new and more diversified population (Martin & Midgley, 2003).

Throughout history, immigrants to the U.S., whether forced or voluntary, included the first colonial settlers to Jamestown in 1607 (Anderson, 2010), African slaves brought to U.S. soil (Anderson, 2010; Rong & Preissle, 2009), Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants during the late 1800s, and the arrival of southern and eastern Europeans during the 20th century (Rong &
Preissle, 2009). The U.S. has also experienced an influx of immigrants from Latin America since the 1970s (Rong & Preissle, 2009). In addition, roughly 17 million immigrants entered the United States between 1990 and 2005 (Rong & Preissle, 2009). Since then, the Pew Hispanic Center (2013) reported that the immigrant population has increased by 2.4 million people between 2007 and 2012 alone.

Today, the United States is an extremely diverse nation in terms of religion, race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status. Given the scale of the foreign-born population in the United States, the implications for society are significant and widespread. For example, numerous researchers have investigated the impact of immigration on the economy and the workplace (Cordero-Guzman & Nuñez, 2013; Gold, 2009; Borjas, 2006) and schools (Paat, 2013; Bang, 2011; Chu, 2009). In spite of that, the flow of people across borders is much more than an economic or political concern. This is because human migration simultaneously intersects with several levels of the educational system, including higher education.

The myriad policies that inform higher education has a significant impact on the way in which students born outside the United States are able to access it. However, very little research exists examining the concerns of students born outside the U.S. who live in the United States. Particularly within the college and university environment, these students are typically lumped together as a homogenous group with minimal attention paid to the categorical distinctions between international students, migrant students, undocumented students, immigrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking students. Some researchers, however, do attempt to draw distinctions between these student groups. Hazen and Alberts (2006), for example, argued that international students and immigrant students differ in meaningful ways, and considered intent to remain in a country as an important differentiator. Other researchers considered the differences between
immigrant and refugee students, and concluded that refugee students have distinct needs. Earnest, Joyce, de Mori, and Silvagni (2010), for example, studied refugee and international students. They found that refugee “participants did note that their experiences were not the same as international students” (Earnest et al., 2010, p. 170). The data compiled through that study compelled those researchers to conclude that universities should offer additional support mechanisms to ensure the success of students from refugee backgrounds.

**Research Question**

This dissertation research expanded upon the existing body of work pertaining to refugee college students. Given that so few studies have explored their higher education experiences, the primary goal of this research was to probe into the U.S. postsecondary experiences of students from refugee backgrounds. Based on that objective, this research looks at participants’ resettlement to the United States. In addition, the single research question guiding this study was *What is the essence of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds when navigating postsecondary education in the United States?*

**Scope of the Study**

This research focused on the phenomenon of resettled refugees enrolled in, or recently graduated from, a four-year or two-year institution. The study examined the intersection of refugee status and enrollment in a degree-seeking program, and did not restrict the parameters of the study to national origin. In other words, this study did not focus exclusively on refugee students from particular countries (i.e., Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, etc.) or regions of the world (i.e., the Middle East, West Africa, etc.). Instead, the research concentrated on the overarching phenomenon of being a student from a refugee background who is currently negotiating, or has
Significance of the Study

The demography of higher education is growing more and more diverse. From 1976 to 2010, the racial and ethnic composition of enrolled college and university students rose from 9% to 14% Black, 3% to 13% Hispanic, and 2% to 6% Asian/Pacific Islander (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). In contrast to the aforementioned racial and ethnic minority groups, the percentage of enrolled White students declined from 83% to 61% during the same time. Growth in the immigrant student population is also contributing to the rising diversity of the college and university student population in the U.S. Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, and Suárez-Orozco (2011) defined immigrant students as foreign-born students who attend college or university as immigrants and intend to remain in the United States permanently. Teranishi et al. estimated that nearly 25% of 6.5 million degree-seeking community college students during the 2003-2004 academic year came from an immigrant background. However, lost in the changed context of higher education is a full depiction of the presence and scale of students from refugee backgrounds. This may be due, in part, to the pathway to legal permanent residence that accompanies refugee resettlement. Specifically, the U.S. government removes the notation of refugee status on official documents after refugees receive their new status as legal permanent residents. Therefore, it is challenging to identify this population within the U.S.

This study is also important because refugee access to higher education is a key priority of the United Nations’ Education Strategy (United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees [UNHCR], 2012a). Furthermore, given that the United States is a leader in refugee resettlement (Roxas, 2011), it is important to understand refugee students’ access to and experiences within the U.S. postsecondary education system. This study provided greater insight into the nature of
refugee students’ experiences by isolating their recollections from those of other students. In doing so, the wider contribution of this research is twofold. First, research on this subject informs readers of the experiences of being a refugee student in higher education. Detailed research has the potential to deepen practitioner understanding of the social and cultural contexts of postsecondary education. Second, this study magnified the voices of an often-overlooked subset of the student population. Typically submerged into the wider domestic student population, or mistaken for traditional “international students,” it is critical for colleges and universities to understand the unique experiences of SRBs. Perhaps above all else, it is important to realize that the diversity among the group of students born outside the United States is both real and significant.

Definitions of Key Terms

The meaning of terms related to refugees can vary among countries. For the purposes of this research, the following list provides working definitions of key terms that are central to understanding this study. It is also important to be aware that United States’ laws, policies, and practices inform the definitions utilized in this research.

Asylum seekers are individuals who claim to be refugees and have applied for international protection once they arrive in a country perceived to be safer (Koser, 2007). It is possible to seek asylum outside the country in which the asylum seeker desires protection. For example, people may apply for asylum at an embassy, consulate, or within a refugee camp external to the country where refuge is desired. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2012) defined asylum seekers as:

people who move across borders in search of protection, but who may not fulfill the strict criteria laid down by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.
seeker describes someone who has applied for protection as a refugee and is awaiting the
determination of his or her status. (para. 1)

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), or any legitimate
agency acting on its behalf, must verify and evaluate claims made by asylum seekers (United
Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2012). Ultimately, the standards
detailed in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees guide the judgment of
applications for asylum (Koser, 2007). United States Citizenship and Immigration Services
finalize and approve any applications submitted for asylum in the U.S.

A citizen is a person legally recognized as belonging to a State and receives all of the
protections provided by law. In most countries, the evolution of laws related to citizenship, and
their associated consequences, originate from one of two principles: ius/jus sanguinis and ius/jus
solis (Grieco, 2002; Koser, 2007). Ius sanguinis, as the law/right of the blood, requires that an
individual must be a direct descendant of a recognized national of the country in question. In
contrast, ius solis is the law/right of the soil, which indicates that citizenship is determined based
on one’s birth within the territory of the country in question. In a discussion of the implications
of ius solis and ius sanguinis on immigration and citizenship practices, Grieco (2002) observed:

When combined, both place of birth and citizenship status can be used to divide the
population into three categories—native-born citizens, foreign-born citizens, and non-
citizens—and define who among the foreign born has acquired the full rights and
responsibilities bestowed on all citizens. (para. 3)

In terms of immigration laws and policies, quite a few countries, including the United States,
adhere to the ius domicile principle. This principle recognizes that people born outside of a
country’s borders or territory may gain citizenship through a process of naturalization; the
exceptions to this policy are children of U.S. citizens. Naturalization procedures and timelines do vary according to country, and can range from as little as the three years required in Australia and Canada to the 10-year requirement imposed by Austria and Germany (Koser, 2007).

*Immigrants* are people who have moved from one country to another. The laws of the United States categorize immigrants as authorized ('documented') or unauthorized ('undocumented'). Authorized immigrants have voluntarily relocated to the United States for long-term personal or economic gain, and have acquired lawful permanent residency (Anderson, 2010).

An *internally displaced person (IDP)* is a person forced to flee his or her home, but who has not crossed a recognized international border. Although violence, persecution or a fear of persecution are frequently the cause of internal displacement, this is not always true. Environmental factors, for example, also contribute to internal displacement (Koser, 2007). IDPs are subject to the jurisdiction of the government because they are still located within its borders. This is quite different from refugees and asylum-seekers, as they have left the borders of their homeland. However, many refugees first experienced internal displacement prior to forced migration out of the country.

An *involuntary immigrant* is a person who has immigrated to another country against his or her own will.

*Legal permanent residents*, also known as lawful permanent residents, are not citizens of the United States. However, they are residing in the U.S. legally and have documentation of their status as lawful residents in their new country of residence. In the United States, some people refer to legal permanent residents (LPRs) as “green card” recipients (Monger & Yankay, 2013). This residency status affords recipients limited rights and responsibilities. Examples of
these rights include the legal right to live and work permanently within the United States, own property, and attend public schools, colleges, and universities. Immigrants who live within the borders of the United States and desire to apply for LPR status are required to apply for an adjustment of status with USCIS. Refugees, asylum-seekers, certain categories of temporary workers, international students studying in the United States, and family members of U.S. citizens or alien residents may apply for legal permanent residence. In certain circumstances, unauthorized immigrants may also apply for legal permanent residence. For example, youth who have been neglected, abused, or abandoned by a parent/guardian may apply for “Special Immigrant Juvenile Status,” victims of criminal activity may apply for a U visa, and victims of human trafficking may apply for a T visa (USDS, 2014b). For a small number of eligible applicants, the U and T visas generate an opportunity to apply for legal residency despite one’s initial unlawful presence.

*National origin* is the country of one’s birth and/or ancestry.

For the purposes of this study, participants who self-identify as *refugees* were eligible to participate in this exploration of postsecondary experiences in the United States. A refugee is an individual forced to flee his or her home country. Refugees request the right to migrate permanently to another country. Much like asylum seekers, refugees flee their own country to seek safety within the borders of another country. However, asylum seekers request protection upon, or after, arrival. Refugees, in contrast to asylum seekers, request this protection in advance. Although successful applicants for asylum receive refugee status, not all refugees were initially asylum seekers. U.S. laws require refugees to apply for legal permanent residence after one year; they become eligible to apply for citizenship after five years have passed (USCIS, 2013). According to USCIS, upon admittance to the United States, refugees receive a Form I-94
(record of arrival and departure) as well as a refugee admission stamp; this is proof of lawful admittance to the U.S. under refugee status. The allocation of the number of refugees admitted to the United States is determined on an annual basis by the president in consultation with the United States Congress. The most recent allocation level available was set in 2014 for fiscal year 2015. For fiscal year 2015, the refugee admissions level was set at 70,000 refugees (The White House, 2014).

The United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (2012b) described resettlement as “the selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third State that has agreed to admit them - as refugees – with permanent residence status” (p. 1). Authorized entities physically relocate approved individuals from one country to a different country. Resettlement provides a legal pathway to permanent residency. People who relocate permanently without authorization are unauthorized immigrants.

The United Nations (2013) defined a state as a sovereign political and geographic entity recognized by the United Nations. According to that definition, the United States, Mexico, and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) are states. To that end, for the purposes of immigration law, a state is not a part of a country, as would be the case for states within Mexico, the United States, and the U.A.E.

A stateless person is a displaced person who does not have citizenship from, or is not recognized as such, by a recognized state. According to the legislation, constitutions, and the viewpoint of recognized states, stateless people are not nationals (United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, 2012c). Two conventions protect the rights of stateless people: the 1954 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961
Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

A voluntary immigrant has chosen to live and work in another country on a long-term basis based on his or her own free will. In the United States, foreign-born people who desire to live permanently in U.S. must apply for an immigrant visa (United States Department of State [USDS], 2014). Many of the immigrant visa categories attend to economic motivation (employment) or family ties.

Summary

This study sought to determine the essence of the postsecondary experiences of students from refugee backgrounds. Chapter Two provides an overview of the history of refugee admissions in the United States and synthesizes previous research pertaining to refugee youth, and college and university students from refugee backgrounds. This review distinguishes between refugees and immigrants and includes the history of immigration and resulting immigration laws. I will also highlight some of the challenges encountered by refugees during resettlement and when encountering the U.S. educational system. In Chapter Three, I present my research design by providing background information on phenomenology and the research methods that guided the implementation of this study. I use Chapter Four to illustrate the lived experiences of the participants through themes and excerpted quotes. Chapter Five explains how the findings of this study relate to extant research and offers suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A review of the available literature pertaining to refugees shows that little information is available about their college and university experiences. Much of the literature relating to refugees and education is limited to studies that discuss secondary schooling experiences (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006; Karanja, 2010; Lockwood, 2010). Many of the studies that do relate to the college and university experiences of students from refugee backgrounds are set outside the United States, in countries like Australia and Canada (Earnest et al., 2010; Ferede, 2010; Harris & Marlowe, 2011). In general, the majority of existing studies about refugees also focused on specific countries of origin or particular regions of the world. Anjum et al. (2012), for example, investigated the experiences of refugees from West Africa. Additionally, Yako and Biswas (2013) studied Iraqi refugees, and Xiong and Lam (2013) studied Hmong college students. Given the small body of scholarship available about refugees, the purpose of this study then, was to extend the base of knowledge about the collegiate refugee population in general. My research sought to determine the essence of the university experience for students from refugee backgrounds, also referred to as refugee students or SRBs.

It is impossible to understand refugee student experiences without becoming familiar with the context of higher education in the United States. It is equally as important to survey previous research and remain cognizant of what we already know about what it means to be a refugee student in U.S. higher and postsecondary education. First, the reviewed literature offers one view of the mission and purpose of higher education, and provides an overview of historical immigration patterns. Those immigration patterns provide context for the presence of refugees in the United States today. Third, this chapter highlights the diversity of the refugee population in the U.S and briefly outlines the laws and policies that inform refugee resettlement. Next, I
synthesize previous research pertaining to refugee youth and refugee university students. Finally, I offer literature pertaining to incorporation and acculturation, resilience and grit, and self-efficacy as a framework for understanding the essence of the postsecondary experiences of students from refugee backgrounds.

**Mission of Education**

Both secondary and postsecondary educational systems assume pivotal roles in the adjustment of all students, including refugees, to life in the United States. However, before considering the role of colleges and universities, it is helpful to evaluate the function of K-12 schools. A functionalist theoretical perspective views society as having numerous interrelated parts. Within that larger system, the role of schooling is to transmit culture and maintain social order (Pai, Adler, & Shadiow, 2006). Based on this role, Pai et al. viewed education as a form of enculturation, which they defined as “the process of learning one’s own culture” (p. 39). With regard to U.S. schools and institutions of higher education, the enculturative process demands that the culture taught be that of the U.S. Aside from a focus on culture and the maintenance of social order, another priority within the mission of education is to create productive members of society. For example, one purpose of public secondary schools is to educate students to a degree that enables graduates to complete high school and exit with the necessary skills and credentials to navigate U.S. society successfully.

Although the sanctioned purpose of a school is to transmit specific content knowledge (Pai et al., 2006), schools also teach students to be productive members of society. In addition, schools are responsible for exposing students to social norms, facilitating personal development, and helping students to explore career options. Clearly, the successful navigation of U.S. society relates not only to values and behaviors, but to workforce entry expectations as well. To that
end, in an observation of the expectations established for public secondary schools, Carnevale (2011) offered economics as a key factor contributing to the purpose of a school. When considering the link between economics and the mission of schools, it is apparent that schools expose students to another dimension of the expectations of life in the United States. Along similar lines, Kamens (1981) used anticipatory socialization theory to explain how schools assume socializing and allocation roles within society. According to Kamens, it is within a school system that students learn about their social identity and begin to engage in a process of anticipatory socialization. The process of anticipatory socialization, as facilitated by schools, prepares students for the roles that they will often occupy in future years. Subsequently, schools are an important instrument of socialization.

The Role of Schools

A scholarly example of anticipatory socialization, or learning directed toward one's future roles in society, is the work of Anyon (1980), who suggested that schools implement differential socialization based on socioeconomic status. In that study, Anyon categorized five schools into distinct social statuses: working-class, middle-class, affluent professional and executive elite. On that basis, Anyon concluded:

Differential curricular, pedagogical, and pupil evaluation practices emphasize different cognitive and behavioral skills in each setting and thus contribute to the development in the children of certain potential relationships to physical and symbolic capital, to authority, and to the process of work. (p. 90)

Anyon’s conclusions drew a link between school and career by associating differentiated instruction with the assumed likelihood of entry into specific spheres of work, such as factory work, middle class management, or senior leadership. This research also suggested that schools
enable students to access multiple forms of capital. Although capital is traditionally associated with labor and the economy, Bourdieu (1986), like Anyon, identified more than one type of capital. Specifically, Bourdieu identified and differentiated between three facets of capital. Those three forms of capital are economic, cultural, and social capital. According to Bourdieu, each form of capital had its own relationship to class.

This link between schools and the economy rested on the idea of a hidden curriculum, or the unofficial beliefs, norms, behaviors, and values prioritized and taught in schools (Pai et al., 2006). However, the norms established in the hidden curriculum ultimately extend far beyond the school system. An essential function of the hidden curriculum of schools in the United States is to expose students to the expectations for what it will mean to navigate school and life in the U.S. successfully. In that way, the hidden curriculum operates as a process of socialization within schools, and has tremendous potential to solidify students’ upward social mobility. Conversely, failure to adopt these implicit values can create a barrier to future success. For immigrant and refugee youth, failure to replicate these often unspoken norms can disrupt the pipeline from K-12 education to postsecondary education. Examples of these norms might include attitudes towards education and work, assumed standard classroom behavior, and learning and using United States Standard English. For that reason, Anyon’s 1980 work has wider implications for consideration of the ways in which schools prepare students to negotiate society. Anyon’s study also provided additional background for understanding socialization and its intersection with schools and the process of schooling. Accordingly, the implications of Anyon’s work can also be used as a tool for exploring how schools shape immigrant and refugee youth experiences.

For refugee and immigrant students, experiential evidence of the socializing function of
schools exists in the growing emergence of “newcomer” schools and programs that address the
distinct needs of newly arrived students born in other countries (Custodio, 2010). The Center for
Applied Linguistics (2014) reported the existence of more than 60 newcomer programs in the
U.S. Dispersed across the entire country, newcomer schools are located in states like Kansas,
Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas,
Wyoming, and more. Strictly defined by Custodio (2010), newcomer students are those students
who have been in the United States for less than two years and demonstrate low English-
language proficiency. Custodio explained that newcomer programs and schools help orient
students to their new country, language, and school. Within the context of the school system,
teachers assume a pivotal role in the successful orientation and adjustment of immigrant
students. Banks (2006) noticed, for example, that teachers help students learn traditional
academic content in addition to providing substantial assistance with English language
acquisition.

Rong and Preissle (2009), like Custodio (2010), agreed that schools are responsible for
integrating immigrants into U.S. society. Rong and Preissle (2009) claimed, “U.S. schools have
been the most important social institution for absorbing newcomers; few public institutions have
been as directly affected by high levels of immigration as the nation’s schools” (p. 5). The
critical role that schools play in facilitating integration is due, in part, to the volume of immigrant
youth. For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that the refugee youth population in
the United States is also sizeable. In 2011, 38% of all refugees resettled to the United States
were below 18 years of age (Migration Policy Institute, 2012). The size of the refugee youth
population in the United States encourages primary and secondary schools to play a large role in
the transition of refugee youth to the U.S. This is especially important given that the U.S. has
compulsory school attendance laws for all youth regardless of immigration status or
documentation, to the age of at least 16 across all states (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

**Policy-Driven Support**

Several laws, policies, and governmental agencies drive support of immigrant and
refugee youth, and advocate for equitable educational experiences. One such example is the
Division of Refugee Assistance (DRA), which is a part of the Office of Refugee Resettlement
(ORR); the DRA helps to facilitate access to primary and secondary education. Committed to
helping refugees find employment and attain economic self-sufficiency, the DRA oversees
programs that provide services to refugees. The DRA also disburses money to programs and
activities that address the needs of refugee children enrolled in public schools (ORR, 2013a).
Local K-12 school districts that have high numbers of refugee youth receive supplemental
money through the federally funded Refugee School Impact Grant (RSIG) (ORR, 2013a). The
espoused vision of the RSIG is to assist newly arrived refugee students and their families with
the adjustment to school and community in the United States. The RSIG stipulates that schools
facilitate the refugee adjustment process in a culturally and linguistically sensitive manner.

Additionally, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) is responsible for upholding and
enforcing civil rights in U.S. schools. These civil rights include the protection of students’
language rights. The OCR also ensures that school systems do not engage in actions that violate
Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VI prohibits discrimination based on race, color,
and national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance (Kaplin &
that required school districts to help “national origin minority group children” overcome English
language barriers (United States Department of Education, 2015, para 3). *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) emerged from a 1971 class action suit against the San Francisco, California school system for failing to provide English language instruction, or other language assistance measures, to approximately 1,800 students of Chinese ancestry who did not speak English.

The requirement that all children living in the United States enroll in public K-12 schools does not guarantee access to higher education. Recent debate about the legality of undocumented students’ right to enroll in public schools has underscored the laws that protect the right to access elementary and secondary education. One example of this is the court case *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), which addressed public understanding of the intersection of immigration law and education policy. A key aspect of the ruling of this case was the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which bars states from denying people within its jurisdiction equal protections afforded by the law. The Supreme Court “ruled on equal protection that states could not deny free public education to undocumented alien children” (Kaplin & Lee, 2007, p. 335). Although *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) expressly referred to K-12 education and youth without an authorized immigration status, it is also a landmark case because it laid the foundation for the right of all children in the U.S. to have access to schools. From this court case, it became clear that undocumented school-age children, U.S. citizens, and permanent residents all have the right to access public education without regard to immigration status.

**The Function of Higher Education**

The function of schools, colleges, and universities is critical for immigrants and particularly for refugee students. Although all children living in the U.S. are eligible to attend public primary and secondary schools, this automatic access does not extend to the higher education environment (Martin & Midgley, 2003). Consequently, when compared to the K-12
system, higher education functions as a privilege because no laws exist to require enrollment in colleges and universities. Therefore, to some, “the university represents a privilege difficult to justify or defend” (Ortega y Gasset, 1944, p. 33). Although neither United States law nor policy mandates postsecondary education, higher education does extend the knowledge base acquired in the K-12 system and a college degree has become the necessary credential to obtain higher-paying jobs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2001). In spite of this, scholars have debated the mission and purpose of higher education in the United States throughout history.

In the 21st century, colleges and universities in the United States, much like secondary schools, prepare students for their roles in society. Given that, one can look to functionalism and the curriculum as a way to understand education in general and higher education specifically. Ballantine and Hammack (2009) noted, “Functional theorists conceive of institutions as parts of total societies or social systems. The parts of the system discussed in terms of their functions [sic], or purposes, in the whole system” (Ballantine & Hammack, 2009, p. 15). Using this perspective, education is both a social institution and a system. Functionalists, for example, view education as a reflection of society, inclusive of stratification and biases. Colleges and universities, like schools, often teach according to the formal curriculum and prioritize certain knowledge bases within the hidden curriculum. Examples of hidden curriculum content include, but are not limited to, values and sociocultural knowledge. In many ways then, higher education is a way for society to transmit the value of desirable knowledge bases, customs, and values in a way that the freely accessible K-12 system cannot accomplish. U.S. colleges and universities, in a manner similar but not identical to secondary schools, expose students to their roles in a stratified society and prepare its attendees for life outside the academy.

Another function of higher education is to prepare students for the transition away from
the postsecondary environment. The notion of life after college is a critical piece of the mission of colleges and universities across the United States. Smith (2012) argued that students and their families, faculty, and staff, view degree completion as an important pathway to future success. Smith commented, “Colleges in the United States have always prepared students for life after college, but the form of that preparation has changed over time” (p. 5). From a time when colleges acted in place of the parent, to modern day emphasis on the positive impact of academic and co-curricular activities on students, colleges and universities continue to wrestle with this issue. However, in the twenty-first century, the main goals of higher education have shifted away from traditional priorities towards workforce preparation and concrete skills development (AAC&U, 2012; Haigh & Clifford, 2011).

In general, a fundamental premise of higher education in the knowledge-based economy is economically motivated and focused on helping graduates to become productive members of society (Hout, 2012). Chan, Brown, and Ludlow (2014) asserted the following:

Generally, higher education exists to create and disseminate knowledge, and to develop higher order cognitive and communicative skills in young people, such as, the ability to think logically, the motivation to challenge the status quo, and the capacity to develop sophisticated values. However, today’s society has also viewed higher education as a training ground for advanced vocational and professional skills. (p. 1)

Chan et al. (2014), like Hout (2012) among others, pinpointed specific goals of the purpose of higher education. These researchers argued that those goals lead to specific outcomes like productivity and entry into the workforce. The purpose of a higher education then, it is not to meet civic, moral, or self-serving goals. In contrast, the educative process teaches students how
to interact with society regardless of individual backgrounds.

Although colleges and universities are not expressly charged with integrating people into U.S. society, those students who enter its doors do more than acquire academic knowledge and skills. Kaufman and Feldman (2004) viewed the higher education space as a place of social interaction. They argued that the wide variety of people and social interactions within the college arena strongly influenced the development of one’s identity. Similarly, in an exploration of social attitudes towards immigration policy in the United States, Chandler and Tsai (2001) touched on the role of colleges and universities. Chandler and Tsai noted that higher education exposes students to a wide range of cultures and perspectives, and reported that a college education is strongly associated with one’s level of tolerance for diversity. Additionally, they assumed that this exposure to cultural diversity is largely advantageous, and concluded that individuals develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others through social interaction.

**Refugee Access to Higher Education**

For many refugees, access to education is an important part of the adjustment process. Due to the presence of more than 350 refugee resettlement agencies across the United States, it is certain that students from refugee backgrounds are present in K-12 classrooms (Roxas, 2011). The financial resources allocated for the support of immigrant and refugee students enrolled in U.S. schools bolsters the assumption that students from refugee backgrounds are present in K-12 classrooms. However, the support made available to refugees in the K-12 schooling system is not nearly as accessible, or as visible, within higher education in the United States. Consequently, the progression of refugee students’ educational journey beyond the K-12 system is uncertain in the United States. Fortunately, several laws and policies provide a framework for
understanding the tremendous diversity of this group and the influence of migration on these students’ enrollment in schools and institutions of higher education.

It would be extremely difficult to discuss the impact of SRBs’ access to postsecondary education without first considering the broader context of human migration. Although people move for various reasons – economic gain, family reunification, etc. – refugees, per the definition, vacated their country of origin based on a well-founded fear of persecution. For that reason, refugee access to higher education is particularly difficult to track and it is difficult to pinpoint the exact number of refugee students enrolled in colleges and universities. Nonetheless, several researchers acknowledged that the education of refugees is not just a challenge for schools (Dwyer, 2010; Harushimana, 2007; Oikonomidoy, 2010; Roxas & Roy, 2012), but for colleges and universities (Earnest et al., 2010; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Khadaroo, 2008), as well. Morrice’s (2013) exploration of the role of higher education in refugee students’ transition to a new country found that several pre- and post-migratory experiences affected their experiences within higher education. For refugee professionals who resettled to the United Kingdom, a college and university education offered an opportunity to re-establish a professional identity and transition into the greater society. The transition, however, was often less than seamless because

The experience of migration disrupts identity producing conflict between past experiences and the realities of the receiving culture… the experience of being a refugee continues to play a significant role in their lives, in the kinds of learner identities that are constructed and in their sense of belonging and inclusion. (Morrice, 2013, p. 654)

Morrice’s study suggested that refugee status plays a significant role in shaping the identity that emerges because of forced migration. This research also highlighted the many adjustments that
refugees experience as they encounter higher education and resettlement to a new country.

The law expects refugees to adjust and transition to the norms and expectations of the resettlement country and culture (USCIS, 2013). Refugees resettled to the U.S, for example, must demonstrate self-sufficiency after one year. Given that reality, some refugees look to education as a way to adjust to life in the U.S. Accordingly, refugees often perceive higher education as a way to develop the necessary skills that will enable them to enter the workforce and generate income. Baum and Flores (2001) reported, “Enrollment in postsecondary education is increasingly closely tied to labor market success in the United States. Although having any postsecondary education pays off, completing a degree or certificate brings the most significant rewards. Four-year degrees have the highest economic value” (p. 184). Similarly, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded that education “mediat[es] the influence of an individual’s background resources (such as family socioeconomic status) on subsequent occupational status and income” (p. 373). Again, higher education can facilitate access to economic self-sufficiency; it can also stimulate a deeper awareness of cultural and societal norms.

In many countries of resettlement, students from refugee backgrounds struggle to overcome barriers to degree completion. Several researchers have explored the experiences of college students from refugee backgrounds in other national contexts. In Canada, for example, Ferede (2010) noted that refugees are the least educated group of students and the group least likely to pursue higher education. Ferede asserted, “understanding and increasing refugees’ participation in higher education is a natural extension of Canada's acclaimed humanitarian refugee resettlement efforts” (p. 80). Similarly, O’Rourke (2011) called for a closer examination of refugee students’ access to tertiary education in New Zealand. Following a review of policies and funding issues, O’Rourke determined, “Apart from not getting English and skills training,
refugee-background students who enter without formal transitional support miss out on socialization into the university community” (p. 29). In both studies, researchers deemed resettlement support and higher education access as key components of the resettlement process.

In looking at the body of research pertaining to the intersection of students from refugee backgrounds and higher education, very few studies have examined refugees’ perceptions of identity or refugees’ perceptions of national origin. Other studies explored how, and the extent to which, social workers, teachers, professors, and other educators were prepared to assist refugee learners (Perry & Hart, 2012). There is an even smaller body of literature investigating refugee experiences with higher and postsecondary education, or the nature of their experiences inside or outside of the formal learning environment. Some of this research has been conducted outside the United States (Ferede, 2010; Harris & Marlowe, 2011), but very little of it is focused on U.S. experiences. Within the realm of study related to the U.S., Basu (2013) and Khadaroo (2008) used their writing to describe SRBs’ interactions with U.S. higher education. Both researchers asserted that refugee students struggle to enroll in, adjust to, and graduate from colleges and universities in the U.S.

**Historical Overview of Immigration in the United States**

An understanding of refugees in the United States is impossible without considering the immigration trends that have shaped U.S. history. Fluctuations in immigration patterns slowly force culture, politics, and the economy of the receiving nation to evolve. Both Fix and Passel (1994) and Fitzgerald (2006) argued that immigration alters the diversity of a nation. Fitzgerald’s (2006) review of immigration policies argued that immigration changes the identity of a nation and asserted that immigration is critical for more than its economic and political implications. To Fitzgerald (2006), immigration policy:
is a collective decision that shapes the nation’s identity. This policy tells the world how a nation defines itself. It helps shape culture, especially in the long run, because it changes demography. It states to the world who and what a polity takes itself to be, while reshaping the polity itself. In this sense, immigration shapes the face of the nation both concretely and consciously. (p. 16)

From this assertion, one could argue that immigration creates subtle changes in the people of a country. It is possible then, to understand nations as fluid entities that are metaphorically ‘redrawn’ through the influences of immigration.

Although immigration patterns have changed dramatically throughout U.S. history (Fix & Passel, 1994), Rong and Preissle (2009) highlighted three dominant strands of ancestry in the United States: colonists, involuntary Americans, and immigrants. American society descended from the European colonists who settled in what would become the United States during the 17th century. Involuntary Americans refers to those groups forced to integrate, assimilate, and/or relocate to the U.S. Examples of involuntary Americans, as provided by Rong and Preissle (2009), included Native Americans, Native Alaskans, descendants of enslaved Africans, and Spanish and French populations acquired through western expansion of the United States. Finally, immigrants are noncitizens born abroad whom the U.S. government classifies as ‘aliens’ \[^{[sic]}\] (Rong & Preissle, 2009). In describing this group, Rong and Preissle (2009) stipulated that immigrant settlement to the U.S. was voluntary.

Both Ogbu and Simons (1998) and Rong and Preissle (2009) drew a distinction between voluntary and involuntary migration to the United States. This is noteworthy given their very different research contexts. Ogbu and Simons (1998) studied the achievement and performance of underrepresented students in U.S. schools, and traced underrepresented students back to their
assumed immigrant roots. They also divided students into groups of autonomous, voluntary (immigrant), or involuntary (nonimmigrant) minorities. Rong and Preissle (2009), on the other hand, exclusively examined first-generation immigrants, the influence of immigration on schools, and reviewed immigration patterns. In their overview of immigration trends in the United States, Rong and Preissle (2009), much like Martin and Midgley (2003), identified four waves of immigration. These four immigration waves present the researchers’ shared understanding of the factors shaping the growth of the immigrant population in the United States.

Waves of immigration. Although immigration was largely unregulated during the first century of U.S. history (Rong & Preissle, 2009), the first documented wave of immigration occurred between 1790 and 1820 (Rong & Preissle, 2009; Martin & Midgley, 2003). Immigrants from England, Scotland, Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Spain came to the United States for any number of religious, political, and economic reasons. Irish and German immigrants ushered in the second wave of immigration during 1820-1860, a time when the frontier of the United States was rapidly expanding (Rong & Preissle, 2009; Martin & Midgley, 2003). Overall, following the political upheaval, revolution, and famine that swept through Europe, more than five million immigrants settled in the United States during the 1880s (Fix & Passel, 1994).

A third wave of immigration occurred during 1880-1914. At that time, more than 20 million people from southern and eastern Europe moved to the eastern and midwestern states. During this era of tremendous urban industrialization, many immigrants worked in the steel industry, or held jobs in manufacturing, mining, or meatpacking (Martin & Midgley, 2003). At the close of the third immigration wave, other immigrant populations of note came from Canada and Newfoundland, Sweden, and Austria-Hungary (Anderson, 2010). During the 1900s in
particular, over one million immigrants moved to the United States each year, and nearly nine million European immigrants had arrived (Anderson, 2010; Fix & Passel, 1994).

Europe was not the only source of this uptick in the third wave of immigration, and by the late 1800s, settlers from China and Japan had arrived. The majority of settlers from China and Japan moved to California or other states in the West (Rong & Preissle, 2009). Unfortunately, popular opinion generated invidious distinctions among racial and ethnic groups. For example, Asian immigrants, the target of much resentment and discrimination, became victims of boycotts and lynchings (Anderson, 2010). As Rong and Preissle (2009) noted, “A surge in Asian immigration in the late 19th century caused some natives to fear the growing number of Asians in the labor market” (p. 128). Asian immigrants were collectively referred to as “Yellow Peril,” “job-takers,” and “societal burdens” (Rong & Preissle, 2009, p. 129). Such inflammatory and discriminatory language reflects how societal attitudes towards difference had expanded outside the binary of Black and White race relations in the United States. As negative attitudes towards the newest immigrant arrivals increased, laws targeting specific racial and ethnic groups soon emerged. In most instances, Asian immigrants, especially the Chinese population, were the primary targets of these laws.

Over time, gradual changes to United States laws systematically reduced the numbers of immigrants legally allowed to enter the United States. Three examples of deliberately biased laws include the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the U.S. Immigration Act of 1907, and the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1908 (Anderson, 2010; Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, n.d.; Rong & Preissle, 2009). The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act suspended immigration to the U.S. from China for ten years (Anderson, 2010). The Immigration Act of 1907 limited the number of immigrants allowed to enter the United States much more broadly.
This act excluded individuals based on several factors, including mental health, physical or cognitive disability, disease, and criminal history (Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, n.d.). This act also prohibited Asian immigrants from entering the United States through Hawaii, increased the immigration tax to four dollars per person, and created the Dillingham Commission, which allowed U.S. authorities to collect personal data about immigrants. The data collected through the Dillingham Commission led to the immigration quotas established in later years. Furthermore, the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1908 restricted the number of Japanese immigrants allowed to enter the continental United States, with exceptions granted to specific categories of business professionals (Rong & Preissle, 2009).

Other laws that singled out Asian immigrants were the 1917 Immigration Law that excluded both Chinese and Indian immigrants, and the 1924 Oriental Exclusion Act that banned immigrants from most Asian countries except the Philippines. In addition, the outbreak of World War One and the economic depression of the 1930s further impeded the flow of immigrants to the U.S. In 1940, the Alien Registration Act required all foreign-born residents of the United States to register with the government and receive an Alien Registration Receipt Card (Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, n.d). By the time the Internal Security Act passed in 1950, many people referred to it as a “green card.” Increasingly restrictive laws led to a lull in immigration between 1915 and 1964 (Martin & Midgley, 2003). Immigration growth also decreased as society’s attitudes towards immigrants, immigration, and the ever-changing racial and ethnic diversity of the United States became wary, fearful, and hostile.

The fourth wave of immigration, which continues to the present day, began in 1965 (Rong & Preissle, 2009). Martin and Midgley (2003) noted that this wave of immigration saw the racial and ethnic diversity of immigrants shift away from Europe. Less than 20% of all
immigrants to the U.S. were European. This was due, in part, to relative prosperity across Europe and a shift in immigration laws and policies. Immigration priorities were no longer based on national origin and new laws gave preference to people who already had relatives in the U.S. Furthermore, amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act established a seven-category preference system based on family unification and desirable labor skills and talents (Fix & Passel, 1994). Congress passed those amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act on October 3, 1965 (Fix & Passel, 1994). The amendments repealed national origin quotas, imposed a limit of 20,000 immigrants per country from the Eastern Hemisphere, and set a similar ceiling on immigration from the Western Hemisphere for the first time in U.S. history. In effect, changes to the Immigration and Nationality Act created limited opportunities for Filipinos, Koreans, Chinese, and other Asians to emigrate to the U.S. (Anderson, 2010). Lastly, during the 1980s, the U.S. immigrant population swelled to nearly ten million people (Fix & Passel, 1994). The majority of these immigrants were from Latin America and Asia.

**Immigration Laws and Racism**

Immigration laws in the United States echoed widespread societal attitudes. Numerous laws reinforced racist attitudes, promoted nativist pride, and upheld a societal infrastructure that positioned White Americans above other races, ethnicities, and nationalities. Newly sanctioned laws addressed who could be admitted to the United States and who could be counted as a citizen. For example, the Free White Person Restriction, (also called the Naturalization Law of 1790), restricted eligibility for citizenship to Whites (Rong & Priessle, 2009). Revised in 1870 as the Naturalization Law of 1870, it then granted African Americans the possibility of citizenship in the aftermath of the Civil War. However, although this act extended U.S. citizenship to African Americans, it simultaneously steered consideration for U.S citizenship
away from other non-White people by excluding Asians and Native Americans. Iterations of this naturalization law remained in effect until 1952.

**Voluntary and Involuntary Immigrants**

To Ogbu and Simons (1998), voluntary and involuntary immigration status was an important distinction in the relationship of minority groups with White Americans. Ogbu and Simons (1998) differentiated between voluntary and involuntary immigrants according to the reasons why they came to live, or were brought to, the United States. Some people, for instance, may have willingly migrated to the United States. For others, migration to the U.S. was not a choice. Another distinction that informed this classification, particularly as it related to people from minority backgrounds, was the nature of Caucasian/White American involvement with becoming a minority. Based on that framework, Ogbu and Simons (1998) defined voluntary minorities as “those who have more or less willingly moved to the United States because they expect better opportunities (better jobs, more political or religious freedom) than they had in their homelands or places of origin” (p. 164). In contrast to voluntary minorities, “Involuntary (nonimmigrant) minorities are people who have been conquered, colonized, or enslaved. Unlike immigrant minorities, the nonimmigrants have been made to be a part of the U.S. society permanently against their will” (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 165). Examples of nonimmigrant groups, per this classification system, would be Native Americans and African Americans, among other people. Although involuntary and voluntary immigrants do share a frame of reference that stems from the challenge of adjusting to one culture from another, the perceived ease of achievement in the United States plays out differently between these two groups.

**Exceptions to voluntary and involuntary immigrant identification.** It is not easy to categorize all immigrant groups as either voluntary or involuntary immigrants. Ogbu and
Simons (1998) deliberately excluded migrant and guest workers, binational people, unauthorized/undocumented individuals, and refugees from their categories of voluntary or involuntary immigrants. Migrants and guest workers come to the U.S. for short-term employment and do not intend to settle permanently. Ogbu and Simons (1998) claimed that migrants and guest workers adopt tourist-like attitudes, and adopt only as much of the language and culture as is needed to achieve their economic goals. Accordingly, migrants and guest workers do not fit the definition of an immigrant or voluntary minority provided by Ogbu and Simons (1998). Migrants, however, may become immigrants if permitted to change their status from short-term to long-term residency.

Binational people claim allegiance to two countries. As their allegiance is two-fold, they are not immigrants because their desire to remain in one country permanently is undecided (Ogbu and Simons, 1998). Unauthorized or undocumented people, according to Ogbu and Simons (1998), are not easily identifiable because of their lack of documentation. This missing documentation makes it difficult to determine their official intent to settle in the U.S. on a permanent basis or the cause of their relocation. For that reason, Ogbu and Simons (1998) did not categorize unauthorized residents as either voluntary or involuntary immigrants.

Like migrant and guest workers, binational people, and unauthorized individuals, refugees do not conform to Ogbu and Simons’ (1998) definition of voluntary or involuntary immigrants. Certainly, elements of both groups are attributable to refugees. Refugees, for example, freely and willingly sought safety in the United States. In that regard, refugees are voluntary immigrants. Like migrants and guest workers, refugees usually desire to understand cultural and linguistic differences between their culture and that of the U.S. Structures also exist to ease and facilitate refugees’ adjustment to life in the U.S. However, refugees have also fled
their own countries due to persecution or fear of persecution. In the absence of such persecution, it is likely that these people would have remained in their home country.

The very definition of a refugee, provided by international law and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Koser, 2007), likens refugees to involuntary immigrants. Ogbu and Simons (1998) addressed similar tensions:

Refugees who were forced to come to the United States because of civil war or other crises in their places of origin are not immigrants or voluntary minorities. They did not freely choose or plan to come to settle in the United States to improve their status. (p. 164)

Although refugees share some characteristics with immigrant students, the cause for refugees’ relocation to the U.S. has the potential to shape their achievement and attitudes towards the importance of their native culture. Due to forced migration from their homes, refugees may or may not want to maintain their culture upon arrival to the U.S. In addition, while programs do exist to assist refugees, the transition to life in the U.S. can be difficult and might impede their achievement in any number of ways. Some challenges that refugees might encounter include language acquisition, economic self-sufficiency, and trauma recovery.

**Immigration Categories**

The Immigration Policy Center (2013) concluded that nearly 1 in 8 people in the United States are immigrants. Immigrants are people born outside a particular country who have voluntarily migrated to another country with the intent to live and work in that country on a long-term basis (Rong & Preissle, 2009). In the United States, based on adherence to U.S. immigration laws and policies, the law will also further categorize immigrants as authorized/documentated or unauthorized/undocumented. Authorized and unauthorized
immigrants are yet another slice of the population of people born outside the U.S., and the overall size of this population is not insignificant. The 2011 U.S. census reported its scale to be approximately 40.4 million people, or 13% of the total population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2013).

The laws of the United States define the various immigration categories, and in doing so, shape our understanding of students born outside the United States. Immigrants permanently migrate for a variety of reasons, including the potential for economic gain through employment opportunities or higher wages, medical care, and a desire to reunite with friends and/or family already living in the country (Koser, 2007). In a review of the demographics of people born outside the U.S., the Immigration Policy Center (2013) reported, “approximately 37% of the foreign-born were naturalized U.S. citizens, 31% were Legal Permanent Residents, 28% were unauthorized, and 4% were legal temporary migrants” (p. 1). Although authorized immigrants move to the United States from all over the world, Monger and Yankay (2013) discovered that the majority of those who attained legal permanent resident status in 2012 were from Mexico, China, and India. Authorized immigrants are eligible to apply for legal permanent residence, informally known as a ‘green card,’ in a number of ways (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2011). According to USCIS (2011), people may apply for legal permanent residence through family ties, employment, the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program (‘Green Card Lottery’), K-1 nonimmigrant applications (includes children and engaged partners), the Legal Immigration Family Equity (LIFE) Act, Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) Status, or refugee or asylee status. Other specialized green card programs exist to meet the needs of
victims of criminal activity, victims of trafficking, American Indians born in Canada, Cuban natives and citizens, and more.

There are several advantages to obtaining legal permanent residence. Some of these benefits include the right to live and work permanently within the U.S. and to own property (Monger & Yankay, 2013). In many cases, individuals awarded permanent resident status may apply for citizenship after five years as a legal resident of the U.S. (Monger & Yankay, 2013). To do so, permanent residents must undergo a process of naturalization, which Bloemraad (2006) explained as “the legal process that enables those not born with U.S. citizenship to become American citizens” (p. 19). Despite the fact that naturalized citizens were born outside the U.S., once naturalized, the laws and policies of the U.S. no longer view them as immigrants. The citizenship application process requires successful completion of tests in U.S. history and civics, and demonstrated competency in the English language (Monger & Yankay, 2013). Through the naturalization process, immigrants become “New Americans” (USCIS, 2004) and are afforded the full rights and protections permitted by the U.S. constitution, the right to vote, increased financial and tax benefits, and more (USCIS, 2011).

The unauthorized, or undocumented, population in the United States is a growing concern. The issue is even more polarizing in light of its implications for public education (Gonzales, 2007; Gonzales, 2009; Rincón, 2008; Zota, 2009). Although the actual number of unauthorized students is difficult to pinpoint accurately, Gonzales (2009) argued that youth below the age of 18 account for nearly 15% of the total number of unauthorized immigrants living in the United States. Gonzales (2009) also estimated that 65,000 undocumented children who have lived in the U.S. for five years or more graduate from high school each year. These high school graduates often face substantial challenges to enrollment in postsecondary education.
**Immigration categories and students.** To be clear, the categories of immigration also extend to students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. For that reason, international students, who reside in the U.S. in order to further their education, are distinct from immigrant and refugee students. Given the differences between immigrants and international visitors, Hazen and Alberts (2006) referred to international students as temporary migrants because those students have chosen to reside temporarily in the United States for educational purposes. Overall, international students represent a small portion of the total postsecondary population. This is because international students comprise only four percent of the total number of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions (Open Doors, 2013). As a group, international students naturally disperse across individual schools, thereby affecting some institutions more than other colleges and universities. Marklein (2013) confirmed evidence of this dispersion in the observation that, “nearly 70% of international students are concentrated in just 200 of the nation’s 4,000 colleges and universities” (para. 5). A critical aspect of this statistic is that it refers to a very specific segment of students born outside the U.S.: those students who migrate to the United States to attend college or university.

Some foreign-born students lack the legal authorization to reside in the U.S. The three primary barriers to higher education for undocumented students are the admission process, tuition costs, and ineligibility for financial aid. When reviewing unauthorized students’ access to postsecondary education, Zota (2009) remarked:

access and affordability have emerged as key issues in immigration debates across the nation. The primary issues with respect to higher education are whether unauthorized immigrants should be allowed to enroll in public colleges and universities and whether they may qualify for in-state tuition. (pp. 46-47)
In other words, financial aid eligibility and tuition costs contribute to the main financial barriers to educational access for undocumented students. This is because undocumented students are not able to provide proof of legal residency, which determines the amount of tuition a student must pay in many states. In effect, this is the difference between resident and non-resident tuition costs; in-state tuition rates might be lower than out-of-state tuition rates. Kaplin and Lee (2007) argued, “The litigation related to alien [sic] post-secondary students has more often involved their eligibility for in-state tuition in state institutions than their eligibility for admission as such” (p. 335). Ultimately, for a variety of reasons, “between 5 and 10 percent of undocumented high-school graduates go to college” (Gonzales, 2007, p. 1). In-state tuition is an important factor related to college access and a sensitive issue for states wanting to admit undocumented students to their colleges and universities. Without the reduced tuition costs facilitated by in-state tuition rates, the cost of college enrollment can be especially prohibitive.

Some of the issues that affect undocumented students are extremely similar to the issues that influence postsecondary access for students from refugee backgrounds (SRBs). Even though SRBs entered the country legally because of a forced migration experience, some lack the appropriate documentation that helps them qualify for admission or financial aid assistance (Tobenkin, 2006). Additionally, SRBs who fail to transition out of refugee status, as is required by law in the United States, inevitably run the risk of losing their authorization to remain in the country altogether. Should that happen, SRBs are vulnerable to the same challenges as the undocumented student population. Subject to deportation, SRBs who have become undocumented have then forfeited the protections awarded to them through their previous refugee status.
History of Refugee Resettlement in the United States

Nyers (2006) referred to the refugee experience as a phenomenon and suggested that it has a unique discourse. Moreover, Nyers (2006) asserted:

The phenomenon of the refugee has a long history of being subsumed within discourses of crisis and danger. To be sure, words such as “problem”, “crisis”, “complex political emergency” – and let’s not forget “border control” and “national security” – are commonly invoked whenever the subject of refugees and their movements arise. (p. 4)

Attention to the reality of refugee mobility lays the foundation for scholarly and political discourse surrounding their treatment. Moreover, the treatment of refugees has led to a number of laws and policies designed to address their needs and mobility. For the United States, the earliest documented policy pertaining to refugees is the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, which allowed European refugees from the Second World War to settle in the U.S. (Anderson, 2010). Between 1948 and 1951, following the passage of that act, the United States granted admission and permanent residency to Jewish refugees as well as ethnic Germans and Poles displaced by postwar Europe and the rule of the Nazi regime during the Holocaust. The Second World War laid the foundation for the laws and policies that would shape future waves of immigration and refugee access.

In recent history, the laws and policies that govern the treatment of refugees change often, and typically address needs as they arise. According to Bloemraad (2006), “In the United States, refugee policy from 1945 to 1980 consisted of a series of ad hoc and disparate presidential directives, special legislative acts, and grants of parole status by the U.S. attorney general” (p. 127). Examples of these special legislative acts include the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act, the Refugee Escape Act of 1957, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965,
and the Refugee Act of 1980 (Anderson, 2010). Ultimately, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (INA) laid the foundation for the currently existing immigration system in the United States. Not only did it repeal the Naturalization Act of 1790, it also created a quota system that imposed limits on a per-country basis (Rong & Priessle, 2009). What the quota system did not do, however, was promote diversity, or racial and ethnic tolerance. As Rincón (2008) observed, “Although the INA was said to have ended the more than 160-year-old ban on nonwhite [sic] immigration, it retained the 1920 census as the basis for establishing quotas, thus maintaining an overall white [sic] identity” (p. 39). The impact of that census was that it prioritized immigration from White foreign-born applicants. This legal practice fundamentally changed in 1968, when the United States abolished immigration rulings granted based on race, place of birth, sex, and residence (Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, n.d.).

**Refugee migration.** At the close of 2013, the UNHCR (2015a) reported that there were 11.7 million recognized refugees worldwide. In 2014, 53% of refugees worldwide came from the Syrian Arab Republic (3.88 million), Afghanistan (2.59 million), and Somalia (1.11 million) (UNHCR, 2015b). Refugees, however, are but one human component of the overall impact of global turmoil on people. For the year 2013, for example, the UNHCR (2015a) reported 42.9 million people as falling into one of seven categories of concern. That figure is a noticeable increase from the 35.8 million people identified in 2012 (UNHCR, 2013). The categories of concern do vary from year to year, but in 2013, those categories were refugees; asylum-seekers; internally displaced persons (IDPs) protected and assisted by UNHCR; stateless persons; returned refugees; returned IDPs; and “others of concern” (UNHCR, 2015a).

Across the globe, less than one percent of refugees have the opportunity to resettle permanently to another country (UNHCR, 2015c). Consequently, the vast majority of refugees
drifts from place to place or lives in refugee camps indefinitely. Likewise, their classification, according to labels set forth by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, is not static. Many refugees shift status, (i.e., from internally displaced to asylee to refugee) from time to time, and as a result, fall into different categories of concern to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The fluidity of this status is critical to their treatment politically, economically, and socially, as each category has important ramifications for their treatment within a country, and by the UNHCR.

**Refugee hosts.** Unfortunately, the rate at which some groups of people are displaced from their homes continues to increase. As refugee status is a legal definition understood in a very specific way, it is important to understand the displacement that leads to refugee status. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2015a), by the close of the year 2014, persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations led to the forced displacement of 59.5 million individuals. Those factors are the same factors that lead to a refugee status determination. Hosted by countries more welcoming than their homeland, at the close of 2012, developing countries hosted 81% of the refugee population, which was equivalent to 8.5 million people (UNHCR, 2013). The distribution of refugees hosted across the globe included 34% in Asia and the Pacific, followed by sub-Saharan Africa (26%), Europe (17%), the Middle East and North Africa (15%), and the Americas (8%). Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Germany, Kenya, and the Syrian Arab Republic hosted the highest number of refugees in 2012. In 2014, the five largest refugee-hosting countries were Turkey (1.59 million refugees), Pakistan (1.51 million refugees), Lebanon (1.15 million refugees), the Islamic Republic of Iran (982,000 refugees), and Ethiopia (659,500 refugees) (UNHCR, 2015a).

Although refugee host countries are more welcoming than refugee’s homelands, it is a
temporary and indefinite resolution to a critical problem. Refugee host countries serve as sites of asylum and/or temporary residence via refugee camps. These countries are often ill equipped to absorb the economic and political impact of the sheer volume of refugees that they have allowed to stay within their borders on a legal and temporary basis. The UNCHR (2015a) reported that the least developed countries in the world, per their calculations, hosted 25%, (3.6 million people), of the global total of refugees in 2014. By 2013, the percentage of the refugee population hosted by developing countries overall had grown to 86%, or 10.1 million people (UNHCR, 2015).

In contrast to hosting refugees, other countries are able and willing to provide long-term assistance through refugee resettlement programs and their associated processes. However, not all refugees are resettled to safer countries. Additionally, there are no known laws that mandate refugee resettlement. Instead, refugee resettlement is a voluntary process facilitated by a specific country and/or its designated representatives. In the United States, for example, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) manages refugee resettlement procedures on behalf of the U.S. government. For all countries that host refugees, an important part of the procedures for refugee resettlement includes the determination of how many refugees may be admitted in a given year. For the United States, refugee resettlement allocations are determined by the President in partnership with Congress. The allocation represents an admissions ceiling rather than a quota, which means that the actual number of refugees resettled to the U.S. varies on an annual basis.

Refugee resettlement. Refugee resettlement is but one of three desirable solutions for refugees. The three durable options preferred by the UNHCR are local integration, voluntary repatriation, and refugee resettlement. Although the UNHCR has identified these options as priorities, they have also observed, “It is important to emphasize that the ultimate aim of all
refugees is to find a durable solution to their plight. . . In many instances, a durable solution is determined by factors that are often outside of UNHCR’s control” (p. 19). Forced to flee their countries of origin, a small fraction of the total refugee population permanently resettle to other countries. The local integration of refugees occurs when refugees resettle into local communities in their country of first asylum after receiving permission from the host country. Voluntary repatriation occurs when refugees are able to return to the country of their nationality freely and safely. Refugee resettlement, sometimes referred to as third country resettlement, is the third durable option. Refugee resettlement is the desired option in cases where the refugee host country can no longer host the individual, or the country where the individual has sought refuge is no longer safe. It is also a tool in which to create a sense of belonging and long-term safety.

At the core of refugee resettlement is the idea of permanency. The established definition of refugee resettlement is:

the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another State that has agreed to admit them and ultimately grant them permanent settlement. . . Resettlement is unique in that it is the only durable solution that involves the relocation of refugees from an asylum country to a third country. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015, para. 2)

The process of vacating one’s homeland and resettling to a new country forges refugee identity. Whereas immigrants willingly move to the United States, refugees migrate for safety, and must apply for admission to the U.S. while based in another country. Thus, the process of refugee resettlement is an extremely noteworthy and life-changing endeavor. As described by the U.S. Department of State (2013):

Resettlement in a third country is a durable solution for refugees who are among the most
vulnerable in the world and for whom the other two durable solutions -- repatriation or local integration in the country of refuge -- are not viable options. (p. ii)

This description shows that resettlement is viewed, politically, as the last and least desirable option for refugees; resettlement occurs when a safe return to the country of origin is impossible.

In 2011, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2012b) found that there were 10.4 million refugees in the world; of that number, 604,000 people existed in “a refugee-like situation” (p. 6). To the UNHCR, refugee-like situations include stateless people, internally displaced people, and people living in areas with compromised useable land. The sheer size of this population prompted the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2012b) to declare, “2011 was a year marked by major refugee crises. Conflicts in Côte d’Ivoire, Libya, Somalia, and Sudan forced more than 800,000 refugees to flee to neighbouring countries. This was the highest number in over a decade” (p. 6). By 2012, the refugee population had marginally risen to 10.5 million people worldwide (United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, 2013). Historically, the United States has served as a place of refuge for displaced people, and has accepted more than half of all refugees permanently resettled to third countries (United States Department of State, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of State (2015), the number of refugees resettled to the U.S. is “more than all other resettlement countries combined” (para. 3).

Secondary migration. Even though refugees resettle to a particular country and community, they are not required to remain in that location; some refugees relocate several times. However, the majority of refugees choose not to move too far away from the initial resettlement community. If refugees choose to relocate, they may not be able to access federal refugee resettlement benefits depending on the timing of when they move from one city to
another city. The terms “secondary migration,” “two-step migration,” or “remigration” all refer to the movement of refugees from one community to another (Takenaka, 2007). Another way to conceptualize secondary migration is to frame it in terms of transnational experiences from one country to another. However, as a legal term, refugee resettlement assumes a particular meaning. Specifically within the context of refugee resettlement, secondary migration exclusively refers to refugee relocation out of state. Takenaka (2007) argues, “secondary migration is part and parcel of migration to rich, immigrant-receiving countries today, and that the trend has numerous policy implications” (para. 6). Some of these policy implications have economic consequences for refugees. As an example, the initial refugee resettlement agency distributes and manages refugee resettlement benefits.

Resettlement benefits only follow refugees, regardless of location, during the designated resettlement period. After eight months, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) stipulates that refugees forfeit those benefits if they have chosen to move to a new location (ORR, 2013c). At that point, the ORR treats refugees as people who have chosen to relocate from one community to another. Clearly then, resettlement policies discourage secondary migration, as is confirmed by the first guiding principle, Appropriate Placement and Services, listed in "ORR's approach to services" (ORR, 2013c). The first guiding principle asserts:

ORR increased interagency coordination with the Department of State to ensure refugees are placed in locations where there are appropriate services and resettlement conditions. Appropriate placement and services from the onset is seen as a preventative measure against the challenges brought by secondary migration. (ORR, 2013c, para 6)

In spite of that policy implementation, due to this secondary migration pattern, there are pockets of refugee communities dispersed throughout the United States outside of the scope of politically
designated resettlement cities.

**Resettlement actors.** Eleven primary resettlement actors facilitate refugee migration from their country of origin, (or the country where they are physically located), to other countries. It is common practice to categorize resettlement actors as one of three types of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs): voluntary agencies (VOLAGs) and their local affiliates, mutual assistance agencies (MAAs), or support agencies (Nawyn, 2006). Mott (2010) and Nawyn (2006) explain that VOLAGs specialize in the facilitation of refugee resettlement. The Department of State collaborates with VOLAGs to facilitate refugee resettlement in local communities. In the event that a local affiliate VOLAG chooses not to resettle refugees into a certain community, then those refugees are unable to move to that particular area. The scope of resettlement services provided includes coordinating basic immediate need services for newly arrived individuals and families, including food, housing, clothing, employment, counseling, and medical care during the first 90 days following arrival.

Although many VOLAGs are secular, they can also be faith-based. This is the case for agencies such as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Catholic Charities, and Lutheran Social Services. Mutual assistance agencies (MAAs) differ significantly from VOLAGs because they serve specific immigrant groups, are secular, and provide a broader range of services (Nawyn, 2006). MAAs, like VOLAGs, assist newly resettled refugees; however, their services typically cater to specific ethnic, linguistic, or national backgrounds. According to Nawyn (2006), “…not all MAAs serve refugees and not all MAAs do resettlement. The ones that do resettlement do not specialize in it” (p. 1512). Support agencies are community based nonprofit organizations that provide additional services such as English language tutoring, financial planning workshops,
and more.

**Assistance for refugee resettlement.** Once resettled, refugees must quickly learn how to integrate into their new society. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), a governmental agency, helps resettled individuals and families connect to locally based resources. In the United States, refugees receive a modest one-time financial stipend ($925) from the government to support their relocation (Lutheran Social Services, 2014). These funds are provided to each refugee to help meet the costs of housing, medical care, household goods, food, and spending money for the first 30 days in the U.S. Refugees are strongly encouraged to take advantage of local community resources, social services, and state public assistance programs such as TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and Refugee Cash Assistance programs. Some of the help provided to refugees includes, but is not limited to, housing assistance or reduced housing, short-term financial funding, employment training and placement, and language training (Brown & Scribner, 2014).

In a mixed methods longitudinal study of refugee resettlement experiences, Anjum, Nordqvist, and Timpka (2012) examined barriers to degree completion for refugees resettled from Liberia and Sierra Leone to Sweden. They concluded that refugees found educational access and family reunification to be an integral part of their adjustment to life in Sweden. Study participants raised concerns about the ease of access to education: “Several of the respondents expressed concrete plans and pathways thoughts about how to achieve educational and professional goals, although acknowledging that the journey could be long and tiresome” (Anjum et al., 2012, p. 4). Using a definition provided by Snyder, Feldman, Taylor, Schroeder, and Adams (2000), *pathways thought* represents how people plan to meet their goals. As summarized by Anjum et al. (2012), “pathways thought involves the perceived capability of
generating at least one effective route to a desired end point” (p. 2). Although several resources emerged as important, multiple participants reported that education and family reunification were highly prioritized aspects of their resettlement process and goal attainment (Anjum et al., 2012). Anjum et al. (2012) recommended that future studies examine resettlement experiences further, as well as the role of the resettlement community in facilitating successful transition.

**Immigrants and Refugees in the United States**

In the extant literature, refugees and immigrants are often grouped together for the purposes of exploring the common challenges they face in transitioning to a new culture and way of life (Segal & Mayadas, 2005; Simich, Beiser, Stewart, & Mwakarimba, 2005; Villaba, 2009). Segal and Mayadas (2005) claimed:

The pervasive tendency is to group immigrants and refugees together…most immigrants and refugees have encountered discrimination and oppression at some time. They have been historically denied opportunities because of the color of their skin, the accent with which they speak, or the clothing they wear. (p. 563-567)

There are, however, distinct differences in the way in which refugees, as compared to other types of immigrants, come to engage with United States society and culture. Bloemraad (2006) pointed out that immigrants and refugees were formally recognized as distinct groups as early as 1945 in Canada and the United States. The repercussions of the Second World War profoundly altered how these two countries viewed immigration and migration (Anderson, 2010; Bloemraad, 2006). Immigrants migrate for personal reasons, including economic gain, education, and a desire to travel, among other reasons. Refugees, on the other hand, are compelled to leave their homes due to persecution or fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership
in a particular social group, or political opinion.

The refugee population in the United States. Even though the number of refugees resettled to the United States is but a fraction of the total number of refugees worldwide, the size of the refugee population resettled to the U.S. is noteworthy relative to the refugee intake of other resettlement countries. According to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (2012a), “Overall, three countries, the United States of America, Canada, and Australia, provide ninety [percent] of global resettlement places, while sixteen European countries provide 8 [percent]” (p. 2). At present, the United States is still a leading refugee resettlement destination, having admitted 73,000 individuals in 2014 (UNCHR, 2015a). In contrast to the number of individuals resettled to the U.S., 26 countries admitted 105,200 refugees for resettlement in the same year (UNHCR, 2015a). Current U.S. leadership in refugee resettlement aligns with historical trends. For example, during fiscal year 2012, the U.S. resettled 58,238 individuals (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2013). The United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (2012a) reported that the United States resettled 43,215 individuals in 2011. In contrast, Canada and Australia received fewer refugees for resettlement: 6,827 and 5,597, respectively. In that year, other prominent countries of resettlement included Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.

In 2013, the most recent year for which comprehensive annual data are available, the U.S. resettled the largest number of refugees: 66,200 (UNHCR, 2015). For that year, 2013, the UNHCR reported that 98,400 refugees resettled across 21 countries. For fiscal year 2015, in compliance with section 207 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, President Barack Obama authorized the admission of up to 70,000 refugees to the United States (The White House, 2014). This threshold for refugee admissions is expected to increase to 85,000 refugees for fiscal year
2016 (The White House, 2015). For fiscal year 2016, the three largest demographic priorities are persons from the Near East and South Asia (34,000), Africa (25,000), and East Asia (13,000). Included in the projected needs for refugee admissions are 6,000 unallocated reserve slots. In addition to the traditional and legally mandated definition of a refugee, the following people are also eligible for refugee resettlement in the U.S. during fiscal year 2016: persons in Cuba; persons in Eurasia and the Baltics; persons in Iraq; and persons in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Additionally, in exceptional circumstances, people identified by a United States Embassy in any location in the world are also eligible for refugee resettlement to the United States. Within the proposed allocation for refugee admissions during fiscal year 2016, the United States also expects to admit approximately 10,000 Syrians.

**Refugee Students in an International Context**

The refugee experience is associated with a sense of emergency and urgency. Those overtones have noteworthy implications for viewing refugee students as distinct from immigrant and international students. For refugee students, their adjustment to life in the U.S. was a necessity for survival. Although relocating to the United States may have been their choice, or the choice of their parents/guardians, in terms of safety, the decision to leave their country was not voluntary. Although the present study focused on refugee students in the United States, it is possible to extrapolate themes from research conducted abroad to inform an understanding of the refugee experience in the United States. There is a body of scholarly work available on refugee experiences in England, Scotland, Australia, and New Zealand. Hopkins and Hill (2010), for example, examined the needs of refugee youth and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and youth in Scotland. Drawing from the perspectives of service providers assisting this population, the results of the study showed that refugee and asylum-seeking youth and children needed to be
recognized as children above all else. Many youth experienced multiple educational deficiencies and needed linguistic support.

Hopkins and Hill (2010) concluded that they could adequately illustrate the needs of refugee and asylum-seeking youth in Scotland by using Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Youth often needed shelter, health care, medical care, and legal advice in addition to medical support upon arrival and while transitioning to life in Scotland. The researchers also reported that refugee and asylum-seeking youth were incredibly resilient. They found:

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people in Scotland displayed remarkable coping capacities, a strong commitment to education, and a capacity for hard work. . .Both the needs and strengths of the young people meant that education was vital to capitalize on their very strong commitment to doing well academically and ultimately in their careers. (Hopkins & Hill, 2010, p. 407)

Other researchers shed light on the context of refugee experiences in Canada (Peterson, 2010), England (Stevenson and Willott, 2007), and Australia (Hannah, 1999; Earnest, et al., 2010).

The research available from the aforementioned countries also reveals that gender dynamics within refugee communities are an area of concern. The interplay of gender roles and family often play an important role in some refugees’ adjustment to resettlement to other countries. Before delving more deeply into this issue, it is important to take note of the gender dynamics of the refugee population in general. There are a disproportionate number of female refugees. According to an estimate from the Women’s Refugee Commission (2015), nearly 80% of displaced people worldwide are women. Similarly, the UNCHR (2015a) reported, “…the proportion of refugee girls and women has gradually increased from 48 per cent in 2011 to 50 percent three years later, implying that one of every two refugees today is a female” (p. 41). A
contributing cause of this gender dynamic is the vulnerability of women and young girls to persecution and fear of persecution due to sexism. In some countries, women and young girls are forced to migrate due to experiences of sexual and gender-based discrimination, violence, and exploitation that infringe upon their physical safety, access to an education, financial freedom, and more (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2013; Women’s Refugee Commission, 2015).

**Refugees and secondary education.** It is important to frame the refugee student experience explored in this study within the context of previous research. In a discussion of the transition of refugee youth to secondary education in the United States, Roy and Roxas (2011) argued, “Refugee families face innumerable challenges in adapting to American schools and communities…a myriad of expectations are placed on refugee families and children upon arriving in the United States” (p. 522). Some research is concerned with the role of religious identity for refugee youth in schools. For many refugee groups, vulnerability to religious persecution has played a major role in why people have elected to resettle to other countries. Religion can also significantly affect resettlement and the process of integration into a new society for refugee individuals, families, and communities. Given that, Collet (2010) asserted, “Religion may be of particular importance to refugees in their resettlement and integration processes at the individual and communal levels” (p. 198). In his theoretical analysis of education and polyethnic group rights, Collet positioned schools as “sites of refuge” for refugee students. Concerned by the degree to which refugees can or cannot express their religion in schools, Collet (2010) argued that the espoused liberal and secular nature of schools often conflicts with full religious expression in an academic space. In conclusion, Collet maintained, “For refugee students, the school as a site of refuge must be a site of liberty in every sense of the
term” (p. 205).

Much of the literature available regarding refugee student experience is focused on the K-12 schooling environment (Hastings, 2012; Roxas & Roy, 2012; Roy & Roxas, 2011), or in refugee camps abroad (Mareng, 2010; Wright & Plasterer, 2010). The K-12 literature concentrated on English language adjustment, parental influences on values, teacher preparedness, and the perception and attitudes of teaching staff that work with these students. Another area of study that dominated the extant literature is mental health and the trauma that students from refugee backgrounds often experience or have experienced. Examples of common refugee experiences include adjusting to a new language (e.g., English) and coping mechanisms elicited from trauma survival. Finally, the bulk of available information on refugee student experiences represented the perspectives of populations outside North America, and more specifically, the United States. Many studies represented the perspectives of students from refugee backgrounds who currently reside in Canada, England, New Zealand, or Australia. A very small pool of literature delved into the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds within select states in the U.S.

Roy and Roxas (2011) studied Somali Bantu refugee youth enrolled in schools in South Texas and Michigan. They looked at the institutional structures that shaped refugee students’ ability to navigate school. Investigated through the point of view of educators within the schooling system, Roy and Roxas discovered that although educators did desire to assist students, they largely placed responsibility for the success or failure of refugee students on the shoulders of Somali Bantu parents and students. In that study, Roy and Roxas found that many teachers focused on the challenges faced by these students and functioned from a deficit perspective of students’ capabilities and abilities. Individuals and scholars using a deficit
perspective attribute challenges faced by students belonging to certain groups to missing skills (Ballantine, 2009). Deficit models totally tie achievement, or lack thereof, to membership in a certain culture, race, or socioeconomic status, and not at all on individual or environmental factors.

Roy and Roxas (2011) rejected the deficit orientation enacted by teachers in the classroom. Instead, they concluded that teachers needed greater training in order to meet the needs of refugee students in their classrooms effectively. They asserted, “From our work with Somali Bantu refugee families in two relocation communities in the United States, we contend that schools and educators possess the deficits that must be addressed before perceived deficits of students can be examined” (Roy & Roxas, 2011, p. 538). Interestingly, while Roy and Roxas examined the deficit perspective deployed by teachers in schools, Earnest et al. (2010) arrived at a similar conclusion based on a study of refugee students enrolled in an Australian university. Earnest et al. found that refugee students in university faced numerous challenges, but that proactive university interventions could positively influence those challenges. They found, “it is clear that the multifaceted needs of students from refugee backgrounds require a coordinated approach from university teaching and support staff that specifically deal with their needs” (Earnest et al., 2010, p. 171).

**Refugees and higher education.** A small number of researchers identified special challenges that refugee students face when navigating higher education in the United States. Documented concerns expressed in the extant literature include refugee students’ struggle with English language proficiency and academic writing (Perry & Hart, 2012; Hirano, 2014), recovery from trauma (Ellis et al., 2013), and overall adjustment to the United States educational environment (Oikonomidoy, 2010). Given those challenges, facilitating access to higher
education is seldom an uncomplicated question of financial affordability, academic preparedness, or the logistics of basic admissions processing. Engstrom and Tinto (2008), for example, asserted that “access without support is not opportunity. . . conversations about access ignore the fact that without support many students, especially those who are poor or academically underprepared, are unlikely to succeed” (p. 50).

One challenge that refugee students face is financing their college education. In Canada, the approach to educating refugees at the university level is a systematic process. An example of this is the existence of the World University Service of Canada (WUSC). The WUSC (n.d.) has awarded scholarships and financial aid to refugees through its Student Refugee Program since 1978. The program has resettled more than 1160 students directly from refugee camps abroad to Canada as permanent residents. The program also enrolls eligible students into Canadian colleges and universities. In the United States, refugee access to higher education is far less centralized; as a result, the higher education experience can differ greatly among institutions. Some colleges and universities specifically offer scholarships to refugees in addition to financial aid opportunities that might already exist. Since 2006, Champlain College, for example, has offered the need-based “New American Student Scholarship” to refugee or asylum students in Vermont (Khadaroo, 2008). Then-president David Finney noted the importance of education and the potential for the college to positively impact refugee students and their families. Finney also felt that the program would be advantageous not only for refugees, but for the learning environment in general: “Education is a lot richer if the classroom has multiple voices . . . and these [refugee] students come with a worldview that is very different than the average, relatively parochial American student” (Khadaroo, 2008, para. 3). Similarly, Syracuse University (2012)
offered a scholarship to refugee students.

In most cases, regardless of country affiliation, refugees who are able to enroll in college or university often find the adjustment process difficult. In the United States, the root cause of some refugee students’ barriers to higher education is in the transition from refugee status or asylum status to permanent resident. Students’ legal documents might be inconsistent and students might have more than one document intended to clarify their status in the country. Moreover, colleges and universities may not acknowledge all of these documents as acceptable proof of identity and immigration status. These documents usually come from local judges, a Board of Immigration appeal, or overseas officials who assist refugee resettlement organizations. For many students navigating the process of changing immigration statuses, the legal paperwork will often conflict with the stated guidelines for college admission and financial aid eligibility (Tobenkin, 2006).

The requirements for financial aid eligibility vary by institution. In many cases, citizenship or permanent resident status determines eligibility. This practice effectively creates a barrier to students holding refugee status. Tobenkin (2006) argued, “Many educators and administrators are unaware that holders of refugee and asylee status are entitled to many of the same rights as permanent residents for purposes of gaining admission and obtaining financial aid for undergraduate and graduate programs” (p. 44). Marilyn Rymniak, former executive director of adult education services at International Institute of New Jersey, remarked “Most university admissions program people are not well versed in refugee status and aren’t familiar with the documents these students come with” (Tobenkin, 2006, p. 44). In some ways, higher education administrators treat refugee and asylum seeking students like undocumented students, because institutions may only be interested in admitting permanent residents and U.S. citizens. For those
refugees who do enroll in college or university, they struggle with adjustment to the university much like any other incoming student. However, adjustment is complicated even further by the unique concerns and prior experiences of refugee students.

**International and immigrant students.** The term “international student(s)” utilized by Open Doors (2013) is an umbrella term encompassing all students born in other countries who choose to study in the United States. This term applies to students who reside in the U.S. for study for a specified length of time; the length of time can vary from one month up to the total length of the degree-granting program. In the United States, the available data often comingle information about refugees with more general information about foreign-born people. There is however, within the foreign-born student population, diversity beyond the realm of the ‘typical’ international student. Lost within popular understanding of the demographic category of international students is knowledge and awareness of the specific experiences, needs, and concerns of refugee students enrolled in college/university. This poses a concern because the collegiate environment abides by its own language and set of norms that its participants must meet in order to negotiate the system and emerge as successful graduates.

Ogbu and Simons (1998) made their assertions to increase common understanding of “minority” students in U.S. schools. The labels used by Ogbu and Simons (1998) - autonomous, voluntary (immigrant), or involuntary (nonimmigrant) minorities - acknowledge the varied histories of the affected groups. Autonomous minorities belong to groups of people who are small in number relative to the dominant population, and may differ in terms of language, race, ethnicity, and/or religion. Ogbu and Simons (1998) asserted that nonwhite autonomous minorities are not present in the U.S., and look to Jews, Mormons, and Amish peoples as examples. If we expand the application of Ogbu and Simons’ typology, then it is also possible to
extend the definition of nonwhite autonomous minorities to students from refugee backgrounds. In accordance with the definition, SRBs would also be small in number relative to the dominant population. SRBs would not qualify as voluntary minorities because of their forced migration experiences. Similarly, SRBs would fail to qualify for involuntary minority status given their lack of a relationship to United States history.

**Limitations to Extant Literature**

There is relatively little scholarship pertaining to the experiences of refugees in postsecondary education, and the available literature has several limitations. Much of the literature about refugees relates to the context of Australia, Canada, and England, or a handful of states within the United States. Other research explores familial dynamics or the refugee camp experience. Overall, the majority of the extant literature focuses on the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in K-12 education. However, in many countries, youth are required to enroll in schools by law, and eventually, some refugee youth and adults will choose to enroll in community colleges or four-year institutions. Thus, because the pathway to postsecondary education does exist, there is a gap in contemporary understanding of refugee college student experiences.

There are likely several reasons why scholars and practitioners have paid little attention to students from refugee backgrounds. The first two explanations are either K-12 students from refugee backgrounds have not made it to college, or domestic admissions policies do not explicitly address K-12 students from refugee backgrounds. A third possibility is that refugees disappear within the landscape of higher education due to their reclassification as legal permanent residents. The classification of refugee students during the admissions and financial
aid application process is important due to the financial ramifications for the student.

K-12 students from refugee backgrounds do not typically apply as international students due to their refugee status and the accompanying visa documentation. Refugees who retain refugee status during the first year of resettlement are often ineligible for federal financial aid because they are not citizens and do not have legal permanent resident status. However, because of lack of information about the implications of refugee status, admissions and financial aid staff vary greatly in how they treat students with refugee status. At some institutions, admissions and financial aid staff treat refugee students as domestic out-of-state students because they are legal permanent residents (Tobenkin, 2006). Other institutions do not process these applications because they cannot determine if the student should be treated as an international student or as a domestic student; staff struggle with determining if the applicant should be treated as a citizen, a legal permanent resident, or an unauthorized immigrant.

According to the literature previously reviewed, several factors affect the adjustment of individuals born outside the United States to life in the U.S. One factor is the issue of relocation. Relocation to the United States after fleeing another country is likely to be terribly traumatic and disruptive to one’s life. Refugee resettlement is uniquely challenging for SRBs, as one would need to adjust to the culture of the United States in addition to navigating the challenges of the postsecondary environment. A minority of refugees are able to transition directly from resettlement to the college environment. For those who are able to successfully access postsecondary education, there is often an adjustment period as well. Overall, although entry into and persistence through the postsecondary environment is challenging for any student, SRBs often encounter additional factors uniquely related to their refugee status and/or refugee background.
Theoretical Framework

Researchers commonly use theoretical frameworks to frame the research question and provide a way to understand the intended direction of the study (Creswell, 2012). Since this study encompassed the intersection of forced migration and higher education, it is especially important to situate this research within the context of the factors that shape students’ ability to excel in the postsecondary environment. As context for this research, this study drew largely upon three theoretical perspectives – incorporation and acculturation theory, resilience and grit, and self-efficacy – in order to facilitate understanding of the essence of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in U.S. higher education.

Merriam (2009) elaborated on the use of theoretical frameworks, noting that a theoretical framework provides “the underlying structure, the scaffolding, or frame of your study” (p. 66). In this study, however, incorporation theory and acculturation, resilience and grit, and self-efficacy did not overtly frame the analysis, but instead offered a lens in which to understand and interpret SRBs’ experiences in higher education against the backdrop of existing research. This approach aligns with the use of theoretical frameworks in qualitative research outlined by Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014). Jones et al. asserted, “…The theoretical framework offers suppositions that inform the phenomenon under study and comes from existing scholarly literature. The theoretical framework links the unsettled question to larger theoretical constructs” (p. 22). Together, the three groupings of theoretical perspectives utilized in this study provided context for understanding how SRBs navigate life in the United States, and for the purposes of this research, the U.S. higher education environment.

Incorporation theory. Many scholars believe that student persistence in colleges and universities depends on individual characteristics as well as aspects of the collegiate
environment. College readiness, students’ precollege characteristics, and the culture of the academy deeply affect integration into the higher education environment. Due to the intersection of forced migration and higher education, incorporation theory offered one way to understand how refugees experience higher education. Alternatively conceptualized as defensive identity, oppositional culture (Ogbu, 1994), or cultural ecology theory (Ogbu & Simons, 1998), Rong and Preissle (2009) defined incorporation theory as “the idea that immigrant success depends on how people are viewed as well as by what they do” (p. 246). To Rong and Preissle (2009), incorporation theory is heavily reliant upon internal colonialism. They assumed that racial minorities suffer because of their racially determined roles in society: “Native Americans, Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and many Mexicans have been incorporated into U.S. society against their will through slavery, conquest, colonization and annexation, and they have suffered from severe racial oppression, economic exploitation, and social marginalization” (Rong & Preissle, 2009, p. 246). When analyzing the incorporation of these groups into U.S. society, the role of historical context is quite significant. For that reason, it is important to note that the original context of incorporation theory reflects the interaction of dominant cultures with new immigrant populations.

Another way to view incorporation theory is through related research about assimilation and integration. Similar to incorporation theory, assimilationist perspectives attempt to explain how immigrants become part of their new host society, and intersect with economic, social, and cultural concerns. Embedded within the foundation of assimilation theory is the idea that a single majority culture exists, and that the interaction between immigrants and the host country is a one-way process by which immigrants are compelled to become more like the host country’s dominant group. The existing literature documents several strands of assimilation theory,
including classic assimilation (Alba & Nee, 2003; Gordon 1964) and segmented assimilation (Haller, Portes, & Lynch, 2011; Piedra & Engstrom, 2009; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Classic assimilation theory argues that immigrant groups become more like the dominant culture over time, whereas segmented assimilation theory views change as variable based on family dynamics, general context, and socioeconomic factors, etc. These theories reflect fluctuating attitudes towards immigration throughout history.

A fundamental premise of both assimilation theory and incorporation theory is the forced introduction of the immigrant population to a new society through slavery, colonization, conquest, or annexation. In contrast to those stipulations, however, refugees encounter society differently. Although persecution and fear of persecution forced refugees from their native country, they are not subject to an incorporative process, but are instead welcomed by the resettlement country in policy and practice. In spite of these parameters, I believe that the application of incorporation theory provided an opportunity to consider how refugees encounter the integration process as outsiders to U.S. culture and social norms.

Incorporation theory allowed me to consider the influence of context on SRBs’ migratory experiences prior to resettlement, and the role of forced migration on the transition to the U.S. and to postsecondary education. Incorporation theory also enabled to examine how forced migration affects refugees differently from immigrants. I used incorporation theory to gain insight into the extent to which SRBs’ academic experiences and social experiences within the postsecondary environment were affected by their perceptions of how they were viewed. Although racially minoritized groups experience life in the U.S. differently from their White counterparts, SRBs might also encounter discrimination based on native language use, language
accentuation, how their physical features align with prejudices that already exist in the U.S.,
and/or religious and cultural practices.

In contrast to the assimilationist undercurrents of incorporation theory, an alternative way
of thinking about refugee experiences is through the lens of acculturation, a concept recognized
since the 1800s in the fields of anthropology and sociology (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, &
Cooper, 2003). In particular, this research study considered the acculturative higher education
process as it relates to students from refugee backgrounds. Scholars like Powell (1883) and
McGee (1898) offered acculturation theory as a way to explain the consequences of the
interaction of people from different cultures. In later research, Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits
(1936) provided a formal definition of acculturation: “those phenomena which result when
groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with
subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups” (p. 149). Recent
scholarship defined acculturation as “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that
takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual
members” (Berry, 2005, p. 698). Using this spectrum of definitions sheds light on the
relationship of education with multiple cultures. From this, it is evident that higher education,
much like K-12 education, can provoke both enculturative and acculturative processes for
students (Pai et al., 2006). Due to the interplay of these processes, students are able to negotiate
their own cultures in addition to a culture external to what they already know.

At its core, acculturation relies on the interaction between two or more cultures, a guiding
principle in the existing literature about acculturation theories. Berry (1997) pinpointed two
distinctive aspects of the experience of acculturation. The first aspect, culture maintenance,
concerns the importance of having the ability to maintain some of the main attributes of ethnic
culture. Culture adaptation, on the other hand, is the extent to which ethnic minorities participate in the dominant culture. According to researchers of acculturation, the experience of acculturation is malleable. Along these lines, Bourhis, Moise, Perrault, and Senecal (1997) proposed an interactive acculturation model consisting of three parts. Those parts include an acculturation orientation dominated by immigrant groups, acculturation orientations adopted by the dominant culture towards specific immigrant groups, and the interpersonal and intergroup outcomes that represent the acculturation orientations of immigrant and dominant groups.

Like Bourhis et al. (1997), in a review of acculturation experiences, Torres et al. (2003) identified three distinct acculturation models: linear, two-dimensional, and multidimensional. Whereas linear models view the adaptation process as a continuum of positive ethnic identity and mainstream identity, two-dimensional models consider the relationship between one’s own culture and another culture both simultaneously and independently. The third model of acculturation, multidimensional, examines elements of culture, such as food, language, and music, as independent entities (Pai et al., 2006). The multidimensional model of acculturation assumes that acceptance and loss of one’s culture can vary according to the specified cultural element. Phinney (1990) delved more deeply into culture and ethnic identity, and in doing so, identified bicultural elements within the multidimensional model of acculturation. A bicultural identity allows two cultures to coexist, thereby introducing it as another aspect of acculturation. Existing scholarship defines bicultural individuals as people who have internalized two cultures following exposure to both cultures (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2007). Likely candidates for the development of a bicultural identity include people of more than one ethnic background, ethnic minorities, immigrants, and refugees (Berry, 2003;
Padilla, 2006).

**Resilience and grit.** It is also useful to probe the essence of the U.S. higher education experiences of students from refugee backgrounds through the guiding principles of the literature pertaining to resilience and grit. Resilience and grit, both popular components of research rooted in social work and psychology, are particularly helpful in discerning the relationship between educational institutions and students. There is an emerging body of work related to grit, readily understood by Duckworth, Peterson, Matthew, and Kelly (2007) as a noncognitive trait reflective of a person’s commitment towards long-term goals. In addition to defining grit within the boundaries of perseverance and passion, Duckworth et al. noted, “Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (pp. 1087-1088). From this definition, it is clear that a defining feature of grit is the ability to focus on long-term goals. Called a growth mindset by Dweck (2006), grit is the belief that a person can become smarter and transform failure into success through effort.

Building upon the definition of grit, Von Culina, Tsukayama, and Duckworth (2014) explored the root causes of differences in grit among people. Von Culina et al. found that these differences stem from variances in people’s orientation towards happiness. To Von Culina et al., pursuing engagement and pleasure were important properties of grit; engaging activities captured one’s attention over the long term, and pleasure-oriented activities encompassed those tasks that served altruistic purposes. In an attempt to measure grit, a different study examined relationships between grit and success outcomes (Duckworth et al., 2014). To achieve that goal, Duckworth et al. inquired about participants’ self-control, responses to failure, long-term passions, and probed into elements of what it meant to be a hard worker. From this study, Duckworth et al. found that,
in terms of success, grit appeared mattered more than a person’s intelligence quotient (IQ).

Overall, much of the existing literature regarding grit suggests that there is a positive relationship between grit and college achievement, adjustment, and retention (Duckworth, et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). For example, in a study of Black males’ academic performance, Strayhorn (2014) reported a positive relationship between college grades and grit. Consistent with Strayhorn’s positive results, Robertson-Kraft and Duckworth (2014) found that grit had a positive relationship with the effectiveness and retention of new teachers. In both studies, the notion of possessing higher levels of grit, or being grittier than another, had a positive effect on one’s ability to progress towards goal completion.

The available literature about grit pairs well with the scholarly conversation about resilience. Over time, researchers have drawn a distinction between the terms ‘resilience’ and ‘resiliency.’ Whereas grit relates to persistence towards long-term goals, resilience correlates to the process of positive adjustment in the face of great hardship. Even though the terms are related, Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) limited their understanding of resiliency to individual character traits associated with the phenomenon of competence under adversity. Researchers have studied resilience in multiple contexts, including within the framework of mental health (Flett & Hewitt, 2014; Hartley, 2011), among youth (Borrero, Lee, & Padilla, 2013; Masten, 2014; Williams & Bryan, 2013), and within families (Guild & Espiner, 2014). In addition, researchers have turned their attention to the notion of academic resilience, which looks at the intersection of academic spaces, educational achievement, and risk factors (Gordan & Song, 1994; Morales & Trotman, 2004).

The concept of resilience is concerned with how people cope with difficult circumstances. Accordingly, Easterbrook, Ginsburg, and Lerner (2013) defined resilience as
“sustained competence or positive adjustment in the face of adversity” (p. 100). Similarly, Keck and Sakdapolrak (2013) noted the role of adversity on resilience, and argued that resilience relates to an individual’s ability to persist, adapt, and transform. Similarly, Braverman (2001) offered a definition of resilience that acknowledged its complexity. To Braverman, resilience is “a concept that incorporates two components: (a) exposure to significant stressors or risks, and (b) demonstration of competence and successful adaptation” (p. 2). Likewise, from the growing body of research, Kitano and Lewis (2005) identified several key concepts essential to understanding the phenomenon of resilience.

The core concepts identified by Kitano and Lewis (2005) were risk factors, competence, vulnerability factors, protective factors, and developmental assets. Risk factors are environmental stressors or conditions that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes; examples of risk factors include socioeconomic disadvantage and exposure to violence. Braverman (2001) defined competence as adaptive behaviors that facilitate resilient outcome. Whereas vulnerability factors increase the effects of risk factors, protective factors reduce the negative effects of risk factors (Rutter, 1987). Developmental assets are individual and environmental factors that increase the likelihood of positive outcomes (Braverman, 2001).

Scholars have also debated if resilience is an outcome or a process (Morales & Trotman, 2004; Rutter, 2007; Ungar, 2008). What is clear, however, is that many factors contribute to resilience and promote effective coping. Marsella, Bornemann, Ekblad, and Orley (1994), for example, named several factors pertaining to the resiliency and coping of refugees. Those factors included family and community support, cultural practices, employment, human rights organizations, and more. Marsella et al. also identified situational transcendence, or the ability to reframe a difficult situation and infuse it with new meaning, as a crucial part of resilience.
Walsh (2003), like Marsella et al. (1994) viewed families and communities as integral pillars of support for understanding resiliency. For Walsh (2003), the resiliency framework consisted of belief systems, organizational patterns, and communication.

In a discussion of the factors that affect resiliency, Easterbrook et al. (2013) explored the role of stress, ultimately noting that stress could have positive or negative effects. The positive effects of stress emerge when individuals are able to identify ways to manage stress, which can lead to one’s ability to thrive. Easterbrook et al. also identified three forms of stress: positive, tolerable, or toxic. Positive stress is brief and episodic, tolerable stress is triggered by an event, and toxic stress is long-term. To that end, Easterbrook et al. reported, “The key to thriving is finding the optimal conditions to support positive stress” (p. 102-103). To be clear, whereas positive stress enables individuals to thrive, negative stress facilitates opposite outcomes.

Scholarly research has punctuated the close relationship between resilience and grit. Together, both concepts explore an individual’s ability to positively respond to adverse conditions (resilience) and follow through on long-term goal achievement (grit). As interrelated components of the development of positive self-development, resilience and grit shed light on the internal factors that contribute to students’ success.

**Self-Efficacy.** Resilience and grit are linked to a third theoretical perspective of note - self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is deeply concerned with the way in which individuals perceive and manage their own competencies and capabilities. Moreover, self-efficacy provides a way to understand behavior, motivation, and cognitive functioning (Bandura, 1993). Bandura (1977) described self-efficacy as an individual's belief, confidence, and persistence in their own capacity to implement behaviors necessary for the achievement of specific performance goals. In other research, Bandura (1995) described self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and
execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (p. 2). In other words, self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability to perform a specific task, produce accomplishments, and exert control over self-motivation, personal behavior, and the social environment (Bandura, 1997). In his research, Bandura (1977, 1997) presented four sources of information that structured self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal and social persuasions, and physiological states. Additionally, Bandura proposed that self-efficacy has an impact on three behavioral outcomes; those outcomes are approach versus avoidance, performance, and persistence.

Some of the research regarding self-efficacy delves into its relationship with one’s ability to self-advocate, or articulate one’s needs. In general, Williams and Takaku (2011) believed that people with a high level of self-advocacy prioritize their needs and seek help as needed. This form of help-seeking behavior is but one way in which high self-efficacy is self-empowering, and equips individuals with the skills to overcome difficulty. One strand of research exploring the link between self-efficacy and self-advocacy did so within the context of the experiences of students with disabilities (Kallio & Owens, 2004; Palmer & Roessler, 2000; White, Summers, Zhang, & Renault, 2014). Researchers generally found that for students with disabilities, high levels of self-efficacy and self-advocacy empowered one to explain their disability and associated needs effectively. Quite similarly to that outlook, in their own study of self-efficacy, Williams and Williams (2010) asserted, “individuals with high levels of self-efficacy approach difficult tasks as challenges to master rather than as threats to be avoided” (p. 455). People with high self-efficacy then, are more likely to resolve challenges.

Self-efficacy is frequently associated with positive academic outcomes (Jones, 2008; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005). Therefore, scholars like Chemers, Hu, and Garcia
(2001) specifically investigated how self-efficacy operates in an academic setting. Studies restricted to academic self-efficacy bolster support of the positive relationship between self-efficacy and academic success. Within the higher education environment in particular, research has shown that students who have confidence about their ability to excel in college are more likely to perform well academically. Thus, Chemers et al. (2001) found academic self-efficacy to be strongly related to students’ performance and adjustment in college, and ultimately defined it as “students’ confidence in mastering academic subjects” (p. 56). Academic self-efficacy also surfaced as a remarkably strong predictor of college retention and grade point average (GPA) (Galyon, Blondin, Yaw, Nalls, & Williams, 2012; Robbins et al., 2004; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010), and persistence (Bong, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000). Galyon et al. (2012) investigated the relationships between academic self-efficacy and students’ class participation, examination performance, and GPA. In a study of 165 undergraduate students, Galyon et al. identified a strong relationship between academic self-efficacy and exam performance. This is consistent with the work of Robbins et al. (2004), who conducted a meta-analysis on the psychosocial and academic factors that affect GPA. From that study, Robbins et al. confirmed that academic self-efficacy positively influenced GPA.

In addition to studies pertaining to academic self-efficacy and GPA, other studies look at success. Recall that Bandura (1997) theorized that mastery experiences were a core component of self-efficacy. In preexisting research, Bandura, Adams, and Beyer (1977) noted that mastery was indicative of one’s capability because success produces a strong sense of efficacy. In contrast, Bandura et al. believed that failure undercut the development of self-efficacy. Additional research connecting self-efficacy to success looked at students enrolled in college English classes (Jones, 2008). Jones reported that students with higher levels of self-efficacy
were more likely to be successful. This study enabled Jones to enrich the definition of self-efficacy by explaining it as a characteristic “composed of confidence in the ability to accomplish particular tasks and perform particular skills...it is also composed of confidence in self-regulatory strategies to accomplish those tasks” (p. 230). Jones also noticed that writing students with high self-efficacy were more likely to set long-term goals and make strides towards achieving those goals. In addition, students with high self-efficacy were more likely to undertake challenges, persist in spite of obstacles, and manage their own cognitive development.

Summary

Understanding SRBs as a student subpopulation is important, as it allows us to recognize the diversity present within educational institutions. The available research pertaining to SRBs in postsecondary education is scant and largely focused on the experiences of students in England, Canada, and Australia. This study then, expanded scholarly research on the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds by filling in some of the gaps regarding SRBs in the context of U.S. postsecondary education.

This chapter provided a review of the existing literature about students from refugee backgrounds. The chapter also outlined immigration patterns in the U.S., explained refugee admissions allocations and the process of refugee resettlement, and highlighted scholarly research on the broader issue of the intersection of education and refugee migration. Lastly, in this chapter, I explained how incorporation theory and acculturation, resilience and grit, and self-efficacy inform the exploration and interpretation of the postsecondary experiences of SRBs. First, incorporation theory can shape how we understand the way in which refugees interpret their interactions with society and culture in the United States. Resilience, grit, and self-efficacy offer insight into students’ capacity to overcome adverse conditions, persist towards goal
completion, and press on towards long-term goals. Chapter Three details the methodology used to frame and execute this study.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

As mentioned in Chapters One and Two, students from refugee backgrounds occupy a peripheral space. Based on that positioning, their voices are not dominant in society or even within the higher education landscape specifically. Therefore, because the goal of this study was to understand the postsecondary experiences of SRBs, a qualitative approach was well suited to capturing and amplifying their voices. To Shulman (1981), in some cases, qualitative research was superior to quantitative methods because “there are times we wish to know not how many or how well, but simply how” (p. 7). In this way, qualitative research presents scholars with an opportunity to solicit and share stories and in doing so, can magnify the voices of easily overlooked populations. Based on that rationale, qualitative methodology was an appropriate vehicle in which to accomplish the goal of this research: to examine the essence of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in higher education.

A qualitative research design allowed me to gain insight into higher education experiences from the perspective of students from refugee backgrounds. Several researchers recommended a qualitative research design as the preferred way to capture and present human experiences (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Seidman, 2006). Researchers also looked to participants’ voices to enable them to understand the meanings assigned to those specific experiences. From this, it was clear that qualitative research seeks out participants’ perspectives based on the assumption that the stories themselves will have meaning and be of tremendous value. I also derived value from the ways in which participants understood their experiences. As Merriam (2009) stated, “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). Similarly, Glesne and Peshkin (1992) advocated for
qualitative approaches to research when they explained, “The openness of qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to approach the inherent complexity of social interaction and to do justice to that complexity, to respect it in its own right” (p. 7). From this statement, we saw that researchers needed to work in partnership with participants, must respect the stories being told, and must honor the people who have chosen to share those stories.

In this chapter, I discuss the research design, methodology, and data analysis that informed this study. I also detail the role of the researcher. The research question that guided this study asked, “What is the essence of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds when navigating postsecondary education in the United States?”

**Philosophical Assumptions**

According to Creswell (2013), embedded within any interpretive framework are four associated philosophical assumptions. Those beliefs or assumptions consider the ontology, epistemology, axiology, and the methodological approach to inquiry (Creswell, 2013). These four main philosophical assumptions organize how one understands research. Social constructivism informed the philosophical assumptions that guided my study.

Ontology refers to the nature of reality (Creswell, 2013). In social constructivism, however, there is more than one reality. Researchers who endorse social constructivism believe that reality is constructed, and that this construction flows out of lived experiences and interaction with others (Creswell, 2013; Jones et al., 2014). Because multiple perspectives are valued, social constructivism rejects the idea of a single identifiable reality or truth.

Epistemology explains how to identify reality and is concerned with the nature of truth, knowledge, objectivity, subjectivity, validity, and generalizability (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Jones et al. (2014) and Creswell (2013) noted that truth is co-constructed and represents a
partnership between the researcher and those who are participants in the research process. This notion of partnership shapes the definition of truth offered by Jones et al. 2014: “an agreement between members of a stakeholding community” (p. 13). The third philosophical assumption is axiology. Axiological beliefs address the roles of values (Creswell, 2013). In social constructivism, we privilege both individual values and values in general, treating both as a “means of understanding” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 13). Finally, methodological beliefs encompass the approach to inquiry (Creswell, 2013). Research rooted in a social constructivist perspective often utilizes interviews, observations, and analysis of texts. Creswell (2013) also shared that social constructivists typically employ a literary writing style.

**Interpretive Framework**

Several assumptions shaped the design of this research. The interpretive framework is a set of beliefs that categorically underpin research and its design (Creswell, 2013). Though Creswell (2013) used the term interpretive framework, its practical meaning is extremely similar to the term ‘paradigm’ used by Patton (2002) and Jones et al. (2014). Jones et al. (2014) defined a paradigm as a worldview, or a set of interrelated beliefs. Patton (2002) described paradigms in a similar fashion, and explained it as “a worldview - a way of thinking about and making sense of the complexities of the real world” (p. 69). Patton (2002) further articulated the meaning of a paradigm and proclaimed, “Paradigms tell us what is important, legitimate, and reasonable. Paradigms are also normative. . .” (p. 69). This definition showed that paradigms are a critical component of qualitative research.

The specific interpretive framework, or paradigm, that grounded this phenomenological work was social constructivism. Social constructivism posits that individual experiences affect
reality. Creswell (2013) articulated the assumptions of this framework in the following way:

In social constructivism, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences – meanings directed towards certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas. (p. 24)

Some researchers have used the terms interpretive, constructivism, and constructionism to refer to this framework and its associated premises (Jones et al., 2014). In spite of varied names, Jones et al. asserted that for social constructivism, “the aim of research is increased understanding of complex human phenomena to alter existing power relations” (p. 13). Additionally, Jones et al. noted that this framework stresses understanding and perceives knowledge and existence through human interaction.

A social constructivist approach unearths meaning from numerous perspectives, and researchers are encouraged to gather those perspectives (Jones et al., 2014). The social constructivist approach also recognizes that multiple factors, including history, culture, and society, influence meaning (Creswell, 2013). The impact of those external factors is one reason why research grounded in social constructivism is so reliant on participants’ perspectives and individual experiences. Social constructivist research then, endeavors to understand reality as it exists in the minds of participants. I selected a social constructivist approach because of my rejection of the existence of a single reality. Much like Creswell (2013) described social constructivists, I believe that there may be, and often are, several views of reality. I also believe that reality unfolds out of the experiences of others and that the validity of research emerges
from the sharing of participant experiences.

Yet another indicator of the orientation of this interpretive framework, or paradigm, was the role of theory in the research design. Although phenomenological research might lack an explicit theoretical framework, in an overview of social constructivism, Creswell (2003) noted, “rather than starting with a theory (as in postpositivism), inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning” (p. 9). In other words, by using an inductive approach, I did not use theory as the starting point of the study; in contrast, the theories evolved from the research. Accordingly, in keeping with the inductive nature of this research, I employed an inductive analytical process that enabled the findings of this research to arise from the prevailing themes of the collected data. The unfolding data led me to theories that facilitated a more robust understanding of the essence of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in U.S. postsecondary education. Based on that data, I used literature related to incorporation and acculturation, resilience and grit, and self-efficacy to understand the essence of participants’ experiences in postsecondary education.

**Phenomenology as a Methodological Approach**

I viewed this research as an investigation of the lived experiences of students from refugee backgrounds and used phenomenology to guide the qualitative methods of the study. German philosopher Edmund Husserl, intrigued by meaning and essence, developed the concept of phenomenology, an approach attempting to explain how individuals assign meaning to experiences (King & Horrocks, 2010; Moustakas, 1994). As both a philosophy and a methodology (Jones et al., 2014), phenomenology is frequently used to study people and explore and describe phenomena within their lived experiences (van Manen, 1990). It is also an extremely useful tool for understanding the lived experiences of groups and individuals
(Moustakas, 1994). For van Manen (1990), a fundamental trait of phenomenological research was its focus on the ‘lifeworld,’ a term coined by Husserl (King & Horrocks, 2010). This lifeworld essentially consists of the everyday life and social actions that people encounter and perceive as meaningful.

Two additional expectations of phenomenology are that researchers identify the very ‘essence’ of that lived experience (Creswell, 2013) and focus on how individuals make meaning of it (Patton, 2002). An important assumption of the phenomenological tradition is the existence of a readily understood core essence among shared experiences. Several scholars provided definitions of phenomenology. Across these definitions, researchers viewed the idea of essence, meaning, lived experiences, and the life-world as key underpinnings of the phenomenological research method. For example, Creswell (2013) defined a phenomenological study as one that “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (p. 76). Another definition of phenomenology was set forth by Rockenbach, Walker, and Luzader (2012), who contended that phenomenology is “a philosophical tradition that involves identifying the essence, invariant structure, and underlying meanings of phenomena” (p. 57). In most cases, Patton (2002), van Manen (1990), and Creswell consistently upheld that understanding the essence of the lived experience was a central tenet of phenomenology.

There are several types of phenomenological frameworks. One tradition within phenomenological research is transcendental phenomenology (King & Horrocks, 2010; Moustakas, 1994). Research subscribing to a transcendental phenomenological orientation is typically intentional, intuitive, and descriptive (Moustakas, 1994). There is, however, another type of phenomenological research: hermeneutical. This type of research integrates the fields of
phenomenology and hermeneutic philosophy, which Frederich Schleiermacher developed (Patton, 2002). Hermeneutic philosophy focuses on the interpretation of texts, legends, and stories (Patton, 2002), and when viewed alongside phenomenology, uses both words and narratives to deepen understanding of a phenomenon (Byrne, 2001). In contrast to the description favored by transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutical phenomenology values the co-construction of reality and is interpretive.

Hermeneutical phenomenology studies interpretive structures of experience; this research orientation considers how we understand and engage with things within the human world. King and Horrocks (2010) confirmed the interpretive nature of hermeneutical phenomenology, finding that “understanding the lived experience of the lifeworld is the main goal of most research in the interpretative phenomenological tradition” (p. 179). Van Manen (1990) also described hermeneutic phenomenology as a human science that studies people. Similarly, Patton (2002) stated, “Hermeneutic researchers use qualitative methods to establish context and meaning for what people do” (p. 115). Both Patton and van Manen highlighted hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology focused on elements of subjective experiences. Those subjective experiences included people, context, and meaning. According to Costley, Elliott, and Gibbs (2010), “phenomenological approaches are powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people’s motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of assumptions and conventional wisdom” (p. 87). In this way, there was common ground between van Manen and Costley et al. in that both researchers emphasized the relationship between phenomenological research and people.

The guiding goal of phenomenology is not to generalize, but to understand the phenomenon within a particular environment. Creswell (2013) maintained, “phenomenologists
focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. . .
the basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a
description of the universal essence” (p. 76). In the field of education, much of the existing
phenomenological research is consistent with, and dominated by, the hermeneutical
philosophical tradition (Jones et al., 2014). Phenomenology is especially appropriate in the
education field because research should deepen readers’ understanding of a phenomenon by
relaying the voices of participants who have experienced a specific phenomenon. Additionally,
phenomenology offers researchers an opportunity to carefully consider and interpret human
experience.

Shaped by the previously mentioned premises, this study was rooted in the hermeneutic
phenomenological tradition. The hermeneutic phenomenological tradition allowed me to
generate knowledge about how students from refugee backgrounds experience higher education
in the United States. This school of phenomenology made it possible for me to facilitate
participants’ recounting of their postsecondary experiences by capturing their stories. To explore
the essence of SRBs’ lived experiences, I maintained the tradition of hermeneutic philosophy by
interpreting their stories and written thoughts. This school of phenomenology led me to co-
construct and interpret these experiences in partnership with the participants of the study, and I
used that exchange of information to understand their experiences.

Data Collection Methods

The goal of phenomenological research is to describe an individual’s particular
phenomenon or lived experience. Through the exploration of multiple lived experiences, the
researcher elicits shared meanings and commonalties. In accordance with the conventions of
phenomenological research, I used interviews to facilitate the data collection process (Creswell,
In phenomenological research, interviews are advantageous because “it permits an explicit focus on the researcher’s personal experience combined with those of the interviewees. It focuses on the deep, lived meanings that events have for individuals, assuming that these meanings guide actions and interactions” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 105). Van Manen (1990) also encouraged the use of interviews in data collection. Van Manen insisted, “The interview may be used as a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience” (p. 66). Due to the documented benefits of interviews in qualitative research, I used two one-on-one semi-structured interviews to gather information that would address the research question. Follow-up interviews included questions about emerging themes from the two interviews, and allowed me to seek clarification on certain details of participants’ lives.

I used a semi-structured interview guide, or protocol, across all interviews (Appendix E). The interview guide featured broad questions designed to elicit responses and stories from the participants. The first interview requested demographic information and asked participants about how they came to resettle to the United States. The second interview focused on their experiences in postsecondary education. According to Jones et al. (2014), a key characteristic of the semi-structured interview is that the order of questions is flexible. The inherent flexibility of the semi-structured format allowed me to ask clarifying questions and probe more deeply with each participant as needed. However, even with that degree of freedom, the semi-structured approach still allowed me to maintain consistency within the interview process across all participants in terms of the questions asked.

The semi-structured interview protocol allowed me to include questions that addressed specific aspects of the resettlement experience and navigation of the postsecondary space.
Examples of the prompts that guided the interviews included:

- Do you consider yourself a refugee? Why or why not?
- What impressions stand out in your mind about the process of resettlement?
- What do you recall about your adjustment to life in the United States?
- Tell me what college culture means to you.
- Tell me about a time when you were frustrated with your experience at XX University.
- How would you describe your social experiences at XX University?
- What (or who) influenced your decision to pursue your academic goals? How so?
- What does being a student from a refugee background mean to you?

Although the interview protocol probed into multiple aspects of SRBs’ experiences, the majority of questions delved into various aspects of students’ experiences within the higher education environment inside and outside of the classroom. Each interview session focused on participants’ descriptions of their experiences transitioning to the United States and the transition to college or university. I digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim the semi-structured one-on-one interview sessions. After I completed the transcription of all interviews, I analyzed the transcripts as a body of work for recurrent and resonant themes.

Interview sessions varied in length, but generally lasted between 45 minutes to 1-1/2 hours. I asked broad questions regarding their homeland, the process of resettlement, and students’ background and educational experiences. For example, participants were asked why they were forced to migrate, and were asked to recount their college selection decision-making and overall experience in the postsecondary environment. I conducted all interviews via Skype, which allows users to facilitate face-to-face interviews in an online format free of charge (King & Horrocks, 2010). Although face-to-face interviewing is preferred to online media (Jones et al.,
Skype is gaining acceptability within qualitative research (King & Horrocks, 2010). King and Horrocks (2010) remarked, “Perhaps the most obvious advantage of remote interviewing is that it can facilitate the inclusion of participants who are geographically distant from the interviewer” (p. 80). For King and Horrocks (2010), as long as researchers address technological challenges like bandwidth, audio recording capability, and audio quality, Skype and other video remote platforms offer an exciting and viable data collection option.

As part of the data collection process, between the first two interviews, participants also submitted a written response to a journal prompt through email. The prompt stated, “Describe your experiences as a refugee student navigating higher education in the United States (Appendix F).” I shared the prompt with participants through a desktop email client and through an online drive repository that allowed collaborative use. I used both mediums as a measure of convenience for the participants. I designed the journal prompt to help participants think more critically about factors germane to their ability to negotiate the pathway to postsecondary education. It laid the groundwork for students’ self-reflection pertaining to their experiences as refugees who had resettled to the United States and had experience with the higher education system. Given (2008) endorsed the use of journal entries in qualitative research, arguing, “When sensitive or taboo topics are studied, journals often allow participants to feel comfortable with their degrees of self-disclosure. Likewise, introverts or those who have been marginalized may feel particularly comfortable voicing their ideas in private writing” (p. 214). Thus, the aim of the journal entry was threefold. It provided another source of data, prepared participants for the second interview, and offered a clue as to what I valued as the researcher. To protect the participants’ confidentiality, I assigned a unique folder in the online drive repository (named by
pseudonym) to each participant of the study.

Data Analysis

Prior to data analysis, and even during the process of data collection, I bracketed the preexisting knowledge that I possessed regarding refugee resettlement, students from refugee backgrounds, and SRBs’ experiences within higher and postsecondary education. Bracketing is an integral part of the process of data analysis, as it allows researchers to “enter the situation without prejudice” (Holloway, 1997, p. 29). Hence, the purpose of bracketing in this study was to minimize the influence of my own attitudes and experiences on the stories shared by participants. By bracketing, I mean that I had to acknowledge and then set aside intentionally, to the best of my ability, my own perceptions and experiences related to refugees, resettlement experiences, and access to higher education. For example, to the best of my ability, I acknowledged and set aside my previous work experiences with students from refugee backgrounds and their parents. Additionally, I acknowledged my sensitivity to, and compassion towards, refugee youth and families; previous volunteer experiences with refugee families, along with current events, shaped my attitudes and beliefs. By carving out space to acknowledge, understand, and set aside such experiences, I empowered myself to approach this research, and participants’ experiences, with a higher degree of objectivity than would be otherwise possible.

The ability to set apart, or bracket, this information is critical to phenomenological research because it enables researchers to remain open-minded to data revealed by participants (Creswell, 2013; Holloway, 1997). After explicitly identifying and setting aside my personal views through the process of bracketing, I transcribed all of the interviews verbatim. When all of the interviews were completed and transcribed, I reread the transcripts as a body of work. As I reread the transcripts, I highlighted notable words, phrases, and sentences. These sentences,
phrases, and words captured how participants experienced higher education as a SRB. Known as horizontalization, this step of the process assumed that each individual part contributed to a whole (Moustakas, 1994). I embraced the spirit and practice of horizontalization as I observed, pulled out, and analyzed all data equally. I treated the data as equal components because no one thing was valued as more important than another aspect of the data.

After I read and reread the transcripts and the descriptions within, I pulled them apart into smaller units, or clusters, of meaning, as is standard practice in phenomenology (Creswell, 2013). Data deemed particularly important were reoccurring words, phrases, experiences, reflections, and common ideas that emerged across participants. I looked for patterns across transcripts as well, and lumped commonalities into groupings that became the written structure of the experience. I used those groupings to create a detailed summary, or textural description, of what participants had commonly experienced (Creswell, 2013). I used imaginative variation to determine the importance of individual units of meaning within their particular contexts. I coded those themes from the raw data, as data coding is a formal way of presenting data analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The recognition of those themes was a vital part of the meaning-making process because they “communicate findings that reflect knowledge of the phenomenon under study” (Byrne, 2001, p. 968). When examined as a group, those themes embodied the essence of what it means to be a student from a refugee background.

Creswell (2013) maintained that researchers must extract evidence for codes from the data. Moreover, Creswell, like Marshall and Rossman (2006), indicated that coding allows the researcher to make sense of collected data. In this research, I manually coded the emergent themes twice: according to color for categories, and by number as an indicator of the frequency of certain words and ideas. At the end of the data collection process, I reorganized the data in
accordance with the salient themes that surfaced among the participants. When Creswell (2013) described the process of coding in qualitative research, he noted that not all data would be included in the findings. In reporting the findings of this study, I selectively included data based on their salience across participants and relevance to the sole research question of this study: “What is the essence of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds when navigating postsecondary education in the United States?”

I incorporated the structural and textural descriptions to uncover the essence of the phenomenon. That essence, or invariant structure, reflected experiences shared by all participants (Creswell, 2013). To reflect those shared experiences, I described what the SRBs of this study had experienced. After the data collection and analysis stages of the process were completed, I sought feedback from two colleagues regarding the way in which I interpreted the data. This peer debrief, a measure of trustworthiness, bolstered the credibility of my research. I also provided participants with a copy of their unique transcripts, journal entries, and a summary of the findings of this study. This process, known as member checking, helped to ensure that the data were trustworthy and accurately represented the intended spirit of individual participants’ statements. Furthermore, through the member check, I offered participants the opportunity to read a draft of the full findings so that they would have an opportunity to provide feedback on how I interpreted the overall findings of the study.

**Data Sources**

I used this study to explore the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds while transitioning to life and higher education in the United States following resettlement. The sources of data were interviews and journal entries collected from six participants. Prior to data collection, I applied for and received approval from the Human Subjects Review Board
Geographically, the study focused on the states of New Jersey, New York, and Ohio because those locations have a history of resettled refugee communities.

At least three agencies in New Jersey serve the needs of refugees: the federally funded Refugee Resettlement Program, the American Friends Service Committee, and Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Newark. During fiscal year 2012, the majority of refugees resettled to New Jersey were from Cuba, Iraq, and Burma (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2013). Approximately 3,528 refugees resettled to New York during fiscal year 2012 (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2013). The Office of Refugee Resettlement (2013) reported that 279 refugees resettled to New Jersey in the same year. In the State of Ohio, the federally funded Office of Refugee Resettlement coordinates services to refugees. During fiscal year 2012, 2,245 refugees resettled to Ohio (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2013). In 2012, most refugees in the state resettled from Bhutan, Burma, Iraq, and Somalia.

**Participant Sampling**

Even though Creswell (2013) suggested that a reasonable data sample size might range from three to 15 participants for a phenomenological study, there are no concrete standards. In spite of this, Patton (2002) recommended a sampling size that aligns with what is reasonable in terms of available resources, timelines, the purpose of the study, and the interests of stakeholders. In this research, I used the collected data and the emergent themes to determine when the sample size was adequate. I made this decision once I had reached a point of data saturation – the point when data have reached significant depth. By definition, data saturation relies on the participation of multiple participants to establish whether there are enough participants to meet the objectives of the study. Jones et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of the saturation of data, and argued, “When themes or categories are saturated, then the decision to
stop sampling is justified. Saturation occurs when the researcher begins to hear (or observe, or read) the same or similar kinds of information related to the categories of analysis” (p. 114). In accordance with this summary, I stopped sampling when participants’ stories and reflections began to echo one another. These echoes were realized when participants voiced markedly similar words, phrases, and ideas multiple times. At that point, redundancy in the collected information was a clear indicator that the size of the participant sample was appropriate. I found that reaching the point of data saturation was an organic, naturally unfolding process.

Jones et al. (2014) defined sampling strategy as way to identify individuals, documents, and settings for inclusion in a research study. To maintain expectations for high-quality research, the sampling strategy for this study was purposeful. The sampling strategy also complemented the goals of the study and its methodological approach. Purposeful sampling necessitates the intentional selection of prospective study participants. As explained by Creswell (2012), “In purposeful sampling, researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (p. 206). There are three main advantages to purposeful sampling. First, participants are more likely to provide information that relates to the study. Second, purposeful sampling increases the likelihood that people can raise their awareness of the phenomenon in question. Third, purposeful sampling “might give voice to ‘silenced’ people” (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). Within the overarching strategy of purposeful sampling, I relied on intensity sampling and snowball sampling to advance participant recruitment efforts.

Intensity sampling is appropriate for phenomenological research because it requires participants to have experienced or currently live the designated phenomenon of interest (Jones et al., 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Marshall and Rossman (2006) articulated that intensity sampling “involves information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but
not extremely” (p. 71). To meet the expectations of intensity sampling, I confirmed that interested prospective participants met the criteria for eligibility for participation in the study. I also utilized snowball sampling to expand the participant pool. Snowball sampling allows participants to recommend other people for inclusion in the study (Creswell, 2012). Snowball sampling was advantageous because it increased the sample and boosted the reputation of the participant experience. Personal referrals enhanced the reputation of the study by addressing participant concerns. By being referred to the study by a trusted peer, participants were reassured that the goal of this study was solely to explore the essence of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds, and not to probe into immigration status outside the scope of the study or publicize the details of their personal histories. Snowball sampling also personalized the recruitment process, as it encouraged participant support among students’ peer groups.

**Participant recruitment.** I recruited participants through purposeful and snowball sampling. These sampling techniques yielded six participants in this study of the essence of the experience of refugee students in United States postsecondary education. The first point of contact with students occurred via e-mail in September 2014 (Appendix A). Participants responded to an advertisement emailed to international students and friends, and to cultural groups. The email to students provided a brief overview of the study, provided my contact information, and encouraged prospective participants to contact me directly in order to initiate their participation. Students also had an opportunity to recommend other students for participation in the study. The first participant of the study invited me to an informal meeting with a group of students from refugee backgrounds. During that social gathering, I had an
opportunity to explain the purpose of my study in-person.

Prior to the first interview, I asked students to review an informed consent form that explained their rights as prospective participants of the study (Appendix D). For those who chose to participate, I documented informed consent verbally during the digital recording of each interview session. Participants selected a pseudonym to conceal their identity. They also received an interview guide prior to each one-on-one interview session. I kept all participant responses confidential and scheduled interviews in advance of the mutually agreed upon meeting time.

All participants participated in a one-on-one Skype interview, next submitted a journal entry, and following that, completed the second and final one-on-one Skype interview. Participants engaged with the data collection process between November 2014 and May 2015. However, whereas some participants completed the first interview, submitted a journal entry, and then completed the second interview within a 6-week time span, others completed the first interview during December 2014, submitted the journal entry in March 2015, and completed the final interview in May 2015. Additional follow-up sessions occurred during fall 2015 to delve more deeply into participants’ selection of a college or university, and to explore further their experiences on and off college campuses.

**Eligibility criterion.** I recruited students from refugee backgrounds from a large public institution in the Midwest. I organized this study around the common experience of identifying as a refugee who had resettled to the United States and enrolled in a degree-seeking program at a four-year or two-year institution. Current refugee status was not a requirement of the parameters of this study. Instead, the act of identifying as a refugee was of the utmost importance. This was a critical factor because refugees are required to apply for residency one year after following
admittance to the United States as a refugee (USCIS, 2013). All interested students received a follow-up email that outlined the precise details of the study (Appendix C).

Eligibility in this study was limited to participants 18 years of age or older. I implemented this age restriction to ensure that participants could participate in the study as legal adults. Eligible participants also needed to have completed at least one semester of undergraduate coursework in the United States. All participants were required to self-identify as a student from a refugee background. I also required participants to have current enrollment in a degree-seeking program, or to have graduated within the last two years. I required undergraduate participants to have current enrollment in the university with at least six credits. Graduate students were required to have current university enrollment with at least three credits. I implemented these academic credit stipulations to make it more likely that student participants from refugee backgrounds would adequately understand and be familiar with the culture, norms, and expectations of postsecondary education in the United States.

**Measures of Research Quality**

A critical part of the research process is the ability to consider and attend to the quality of the research. However, in qualitative research, there are few consistent or rigidly imposed standards for assessing research quality. When noticing this, researchers King and Horrocks (2010) lamented, “There is no general agreement about which criteria to use when assessing criteria, or how to apply the criteria” (p. 158). In spite of a lack of consensus on this issue, Jones et al. (2014), Creswell (2013), and Patton (2002) did offer suggestions for evaluating measures of quality in qualitative research. Additionally, Patton singularly offered explicit counsel on assessing quality and credibility within qualitative work based on the tradition of social construction. Patton highlighted trustworthiness, acknowledgement of subjectivity, authenticity,
triangulation, reflexivity, praxis, contributions to dialogue, and enhanced and deepened understanding as important measures of quality.

In general, the hallmark of a high quality phenomenological study is that a phenomenon has actually been identified (Creswell, 2013), and the ability of the researcher to honor the stories shared by participants, and represent those with accuracy and honesty. Researchers can achieve this goal by providing raw data, like quotes, in support of any statements and inferences drawn. Researchers must portray the essence of participants’ experiences, and when presenting that essence, should do so with a description of the experience and the context under which it occurred. Phenomenological work should also highlight the complexity of, and commonality among, participants’ experiences. That commonality leads to the invariant structures that become the very essence of the phenomenon. Creswell (2013) also advised researchers to demonstrate an understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenological research, to follow the appropriate data analysis procedures, and to be reflexive throughout the study.

Credibility and validity are crucial elements of high quality research. Creswell and Miller (2000) found, “There is a general consensus . . . that qualitative inquirers need to demonstrate that their studies are credible” (p. 124). I validated my research with the use of rich, thick description, which “provides the foundation for qualitative analysis and reporting” (Patton, 2002, p. 437). Creswell (2013) contended, “thick description means that the researcher provides details when describing a case or when writing about a theme” (p. 252). To achieve rich and thick description, and to allow others to recognize this study’s relevance to other contexts, I provided information about the participants as individuals and the context of the research in detail. Creswell and Miller (2000) argued that thick, rich description leaves readers with “the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in a study.
Thus, credibility is established through the lens of readers who read a narrative account and are transported into a setting or situation” (pp. 128-129). Thick, rich description also deepens readers’ engagement with the research in question. To achieve the goal of providing rich description, I included excerpts from interviews and journal entries that captured the essence of SRB experiences. I also edited participants’ comment quite minimally to ensure that readers would be able to experience the voice and personality of each participant.

A second aspect of trustworthiness is reflexivity, defined by Jones et al. (2014) as “reflecting critically on the human as instrument” (p. 45). To meet the ideals of reflexivity, I maintained a researcher journal throughout the data collection process. I used this journal to record my impressions; it provided a space to document ongoing self-commentary during the process of data analysis. I also used this journal as a place to assess my own biases and values as it related to this study of higher education and SRBs. The process of maintaining the journal kept me engaged with the study as an active researcher-participant. It empowered me to maintain an ongoing record of my ideas in a systematic way. The very act of documentation is a classic form of reflexivity in qualitative research. In general, the reflexive process can be used to provide support to claims of validity (Kings & Horrocks, 2010). Kings and Horrocks (2010) understood reflexivity as the process in which “the researcher makes visible their part in the production of knowledge – thus, as a researcher, you are accountable” (p. 133). Somewhat related to reflexivity is researcher positionality. Jones et al. (2014) cautioned researchers to understand one’s own position and worldview prior to embarking on a research study. Similarly, Patton (2002) advised qualitative researchers to make every effort to reduce researcher bias.

Yet another measure of quality is data triangulation. To strengthen the quality of this research, data triangulation occurred through an analysis of the interviews and the resultant
transcripts, as well as an analysis of the submitted journal entries. Qualitative researchers often rely on data triangulation to check and establish the validity of their research among several resources and perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Quite simply, as stated by Patton (2002), “triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods” (p. 247). Glesne and Peshkin (1992) reinforced this idea, noting that data triangulation contributes to the trustworthiness of data collection by incorporating more than a single data collection method. Likewise, Marshall and Rossman (2006) emphasized, “Triangulation is the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point” (p. 202). Without data triangulation, flawed research results linked to the research method are more likely. As part of the research process, it was important for me to recognize that the goal of data triangulation was not to achieve consistency among sources of data, but to test for consistency (Patton, 2002).

Other elements of trustworthiness connect to the process of data analysis, which should provide a system of checks and balances. I shared a copy of each participant’s transcript with him or her. This enabled me to verify that I had accurately captured their reflections and thoughts. It also gave participants an opportunity to clarify or correct the facts captured within the transcript, and to add information that they believed would be relevant and helpful. Participants also had an opportunity to clarify my interpretation of the experiences shared in the interview sessions and journal prompts. Jones et al. (2014) called this process member checking. The purpose of member checking is to address factual accuracy and the appropriateness of my interpretations as the researcher.

Mero-Jaffe (2011) advised researchers to conduct a member check as a way to ensure that the interview transcript is an accurate representation of what the participant said. I held member checks after transcribing each participant’s interview. Those member checks assumed the role
primarily of being a transcript review. However, the member checks scheduled at the end of the interview process, after identifying themes, were more robust. The final member check allowed participants to offer feedback on the results of the data as a whole, and not only on their individual contributions. I conducted the member checks via telephone with each participant, and each lasted approximately 15 - 20 minutes. Participants received the themes in writing before the scheduled phone call; the themes shared included excerpts from all of the interviews. Participants agreed with the results of the data, and found that the quotes used to support those themes were appropriate. Shenton (2004) described what a ‘good’ member check might look like:

Checks relating to the accuracy of the data may take place “on the spot” in the course, and at the end, of the data collection dialogues. Informants may also be asked to read any transcripts of dialogues in which they have participated. Here the emphasis should be on whether the informants consider that their words match what they actually intended, since, if a tape recorder has been used, the articulations themselves should at least have been accurately captured. (p. 68)

Overall, member checking boosts the credibility of research by allowing participants to check for accuracy and clarity following the interview process.

An additional layer of trustworthiness used in this study was the use of inquiry auditors (Jones et al., 2014). In addition to offering participants an opportunity to provide responses and feedback, I solicited feedback from two colleagues. Specifically, I asked my colleagues, who were not a part of the study design or data collection process, to review the transcripts, interpretations, and my conclusions. The process of using inquiry auditors provided me with a much-needed level of objectivity, as well as constructive criticism and feedback. The inquiry
auditors also allowed me to reexamine my values and biases, and enabled me to think through the common elements of the data that led to the identified themes. Ultimately, the inquiry audit allowed me to confirm that my conclusions were accurate, logical, and supported by the transcript.

Combined, member checking with participants and the inquiry audit process presented additional ways for me to bolster the overall quality, validity, and credibility of the research. One of the key results of the inquiry audit was that it empowered me to refer back to my researcher journal to draw on my observations that complemented participant’s words and thoughts. Member checking with participants gave me an opportunity to ask participants to clarify certain statements, and to expand on the details of parts of their higher education experiences. In both cases – member checking and the inquiry audit – participants enhanced the data with additional details even though the theme remained unchanged. Consequently, I found that the process enriched and confirmed the data.

**Researcher as Instrument**

It was difficult to detach my personal interpretations from the content of the research and the data that I had collected. Even so, I made a consistent and conscious effort to remain aware of any personal experiences that could affect my engagement with and analysis of the data. Such an awareness of what I personally brought to the research process was critical to minimizing bias as much as possible, and highlighted my willingness to be a reflexive researcher. According to Creswell (2013), reflexivity occurs when “researchers convey (i.e., in a method section, in an introduction, or in other places in a study) their background (e.g., work experiences, cultural experiences, history), how it informs their interpretation of the information in a study, and what they have to gain from the study” (p. 47). Patton (2002) also acknowledged the emergence and
growing importance of reflexivity in qualitative research: “Reflexivity has entered the qualitative lexicon as a way of emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one’s perspective” (p. 64). That awareness of myself as a researcher is an important part of being a reflexive researcher.

Reflexivity is truly more than a best practice; it is a cornerstone of qualitative research expectations. To demonstrate reflexivity, I relied upon epoché and bracketing. According to Jones et al. (2014) although epoché and bracketing are discrete entities, they are still highly connected within phenomenological analysis. Jones et al. viewed epoché as the first step of phenomenological analysis. Similar to bracketing, epoché was an ongoing process, and required that I identify, address, and think about any biases or assumption that I held and brought with me to the process of engaging with this research. However, bracketing is primarily concerned with identification of these issues, whereas epoché engages with the process of suspending these beliefs from the research as much as possible. In defining epoché, van Manen (1990) wrote,

Epoché is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things. . . Epoché requires a new way of looking at things, a way that requires that we learn to see what stands before our eyes, what we can distinguish and describe. (p. 33)

The phenomenological approach demanded that I, as the researcher, pull out certain factors. As I moved to set aside these assumptions, I identified, isolated, and suspended, as much as was possible, any prior knowledge, experiences, opinions, ideas, and values from the phenomenon under study.

As a reminder, Creswell (2013) called that separation and acknowledgement of personal, preexisting biases and assumptions bracketing. The expectations of phenomenological research
demand that the researcher is bracketed outside the study in order to “identify personal experiences with the phenomenon and to partly set them aside so that the researcher can focus on the experiences of the participants” (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). Jones et al. (2014) stated, “bracketing follows epochè in an analytic process referred to as phenomenological reduction” (p. 92). Bracketing relates to one’s everyday understandings, theories, beliefs, habitual modes of thought, and judgment. Bracketing also empowers researchers to set aside, or at least become aware of, one’s biases, habits, and assumptions.

**Researcher role and identity.** The role of the researcher is critical to qualitative research because the researcher is truly the ‘instrument’ used to discern information about the participants. As is standard practice in qualitative research, targeted and overt awareness of my personal and professional experiences were critical to this research. I made a conscious effort to acknowledge my biases and responses to the data, and separated them from the research process in an attempt to be objective, neutral, and not overly influence the communication process with participants. Ultimately, my goal for the study was for the findings to be a true representation of participant reflections and to capture the essence of those experiences.

The core tenets of qualitative research require that investigators acknowledge and are transparent about their biases and assumptions. This acknowledgment, however, is not to be confused with disinterest or a lack of passion. To that point, Seidman (2006) maintained that it is critical for researchers to share some of themselves within the context of the study. To a degree, the data collection process in qualitative research requires bidirectional communication. Seidman argued, “Rather than seeking a “disinterested” position as a researcher, the interviewer needs to understand and affirm his or her interest. . . An autobiographical section explaining researchers’ connections to their proposed research seems to me to be crucial for those interested
in in-depth interviewing” (p.32). For that reason, it is important to have insight on my perspective as a researcher and the identity that I embrace. In that spirit, I share an overview of my professional experiences and perspectives in order to illuminate my role in the research and offer context to my identity as a researcher.

As a researcher, when I consider knowledge creation, I believe that we come to know what we know and understand because of personal experience, intake of anecdotal advice, and through careful reflection. This reflection often follows the observation of what is happening and what has happened to the people around us. These impressions of the surrounding world form a worldview that individuals then assume to be true. In researching the intersection of migration and postsecondary education, I have also come to believe that migration has a subtle but still important effect on the functioning of higher education.

I am inspired to conduct this research based on my interest in comparative and international education, and my experiences working directly with students from refugee and immigrant backgrounds inside and outside of the classroom. Furthermore, part of my interests have emerged out of my experiences with newly resettled refugee teenagers while working at a university based academic summer program. My roles varied, ranging from a residence life position to academic support and advising. As a live-on residence life staff member, I interacted with students quite deeply and was often able to connect with students on an intimate level. Through late-night conversations, I learned about students’ fears, their thoughts on the transition to the United States, and their questions and perceptions about college. In contrast to my student-facing role, as an academic support staff member, I had several structured opportunities to meet with parents and/or adult caregivers. Although the focus of my role was to build relationships between families and the college/university, it was also a time for families
to voice their concerns and provide feedback about the program. In my experience, at that time, I often found that parents were happy to support their child’s participation in the program. They appreciated the academic components and the financial incentives, and perceived the program as a gateway to college access. However, parents also questioned the validity or need for many of the co-curricular activities, often challenging its usefulness and relevance. I also encountered many instances where the parents did not agree on the program. In those instances, one of the parents wanted to remove their teen from the program in order to have that child support the family by working part-time or assisting with the care of younger siblings.

For the students and families that I interacted with, underpinning all of these interactions was the awareness of trying to establish oneself in a new country because of the circumstances that led to refugee status. Deeply moved by the courage of these students and their families, I became curious about what their college and university experiences might look like one day. For some students, I observed tension between their personal desire to attend college and their parents’ inability to perceive the practical value of a postsecondary education. To some of the parents/adult caregivers, a college education seemed like an admirable yet out of reach goal that detracted from more important and immediate concerns.

For other students, I was informed of their lack of literacy in their native language, and observed firsthand the additional struggle of not speaking proficient English. As a higher education practitioner, I admired this institution and its leaders for their commitment to facilitating educational access for this growing community within their community. Intrigued by forced migration and its impact on education, I realized that few people had substantial knowledge about this population or the student population that is growing out of it. As I learned more and more about refugees in the higher and postsecondary education environment, I realized
how ‘invisible’ they could be, as refugee students frequently become lost in the umbrella of an assumed international identity, or integrate so fully that they are hardly distinguishable from domestic students.

Three other distinct experiences frame the way in which I view the world. First, I am an instructor for teaching English to speakers of other languages. In that capacity, my goal is to facilitate lessons that allow students to gain practical language skills that empower them to achieve a certain level of independence. Second, as a higher education professional, I have had many opportunities to interact with students from a variety of international backgrounds – whether they chose to relocate to the United States as study abroad students, without documentation, for employment, or whether they resettled to the United States through the process of seeking asylum or as refugees. Based on experiences working within several colleges and universities, I have noticed an assortment of attitudes that shape how people perceive and interact with students born outside the United States.

Third, as the older daughter of parents born outside the United States, the experience of emigration molds my perspective. Awareness of emigration influences the way in which children of immigrants interact and negotiate with life, culture, and education in North America. For every positive way in which my heritage has enriched my life, there were also moments where people bullied my family and I because of differences in our preferred food, clothing, or educational priorities. My parents were occasionally accused of “stealing jobs from Americans,” and in many cases, teachers made faulty assumptions about what their children could or could not do based on their beliefs and attitudes pertaining to nationality, language ability, and socioeconomic status. From my experience, in a country where value rests on an
idea of being American, there is some tension in straddling two worlds.

All of the aforementioned experiences shaped my approach to this study, the data, and the findings. At the core, my experiences, especially those moments where I worked directly with students from refugee backgrounds, drove my interest in exploring the essence of the experiences of refugee students in United States postsecondary education. In interpreting the data that led to the findings, my experiences compelled me to feel empathy when participants shared experiences of bullying based on accent, or discussed their motivation to persist to degree completion. Although I tried to separate my experiences from what was shared during the course of the study, it still affected how I engaged with the data. Furthermore, as a researcher who is not a member of the refugee background community, I took extra steps to triangulate the data with participants to avoid diluting their experiences with my own ideas about what the essence should be. My lack of firsthand experience as a refugee made member checking even more important. It was also important to build trust with participants to develop a relationship that would allow participants to feel comfortable sharing such personal details of their lives.

My overarching professional interests are concerned with the role of diversity in higher education. In my opinion, diversity-oriented and intercultural initiatives can serve as the foundation for building an inclusive environment, stimulating academic engagement, and assisting students with their interpersonal skills. I believe that this is important because the world is not a homogeneous space. If people are equipped to encounter difference, then it will be easier to establish equity within a greater number of social interactions. Interest in the study of migration and education is a striking example of diversity in higher education. At a time when the value of education is questioned and subjected to global scrutiny, I firmly believe that
it is truly important to acknowledge how and why people choose to enroll in higher education in the United States. It is also important to recognize what those educational experiences look like and remain aware of the factors that contribute to that experience.

Summary

I have presented the research design of this study here, including its purpose, research question, and descriptions of the hallmarks of social constructivism and phenomenology. In addition, I provided information on participant recruitment, and data collection and analysis procedures. Additionally, I shared information about my perspective as a researcher and the reason for my interest in the educational experiences of students from refugee backgrounds. The upcoming chapter reviews the results of this study; these themes reflect participants’ experiences within postsecondary education. There is also a discussion of the findings, the implications of this study, and suggestions for future research in the final chapter.
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This chapter provides an overview of the findings from this research study. I guided this study by a single research question: “What is the essence of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds when navigating postsecondary education in the United States?” The primary purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of scholarly literature, and to that end, this chapter shares those findings. I presented the findings from the data through excerpts from participants’ interviews. The excerpts represent individual perspectives regarding the intersection of refugee status and experiences within higher and postsecondary education. The findings of this study are not an exhaustive view of the experiences of all students from refugee backgrounds. Although the experiences of this particular student subpopulation - SRBs - are not monolithic, several common experiences emerged across the participants to inform the phenomenon of SRBs’ experiences in U.S. higher education. Those shared experiences shed light on how these SRBs have negotiated, and are continuing to negotiate, the postsecondary education environment.

Because this study was rooted in the phenomenological qualitative tradition, its design created an opportunity to communicate the lived experiences of a small sample of students from refugee backgrounds. The data provided an understanding of the essence of what it means to navigate higher education as a student from a refugee background (SRB). Participants willingly and freely shared some of the key events and moments of their lives, and in doing so, touched on migration experiences, the adjustment to life in the United States, and their interaction with postsecondary education in the United States. Using the stories they shared, in this chapter, I present participants’ thoughts and experiences, and have made every effort to rely on and present their unique voices as consistent with my research paradigm, social constructivism.
The first section of this chapter introduces each participant with a brief profile. This profile shares information about the individual background of study participants, identifies their country of birth, and details the nature of their postsecondary experiences. These profiles also highlight participants’ self-identification as a student from a refugee background. A discussion of the overarching themes that surfaced through the data collection process followed the presentation of participants’ profiles. There are five themes that emerged from careful review and analysis of my data as common to participants’ understanding of the central story of being SRBs in U.S. higher education: mobility and higher education; U.S. English language acquisition; negotiating a bicultural identity; connections to a community of national origin; and sources of support for persisting in higher education. The themes united participants’ common experiences and represented the essence of the phenomenon explored in this research.

One-on-one interviews and the submission of journal entries captured the essence of the experience of being a SRB in higher education in the United States. During the first interview, I asked participants to share demographic information and share their resettlement experiences. The journal entry prompted participants to reflect on their college experiences, which led to the second interview. During the second interview, I asked participants to describe their entry into and movement through higher education. All participants identified critical milestones to adjusting to life in the United States that influenced their ability to enroll in an institution of higher education and persist – or drop out of – their academic course of study. In describing their higher education experiences, some of the adjustment milestones identified included the ability to learn and utilize the English language; becoming knowledgeable of United States citizenship laws and immigration status; the role of supportive administrators within institutions; college adjustments in general; and learning about and interacting with the culture of the United
Participant Overview

The first objective of the data collection process was to allow participants to share their own unique stories and set of lived experiences. The second objective of the data collection process was to explore common experiences, phrases, and ideas that could illuminate the essence of this lived experience. Six students opted to participate in the full data collection process, which consisted of two interviews and a journal entry submission. Through the interviews and journal entries, participants disclosed their personal experience of forced migration, gradual adjustment to the United States, and negotiation of the higher education/postsecondary environment.

Six participants, four women and two men, participated in this study and self-disclosed that they identified as students from refugee backgrounds. The participants represented a range of higher education levels and degree completion from community college coursework through graduate degree completion. At the time I collected these data, four were current undergraduate or graduate school students, and one participant was a recent alum, who had graduated within one academic year of the time of their participation in this study. There was some variation among participant demographics in terms of the country of birth, age, gender, institutional type, academic standing, and individual experiences within the academy.

Despite the variety across participants’ demographic profiles, common themes did arise to unite their collective experiences. Thus, these students provided rich and useful data for this exploration and examination of the phenomenon of students from refugee backgrounds in U.S. higher education. The six students involved in this study, presented in order of educational attainment from some college to pursuing a graduate degree, are Vince, Nikki, Laila, Mai, Judy,
and Jared. All participants chose pseudonyms to represent their personal and unique experience. Ranging in age from 22 to 41, four out of six participants had resettled to the United States as children. Therefore, those four participants had access to extensive first-hand knowledge of the United States prior to their engagement with the postsecondary education system. Another four of the six participants were women and were born in African countries: the Republic of Rwanda, the Federal Republic of Somalia, and the Republic of Sierra Leone. Both men were Asian; one participant was born in the Kingdom of Cambodia and the other in the Kingdom of Bhutan.

Table 1 provides a demographic profile of all participants arranged according to highest educational attainment. Following Table 1 is a biographical profile of each participant; those profiles also summarize the context of each participants’ forced migration experience.
Table 1.

Demographic Profile of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>U.S. Educational Attainment</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age of U.S. Resettlement</th>
<th>Country of Birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vince</td>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cambodia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>Undergraduate Student</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Rwanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laila</td>
<td>Undergraduate Alumna</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mai</td>
<td>Undergraduate Alumna</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>Undergraduate Alumna</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jared</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Bhutan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vince. In 1983, at approximately three years old, Vince moved from England to the United States with his mother and older brother. The outbreak of a civil war forced his family to move out of Cambodia. Because Vince was so young when his family moved out of Cambodia, he could not directly recall what life was like in Cambodia at the time. However, he shared that his family reminds him of those circumstances, and that he grew up with an awareness of the reason for their resettlement to the United States. Vince commented, “I was born in Cambodia and I moved to the U.S when I was about three or four years old but I don’t remember anything. But I know there was a war, and they left us with nothing but the clothes on our backs.” His family resettled to the United States directly from a Cambodian refugee camp.

Vince was a high school graduate. His mother did not complete high school; however, his older brother graduated from high school in the United States. At the point of his participation in this study, Vince had completed some coursework towards the completion of an
associate’s degree at a local community college. Vince was enrolled in community college classes when I interviewed him, and had been enrolled in coursework intermittently for several years. Vince worked full-time to support his family, which consisted of a young son and his fiancée, who was born in the United States. Vince was 36 years old when I interviewed him for this study.

**Nikki.** Born in Rwanda, Nikki was a 33-year old mother of three children. When she was 14 years old, genocide erupted in Rwanda. Nikki referenced the outbreak of ethnically charged violence between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes as the reason for leaving Rwanda. That outbreak of violence, which began in 1994, is now known as the Rwandan Genocide. Some estimate that as many as 800,000 people died in its aftermath, and the vast majority of the deceased identified as members of the Tutsi ethnic group. As a member of the Tutsi ethnic tribe, Nikki witnessed the massacre of her immediate family, including her parents and siblings, by Hutu tribe members. She survived a violent attack, relocated to Uganda, later moved to England, and finally resettled to Ohio in 2011 with her now ex-husband and three children. Nikki attended a four-year public institution and was a full-time, degree-seeking student. At the time of these interviews, Nikki was pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration. Before resettling to the United States, Nikki had completed some university courses in Uganda. Her ex-husband is a college graduate. Nikki’s mother and father both received vocational training by completing the equivalent of middle school in Rwanda.

**Laila.** Laila was 22 years old at the time of her interview. She completed a Bachelor of Science degree in nursing from a four-year public institution in 2014, and was pursuing admission to graduate school at the time of her interview. Born in Somalia, Laila relocated to the United States with her mother and siblings when she was 8 years old. Laila and her family
left Somalia due to the outbreak of civil war and tremendous instability. In describing the political climate at that time, Laila stated, “Somalia. . . there wasn’t even a legit government. It just wasn’t safe.” Laila and her family first resettled to Kenya, but ultimately relocated to the United States. Both of Laila’s parents hold high school diplomas; they were educated outside the United States.

**Mai.** Mai, who was 25 years old at the time of her interview, was born in Somalia. At the time of her interviews, Mai was a full-time student in a doctoral program in neuroscience. She earned a Bachelor of Science degree in neuroscience from a four-year public institution. Born in Somalia, Laila relocated to the United States with her mother and siblings when she was 10 years old, following the outbreak of war. As Mai noted, “we moved because there was a civil war that broke out in Somalia in 1991.” Mai and her family first resettled to Kenya, and eventually resettled to the United States permanently. Mai’s parents were educated outside the United States. Her father is a college graduate and her mother earned a high school diploma.

**Judy.** Judy, who was 25 years old at the time of her interview, completed her Masters of Public Health degree in Public Health Epidemiology at a four-year public institution in 2011. At the time of her interview, Judy was a doctoral student in public health and health education, and focused specifically on international health combined with infectious diseases. Born in Sierra Leone, Judy and her parents left Sierra Leone in the aftermath of the outbreak of the civil war. They first resettled to Uganda, migrated to Saint Vincent, and ultimately relocated to the United States under a special refugee admissions regime when she was 10 years old. Under that category, she and her family moved back and forth between Saint Vincent and the United States before final resettlement to the United States. Judy’s parents were educated outside the United
States. Her mother earned a master’s degree in Economics. Judy’s father holds a master’s degree in Accounting.

**Jared.** Jared, born in Bhutan, was 41 years old at the time of his interview. Jared is of ethnic Nepalese descent. He and his family left Bhutan due to a political climate that targeted people of Nepalese descent through a “One Nation One People” national policy. As he said, “we left because of the political problem. There was a little bit of race discrimination among the Asians in some regions so we had to leave the country.” His family, which consisted of his parents, wife, and daughter, migrated to Nepal in 1994. After living there for 15 years, Jared resettled to the United States in 2010 with his wife and child through the refugee admissions process. He later reunited with his parents, also refugees. At the time of his interview, Jared, his family, and his parents lived together. Jared was the father of two children: a seven-year-old daughter and a three-year-old son. His son was born in the United States. Jared was a graduate student pursuing a Master of Science degree in Physics. Before moving to the United States, Jared had completed a graduate degree in Nepal. His parents did not complete high school.

Although four of six participants are now naturalized citizens, they all continued to identify with, to some degree, the refugee status that brought them to the United States. At the time of data collection, Nikki was in the process of applying for U.S. citizenship; I was unable to confirm Jared’s visa status. This sustained connection to their initial refugee status played a large role in how participants understood their experiences within U.S. higher education. The reason for participants’ resettlement out of their birth country aligned with the established definition of a refugee set forth by international law. In all cases, as described in their own words, these students and their families felt unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin based on a well-founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, membership
in a particular social group, or political opinion. Specifically, all participants recalled violence and political instability that swept across the nation and negatively affected their overall sense of safety and acceptance.

Phenomenological research assumes that there is an essence to the lived experience of participants (van Manen, 1990). This essence should remain constant among all participants because they have experienced, or are still experiencing, the same phenomenon. Therefore, although there is some variety among individual participants, when considered as a whole, the collective experience reveals common themes. In keeping with this principle of phenomenological research, several distinct themes emerged to illustrate the overall essence of the experience of being a student from a refugee background navigating U.S. higher education. Those themes are mobility and higher education; U.S. English language acquisition; negotiating a bicultural identity; connections to a community of national origin; and sources of support for persisting in higher education. These themes reflect a comprehensive view of the college experience. In the present study, the college experience consists of several components: access and motivations to pursue higher education, college choice process, campus involvement and support, and persistence and graduation.

**Mobility and Higher Education**

For all participants of this study, the experience of forced migration forged the pathway to higher and postsecondary education. Participation in U.S. higher education, for these participants, would not have been possible without the access that refugee status facilitated. The act of permanently resettling to the U.S. as refugees was, for all participants, the second step in using mobility to facilitate access to a better life, and to higher education. The theme of mobility and higher education developed in different ways for participants who resettled as adults as
compared to those students who resettled as youth.

Four out of six participants resettled to the United States as youth. Nikki and Jared stood out from the other participants because they resettled to the U.S. as adults. Of those four participants who migrated to the United States as young children (Laila, Mai, Vince, and Judy), three had completed or were in the process of beginning graduate study. Based on that common experience, it was clear that for those participants, resettlement during early childhood shaped their ability to move through the United States schooling system and embark on the pathway to higher education. Childhood socialization to life in the United States appeared to affect their lives in three significant ways. First, for Laila, Mai, Vince, and Judy, childhood resettlement shaped their adjustment to life in the United States by building their familiarity with U.S. customs and societal norms. Second, early childhood resettlement influenced their ability to move through the K-12 schooling system, learn about their educational options, and ultimately empowered them to facilitate their own postsecondary access.

A third consequence of childhood resettlement and socialization to the U.S. as youth was that these four participants have never had the opportunity to return to their country of birth. Consequently, complete immersion in U.S. culture has molded the worldview of these participants greatly. Specifically, because these participants have not been able to visit their homeland since early childhood resettlement, those experiences exist as a distant memory, and certainly as a place they desire to visit in the future. For example, when asked, “How would you identify yourself today in terms of nationality?” Vince remarked, “Cambodian, definitely. I can’t remember it, but I’m definitely Cambodian and want to go there one day.” He continued, expressing a strong desire to “see the country I was born in and visit family.” Laila, like Vince, also shared a desire to see where she was born once again. Laila said, “Thinking about Somalia,
it was so long ago, and sometimes it seems fuzzy. But, I’d go back again, at least to visit. It’s special to go where you’re from and I want to pass that on to my kids one day.” Laila also shared the following memory of Somalia:

One of the memories I have of Somalia... is during holidays we would all come out together, like the whole community. It wasn't like a big community it was [a] small, tightknit community. We would all come out together and pray outside. In America now we pray inside the mosque but back then it was outside. We had carpets on the floor and then we would pray outside. And then... the elders would give out money to the little kids and they would have candies and you know just food and stuff and that was one of my fondest memories of Somalia.

Like Vince and Laila, Judy also had a cherished memory to share. When asked what she remembered of her childhood in Sierra Leone, she said:

I don’t remember all the details. I think it was about maybe two or three I think. I don’t remember that much about it...I guess the most I remember is my friends. But the weird part is most of my friends left and moved here. And I remember definitely we only had two seasons and right now it [is] really hot so I remember that and obviously where we used to live. I remember that a lot. I went to a private school too so I also remember that. Little things. I remember the little things.

The memories shared by Vince, Laila, and Judy underscore the impact of forced migration on their resettlement to the United States, and how it shaped their interaction with the physical space - the country - in which they matured from childhood to adulthood. These memories also touch on the sense of self, or the identity, that participants had built for themselves due to resettlement. This identity becomes even more evident in a later theme, negotiating a bicultural identity, where
Judy, who arrived to the United States as a child, also noted differences in the academic curriculum between the United States and studies in other countries. Bilingual in French and English, she described several challenges in adjusting to the United States education system. She mentioned language, classroom discipline norms, and teaching style as being extremely different between the United States and her schooling abroad. However, Judy also asserted that the difference in academic expectations eased her adjustment to the U.S. curriculum:

. . . about the half the stuff I’d already learned when I came here in ninth grade…it was just a little bit easier in how things are graded and things are tested. Like there everything is in essay form. Everything’s in essay, supported and graded difficult and so here it was a little bit easier, especially with the multiple choice a lot of teachers use [in the United States].

When Judy mentioned the idea of being “supported,” she noted that the ways in which writing samples were graded varied significantly between the U.S. and her schooling experiences abroad.

From the stories previously shared, the impact of childhood socialization, and its influence on the pathway to higher education, rose to the surface as a critical theme. Not only did resettling to the United States during childhood distance participants from their homeland, it also appeared to make it easier for participants to transition to life in the United States by participating in K-12 schools. However, of the four participants who resettled to the United States as children, for various reasons, Vince was the only SRB who found it difficult to navigate U.S. higher education. By far, Vince was the youngest person to resettle to the U.S., as he
arrived at four years of age. In that regard, Vince’ resettlement in early childhood differed from participants who resettled as adults or older youth between the ages of 8-14.

Despite variations in the age of childhood resettlement, what Laila, Mai, Vince, and Judy had in common was the impact of their actual participation in the K-12 school system on their ability to navigate higher education. For them, the ability to move through secondary education in the United States allowed them to learn the English language and adjust to cultural norms early on in life. Both of these developments undoubtedly shaped their ability to access the postsecondary environment because it decreased potential linguistic and schooling-related cultural barriers. Moreover, for these participants, childhood socialization played a key role in what it meant for each of them to transition to adulthood as a student from a refugee background navigating higher education in the United States. When asked about the impact of growing up in the U.S. on their journey to postsecondary education, participants’ responses varied widely. Responses ranged in topic from learning about college to comparing college options with their classmates to already knowing how to speak English prior to college enrollment. However, the most salient issue was the advantage of learning English, especially U.S. English, during childhood.

**Transnational experiences and resettlement selection.** Consistent with the available data on forced migration patterns and refugee resettlement, none of the participants of this study resettled directly to the United States. Their experiences then, touched upon several national borders in an effort to locate a new and safe place to rebuild their lives. Vince’s family, for example, moved from Cambodia to England, but quickly resettled to the United States in 1983. Nikki lived in Uganda and England, but in terms of her most recent refugee experience, resettled directly from Rwanda to the United States. While Jared and his family moved from Bhutan to
Nepal to the United States, both Mai and Laila moved from Somalia to Kenya to the United States. Mai and Laila noted that many of their friends and community members fled to Kenya or Ethiopia, possibly due to the proximity of the national border crossing. Judy moved from Sierra Leone to Saint Vincent to the United States.

Another commonality among Nikki, Laila, Mai, Vince, and Judy is their movement within the United States. Research suggests that refugees usually receive a choice of resettlement in more than one country, but in many cases, it is not their decision where to live in the country. Refugee resettlement is determined at the national level but is implemented locally. Such was the case for Mai, Laila, and Vince. In general, after arriving at their resettlement location, refugees are free to relocate to any other part of the United States. Both Mai and Laila then, who first resettled to Colorado, ultimately moved to Ohio. Mai, whose family originally resided in Aurora, Colorado said, “we had family that lived in Ohio so my Mom wanted to move to somewhere where there were more familiar faces. . . We decided to move to Ohio where there was a lot more cultural familiarity.” Here, embedded within this statement about resettlement selection is the impact of the connection to a community of national origin. Laila expressed a similar sentiment that reflected the importance of resettlement selection with the ability to establish a connection to a community of national origin. As an example, Laila mentioned that Ohio was attractive due to the presence of a large Somali community. In discussing her Ohio community, Laila remembered, “It felt like home, even though I wasn’t really home. It was nice to have Somalis everywhere.” For all participants, motivation to relocate stemmed from a desire to connect to a community with a stronger and larger ethnic community like their own, or as a way to access employment and educational opportunity.

Educational opportunity meant different things to each participant of this study.
However, for all participants, an underlying premise of educational opportunity was a formal learning process within the schooling space, and eventually, within the postsecondary environment. Although not all of the participants earned four-year degrees or higher, every participant did engage, at some level, with educational opportunities beyond high school. For all of the participants, the process of resettlement was tied to educational opportunity in that it was a driving factor for why the U.S. was preferred more so than other resettlement options. For example, in her journal entry, Laila wrote

> I think my mom would have killed me if I didn’t go to college. It wasn’t even you know, an option. No questions asked about that ever. When we got sponsored to come here, to the U.S., I knew there had to be a college in the states for me. I knew that before I even knew what college was, when it was just a thing, this idea I’d heard people talking about.

**The United States as a premier destination.** Participants frequently mentioned the opportunity to pursue higher education in the U.S. as a key deciding factor in choosing one resettlement nation over another. Overall, five out of six participants indicated that their motivation for resettling to the United States was the perception of the U.S. as an excellent country to both live in and receive an education. Jared, in particular, outlined the specific resettlement options that his family considered:

> ... Canada, Australia, some of the other European countries as well were options but since the U.S is a place where you have plenty of opportunities especially if you’re one of those scholars who wish to pursue their studies, to prosper, to do things, then this is where you go. It is because of the opportunities that we have seen over the internet and that we have heard, we knew, you know, that this would be good for us.
Jared also offered several other reasons as an explanation for why the U.S. was preferred as an educational destination and as a home. When asked what being in the United States meant to him, he readily responded, “It means a great thing. A country where if you are willing to work then you have the place to work. It’s the land of fortune. That’s why I’m in the process of getting citizenship and getting settled here.” In addition to those beliefs, Jared’s career aspirations motivated him to select a country that would help him reach that goal. In exploring his options, he prioritized opportunities to conduct scientific research, the availability of laboratories and technology, and financial assistance. Specifically, when noting that Nepal is a developing country, Jared said,

The universities in Nepal are not strong in terms of research. Nor in good fundings [funding for research laboratories] because of course, Nepal the country itself is not an advanced technology country. But in terms of theoretical knowledge, we are there and even better than in the U.S., maybe because science is so important. Theoretical application. . . it is good there. However, U.S. has advancement training with advanced research and advanced researchers in the schools. This is good, I think, very good. Good labs especially for science students. Labs are a very, very key part of that and so it made me say, U.S. - yes.

Jared’s attitude towards the selection of the United States highlighted a great deal of thought and showcased how he tied resettlement to a desire to pursue additional education. There is no question, from his words, that he viewed the United States as the best choice.

One reason for his preference towards the United States was the availability of educational funding, both in his ability to receive financial assistance and for research laboratories to receive university funding. Jared compared Nepal and the United States, noting
the advantages of studying in a more developed country. Of the many advantages that he perceived, he repeatedly mentioned the issue of being able to finance his education. In fact, it was access to that funding that enabled Jared to pursue graduate study in the United States. He appreciated having the opportunity to not only study and earn a U.S. degree, but to use his professional experience to continue growing his professional skills through a funded teaching position. He embraced it not only as an educational opportunity, but also as a professional development opportunity that also allowed him to reduce the out-of-pocket cost of his education.

Laila also shared that her family viewed the United States as the best country to pursue an education. Given that she relocated to the United States as a young child, as did two other study participants, she certainly did not choose the U.S. as an educational destination. However, Laila remarked that in her home, her mother “always let me know. . . YOU. . . you are going to go to college. That’s why we’re here. . . you’re going to college.” In reflecting on what it might be like to attend college in the United States, as opposed to in her homeland of Somalia, Laila guessed, “Definitely not as good. They don't have the resources that we have here in America like the tons of technology and so on.” Mai shared a similar sentiment, noting that her mother . . . just worked hard to give us this opportunity for us to just say okay I’m just going to do whatever I want to do. It wasn't an option in our household. Education was important and it was something you had to do, not something you chose to do.

For both women, the notion of education as a priority is overly discernable. It is also apparent that education was a controlling factor in the decision of their families to move to the United States. In other words, their stories show that education was a critical family priority.

**U.S. English Language Acquisition**

All participants reflected on the issue of language. Whether participants learned English
in other countries or within U.S. borders, they all touched on the impact of language as a barrier to, or facilitator of, their ability to navigate higher education. As Vince shared during his member check, “Language is important, yes. It makes it like, one less thing to worry about. Of all the things I had to know, speaking English the right way was not the problem.” In light of that, language is the second theme in this review of the essence of the experience of being a student from a refugee background.

Language deeply influenced participants’ ability to move through the educational system successfully. Learning English, for all six participants, was essential to their ability to navigate a new society, environment, culture, and way of life. However, the challenges of English language acquisition and English language use varied in one notable way: English language origin. As non-native speakers of English, Nikki and Jared learned English prior to their U.S. resettlement. However, following relocation to the U.S., Jared and Nikki had to learn the nuances of United States English. In contrast, for Laila, Mai, Vince, and Judy, all of whom resettled to the United States as youth, early experiences in the K-12 system made it possible for them to learn to speak, read, write, and understand U.S. English to a high degree of proficiency at an early age. Certainly, for these four students, learning English in middle school, and then fine-tuning it throughout high school, enabled Laila, Mai, Vince, and Judy to access higher education with greater comfort. This is due, in part, to the fact that they had longer to learn English in the United States. Consequently, they were highly skilled at using English on a daily basis and in the formal U.S. learning environment.

In accordance with standard policies and procedures for newly arrived refugee youth, Laila, Mai, Vince, and Judy enrolled in school upon their arrival to the United States. They all indicated that school was a key factor in their adjustment to life in the United States. For
example, when asked how schooling experiences in the United States shaped his transition to life in the U.S. and his overall career development, Vince noted, “it helped me learn English, read, and write so I can work.” In contrast to Vince and the other participants, Nikki and Jared resettled to the United States during adulthood. Although Jared and Nikki spoke English prior to their arrival, both pointed out that they had to adjust to “American English” and “the American accent,” and struggled with day-to-day conversation and academic English expectations. In describing the adjustment to using English in the United States, Jared, who had resettled to the United States as an adult, said:

I got an education in English in Bhutan but of course I didn't have to learn English. But the accent and the American way of saying things. . . it took a while but it was not . . . like adults who haven't learned English.

From his words, the differences in the English used in other countries versus the style of English used in the U.S. were significant enough to influence his perception of his adjustment to the U.S. Thus, it is important to consider the importance of learning English and comprehending its deployment within the context of the United States. In that way, language surfaced as a common challenge among all of the participants, all of whom struggled to learn and use (U.S.) English upon their arrival.

Again, although Jared had grown up in an environment where he gained exposure to English, he noted the challenges of adjusting to U.S. English. To address this challenge, he mentioned some of the university resources available to students needing additional assistance in English. Specifically, Jared mentioned English language classes and general language classes; those classes allowed students to practice and improve their speaking proficiency. Ultimately, however, as shared during the closing member check, “you just have to focus and to do. Just do.
Sometimes they cannot teach. You just listen, make some mistake, and do. Since we [non-native students] are from outside, you have to learn the English to get through.” Jared’s words touch on a conclusion not uncommon to other participants. For some, the challenge of using U.S. English was the ability to maintain the flow of communication with native speakers, and to avoid standing out as an English Language Learner, or a non-native speaker. For example, by the time Judy was able to apply to college, like Vince, she was fully capable of using English. This is because when Judy arrived in the United States, she already knew English, as it is a language widely spoken in Sierra Leone. Moreover, Judy used English in Saint Vincent, located in the Caribbean, which was the site of her family’s first migration effort.

In spite of that, Judy reflected that her accent seemed to set her apart from others, particularly in the classroom, when she first moved to the U.S. At times, it was difficult for her peers to understand what she was saying. Judy also noticed differential treatment in general. She attributed this to her accent at the time. When asked to elaborate on how language – or in this case, accent – affected her adjustment to the United States, she said, “I guess maybe I did have an accent at that time and then people are talking. You tell them where you’re from and then they kind of look down on you.” However, Judy found that her ability to integrate into United States society significantly improved as her accent decreased. To that point, when reflecting on her interactions with people in the United States, Judy shared advice that she once received while studying abroad in France during high school:

I lived with a family and I started speaking English to them and the lady told me, she’s like, “You need to start speaking at least try to speak French because the more you try to assimilate and try to at least make an effort to speak our language the better you are with us.”
Judy admitted that this, at first, shocked her and caused great discomfort. However, as she began to travel to other countries for leisure, she found it to be a helpful way of navigating her new environment. Although she received that advice in the context of a study abroad experience, Judy suggested that the advice is also helpful as a way to think about how her efforts to “sound more American” helped her transition to life in the United States. When traveling, Judy asserted, “even if you speak English, it’s a different culture.” She also felt that this is one skill that people from the United States lack, particularly college students: the ability to adjust quickly to other cultures.

With regard to speaking U.S. English, three participants, Laila, Mai, and Judy, described incidents where they felt “bullied” in their K-12 schools. Laila, Mai, and Judy shared moments where they were ostracized based on their accent and/or dialect of English. According to Mai, “Some kids were mean. They’d bully me just ‘cause I was the new weird one and had a funny accent.” When asked how such experiences made her feel, Mai shared, “Like, I felt bad. People have ‘Welcome to America’ jokes or ‘We don’t like your name.’ Eventually you get mad, very mad, and tell them to stop. Usually they stop then.” Laila offered a similar perspective on what it meant to experience teasing related to the implications of her refugee status or her mastery of U.S. English. When asked to reflect on that experience, Laila responded, “It’s the little things like when people say ‘you talk funny’ and laugh, or point at your food. Kids are just mean.” Judy also voiced a similar concern. She said, “Growing up, accents were not cool. People stare, look at you funny…sometimes they talk to you really loud, then louder. Even if I didn’t speak English, yelling won’t make me understand!” The memories shared by Laila, Mai, and Judy showed the extent to which mistreatment based on language and differences in accent colored their experiences in U.S. schools.
Language also played a role in how students interacted with their families. For some, this issue arose when family members did not learn the language, or when family members – usually children – adopted English at the expense of their native language. Vince, for example, shared that he learned English very early on in life, but that over time, “It felt harder to communicate with my mom, who couldn’t catch on as quick. Even now, I still do the translating.” Based on his experience, it is probable that while language may have facilitated his adjustment to life in the United States, it also complicated his relationship with his mother. The reality that he continues to translate for his mother to this day also suggests that lack of English proficiency continues to be a barrier to his mother’s ability to navigate life in the United States on her own. However, while language is likely a barrier for his mother, it was not a barrier for Vince. Vince moved to the U.S. at three years of age and subsequently completed all of his schooling, from that age through high school, in the United States. With that as the case, his command of the English language was likely not a barrier to college entry. Although he was able to enter the postsecondary environment, he did encounter difficulty in moving through the system. Ultimately, although he met the technical linguistic criteria to excel in the postsecondary environment, in the end, he lacked familial support and the appropriate knowledge about what it means to be a part of the higher education environment.

Similar to Vince, for Nikki, functional competency in the English language was not a barrier to postsecondary access. Nikki learned English in school and had lived in England prior to her direct and permanent resettlement to the United States. However, her first language was Kinyarwanda. As a mother of three children, Nikki desired her children understand and speak the Kinyarwanda language well. They were young, but she worried that she would not be able to sustain their language use over time due to the lack of contact with others – outside of her - who
speak it. Nikki said, “I do get scared…that's why I keep talking to them in Kinyarwanda you know [but] they respond to me in English. . . I want them to still speak my language as well.”

Jared shared a similar concern to that voiced by Nikki. He said,

with my parents in the house, as a family we can speak our language all the time. But it’s not the same as hearing it, let’s say, always. My son born here, well he will not know our language well. I have to teach him… but he may not learn properly still.

From those words, one can see the extent to which participants have prioritized language as a way to integrate into U.S. society and to education in the U.S. On the other hand, language also emerged as a concern for what it might mean if their native language was lost in the process. Ironically, the very skill that allowed participants to transition to life in the U.S. and the postsecondary environment was the factor that was also most likely to weaken the bond to one’s homeland.

Mai also mentioned the role of language in shaping the educational experience; she viewed language as a critical part of adjusting to life in the United States. Mai admitted that her proficiency with the English language facilitated her educational mobility. Without learning English at such a young age, Mai would have found it difficult to move forward with her collegiate coursework. From her viewpoint then, she recognized that without mastering English on an academic level, she would have been unable to complete high school and consider all of her postsecondary education options. When describing some of the biggest challenges to her adjustment to childhood resettlement overall, Mai stated:

It was the language. Just learning English in general was a bit, you know, hard. Just having classmates fluently speaking English with no education and not even thinking about the next word that comes into their mind and just saying it was pretty impressive.
And it was hard because you had to practice a lot more and we still were expected to do well in school and be standardized and do well with the rest of the students. Later on, in drawing the link directly between her high school completion and her college ambition, Mai questioned,

Can you imagine? Learning English was like so hard. But doing that while trying to be [a] college student? No, it was definitely a big big bonus I think. It takes too much to do that later when you’re older.

In the end, because all participants discussed English as the vehicle for adjusting to life in the United States, language had a profound impact on participants’ lives. Language also affected participants’ experiences in college, albeit in markedly different ways between those who resettled to the U.S. as youth rather than as adults. Overall, across all participants, gaining proficiency in English, or not gaining proficiency, affected how they interacted with and perceived their relationships with family members who did not grasp the language as easily.

Recall that Nikki and Jared resettled to the U.S. as adults with a strong base of English language skills developed in the context of other countries. For those reasons, their primary linguistic challenge was limited to the nuance of adopting the U.S. accent quickly. They did not experience teasing in the way that other participants did. However, Nikki and Jared struggled to manage day-to-day conversation; they also found it difficult to meet the academic English expectations of the college environment. In contrast to Nikki and Jared, participants resettled to the U.S. in early childhood were exposed to U.S. English language norms over an extended timespan. Moreover, Vince, Laila, Mai, and Judy experienced feelings of linguistic isolation in childhood, not adulthood. Language also facilitated the relative ease with which participants accessed higher education. For example, a high degree of comfort with U.S. English enabled
participants to manage the admissions process and interact with key staff as matriculated students with a greater level of ease. From these trends, we see the impact of language acquisition on SRBs’ adjustment to life in the U.S., and most importantly, for the purposes of this study, on their ability to navigate U.S. higher education.

**Negotiating a Bicultural Identity**

A third theme to emerge from participants’ stories was the process of negotiating identity in the postsecondary environment. All participants had some experience with the postsecondary environment and touched on their view of personal identity as it related to higher education. A critical part of participants’ negotiation of identity was their awareness of how and what they had learned about themselves while navigating the college environment. For all participants, the process of negotiating identity was not necessarily a process of learning new information about themselves. Instead, it was an acute awareness that one’s self-perception shifted while carving out a niche in the educational environment. Participants also discussed how they saw themselves as people in the world; they wrestled with how to identify oneself in terms of racial and ethnic identity, immigration status, and nationality.

Judy’s understanding of her identity is one example of the fluidity of SRBs’ negotiation of identity in the postsecondary environment. When asked if she considered herself a student from a refugee background, Judy affirmed that she believed she could and should participate in this study about the essence of refugee experiences in U.S. postsecondary education. However, she also reflected,

> Sometimes I don't think I consider myself a refugee. I guess what I think of the term of it I think of someone who has lost everything and they’re being thrown into a new situation and country and my situation, technically didn’t lose anything really because my parents’
houses are still there. I've got family. I basically have everything that I left there. We just can’t go there because it’s not safe right now. And I’m lucky. My parents had options and we actually won the lottery.

Judy’s mention of “the lottery” is a reference to the visa lottery system that her family won in order to migrate to the United States. Judy’s statement calls attention to her struggle to balance allegiance to her homeland, Sierra Leone, and to embrace an identity borne out of immigration status. Likewise, this tension was present in the voices of other participants, who also struggled with both conceptualizations of identity. Participants’ stories illustrate how they adopted different identities depending on the environment; their stories also reflect participants’ beliefs about how a particular identity would affect their ability to integrate into mainstream United States culture.

**Constructing a bicultural identity.** For the participants of this study, the higher education environment was an incubator for deep reflection about identity. The higher education environment also acted as a breeding ground for the intensely personal process of constructing a bicultural identity and making meaning of the collection of experiences encompassing one’s life story. Across participants, when defining their journey to and through higher education as a self-identified student from a refugee background, there was a clear intersection between the transition to postsecondary education, the transition to the United States, and forced migration. Although some participants continued to feel displaced and expressed a desire to return to their country of birth, others found that this desire had dissipated over time. Participants who desired to return to their homeland maintained hope that their presence would be welcomed in the future. For example, when asked if she would ever return to Rwanda, Nikki responded, “I have nothing left there. My family's here, my kids. I have my kids here and the same reason as to why I left
the country has not changed and so my life is here now.” She continued, “I miss home a lot, because there just isn’t anything like the place where you’re from. But, it’s hard to live knowing that your home doesn’t even want you there anymore.” During our conversation, Nikki shared that she was in the process of applying for citizenship to the United States. Jared was also in the process of applying for citizenship. At the time of his interview sessions, he did not see value in returning to either Nepal or Bhutan. He said, “I prefer getting citizenship and then stay[ing] here.” For Jared, the United States offered significant advantages in terms of safety, security, and employment opportunity.

Mai, like Nikki and Jared, applied for citizenship and believed that it was quite advantageous. She said, “I think that it's beneficial to have the [U.S.] passport because you have the ability to travel around. . . it's good because I do have that identity. A part of me is American now so you know it's good.” Judy, who became a citizen of the United States, revealed some of the benefits she perceived in holding a U.S. passport. She mentioned travel, for instance, as one aspect of citizenship that is now easier and less expensive to manage. Judy no longer needs to purchase as many visas to travel outside the United States. In spite of that financial benefit, it was interesting to learn that she identifies herself differently based on the situational context. Judy elaborated,

Sometimes I say I'm Sierra Leonean, sometimes I say I'm American. It just depends though because I learned early on in high school that you tell people that I'm from another country and they kind of look, they treat you differently. So I become aware of who I tell and who I don’t tell in a way. I mean it’s not like I’m ashamed of where I’m from. It’s just that I wanted to fit in and I don’t want where I’m from to hold that against me.
Judy continued,

> Coming to America was hard, really, really, hard. There is this look that people give you when they find out you’re refugee. I just like to forget about it and blend in. I think it’s cool to just be a girl from the Midwest, not a refugee who lives in the Midwest.

Other participants appeared to wrestle with similar issues pertaining to identity, and seemed to view themselves fluidly, at least in terms of the context of the postsecondary environment.

Vince touched on this idea of a fluid identity when he discussed how and why he identified as a refugee. When asked what differences, if any, he saw between international students, SRBs, and domestic students, Vince asserted,

> Oh, I definitely think there’s a big difference between being international and being international as a refugee. When regular international students come here, they hopped on a plane and chose to be here. It’s expensive, but they can go home. If I go home, I know a lot of people wanna hurt me, cause harm. Can I even go back? I don’t know. Do I want to go back? I don’t know. I want to know and see where I’m from. But maybe not until lots of things are different. No matter what though, I’m Americanized, but I’m still Cambodian.

His words illustrate how, as a student from a refugee background, he positioned his identity as American or as Cambodian based on the situation. In this way, Vince further distinguished between international students present on college campuses and those students present on the grounds of refugee status.

Some of the tension regarding identity related to language. Whether participants struggled with English, felt pressured to reduce or lose their accent, or saw language as a facet of culture that they wanted to maintain, they repeatedly described language as an important aspect
of identity. As an example, Mai drew a connection between language and her cultural heritage. She said, “I speak Somali you know so the language is there and language is actually most of culture.” Vince also reflected on language as being something that created a sense of difference. When asked why he felt different in the environment, Vince replied

Oh, it’s not just like school and classes and stuff. It’s a lot of the time when I’m just being me…coming from a foreign country and speaking a different language and not knowing certain things about American culture.

Vince continued, “It was good to come here being so young though. I started school here, live here.” To Vince, language was one of the ways to truly achieve “feeling Americanized.” In his mind, “I know I’m from a place that’s not the U.S., but it’s cool ‘cause I have no accent and I blend right in. I can just disappear.” It was interesting to see how Vince, who had completed some courses in the community college environment, associated the lack of an accent with Americanization and the idea of disappearing, or blending in. To Vince, the ability to do so seemed important, and appeared to ground not only his experience of resettlement, but influenced his negotiation of postsecondary education as well.

Jared, like Vince, depicted his use of English as a part of his identity that affected his higher education experience. When asked how his university experiences might be different from those of domestic students, Jared replied

. . . almost the same mostly. But since we are from outside [the country] we are non-native speakers of English we are different. People feel they can say what they want when they hear the accent. But, I can handle those types.

Again, issues associated with one’s accent when using English affected the negotiation of the postsecondary environment. Similarly, Laila referenced how “people look down on you for the
accent. You gotta get rid of it fast.” Such pressure surrounding language affects how students from refugee backgrounds navigate the educational environment. Yet, in order to be enrolled in the university system, all six participants were required to demonstrate competency in academic English through TOEFL testing. TOEFL is the Test of English as a Foreign Language. This was an especially intriguing part of participants’ journey in accessing higher education because four of six participants graduated from U.S. high schools. According to participants, college admissions policies regarding TOEFL testing were often unclear, and varied significantly among institutions. Whereas some institutions waived the testing requirement for U.S. citizens and permanent residents, other colleges and universities based TOEFL testing requirements on the length of time in the U.S., country of English language origin, or primary language use in the home. Yet, even when meeting that linguistic standard, there still seemed to be a barrier, however subtle, to participants’ perception of their full acceptance into the postsecondary environment.

This barrier to feeling fully accepted was due, in part, to the underlying sentiment that participants had to choose who to be not only in the college environment, but when negotiating life in the United States in general. As Laila said, “it’s very hard to define yourself. You have to think about what will work out the best.” Whether participants resettled as adults (Jared and Nikki), as youth (Laila, Judy, and Mai), or in early childhood (Vince), awareness of a history of refugee status forced them to wrestle with the construction of a bicultural identity on some level. This negotiation of identity is not substantively different from what other immigrants might experience. However, within the context of higher education, it does differentiate refugee students from both international and domestic students. The key way in which this difference manifests is that SRBs are constructing an identity that attempts to integrate forced migration
from one’s homeland with the national identity of the resettlement country. This is clearly notably different from the identity construction of immigrant students who have voluntarily left their homeland to live and learn in the U.S.

Many times, participants allowed their peers to label them as members of other national groups, as they assumed that this would result in favorable treatment. For example, Vince noted, “a lot of people think I’m Chinese, so I just let them think that.” Similarly, Laila, Judy, and Mai discussed their social affiliation with Black student groups on their respective university campuses. Judy said, “if people think they know, well I just let them keep thinking I’m a Black girl from the Midwest. There is no harm in that and there are less questions.” Jared voiced a similar sentiment: “People can’t really tell where I’m from. People think Indian, maybe Hispanic, but I don’t always correct them.” From these statements, it is clear that participants frequently experienced having an identity imposed upon them. However, in response to this imposition of an alien identity, participants chose to blend into the U.S. environment by passively embracing this identity.

Clearly, participants had to discern how to live in both worlds - that of the U.S., and that of their homeland - post-resettlement and during their navigation of the postsecondary environment. In many ways, the evolution of a bicultural identity was a consequence of living within a culture of power as a person without power in the United States. For the purposes of understanding refugee experiences in the U.S., power flows to those who are members of the dominant U.S. culture. Accordingly, people without power include, among other categories of people from diverse backgrounds, refugees, immigrants, and other newcomers to U.S. society.

Multiple participants expressed a general sense of feeling Americanized. That sense of feeling Americanized is inherently threatening to pluralism, the notion that differences in culture
persist over time. This is because the integration of ‘being (North) American’ into one’s identity enabled bicultural identities to flourish; it became symbolic of assimilation. As a reminder, assimilation theory posits that previously distinct cultural groups merge with cultures that are more dominant over time (Alba & Nee, 2003; Gordon 1964; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Following this definition, the incorporation of a bicultural identity is assimilationist because it represents a largely one-sided process of cultural and social adjustment. SRBs used their identity to fit into U.S. culture and the postsecondary environment; no participants mentioned, even when directly asked, what impact, if any, refugees and refugee experiences had on U.S. culture and U.S. postsecondary education.

**Perception of first-generation college student status.** According to Billson and Terry (1982), first-generation college students are those who do not have at least one parent who earned a bachelor’s degree or higher. Much of the available literature about first-generation college students shows that they are less likely to maintain enrollment and persist towards degree completion (Choy, 2001). Although only three of six participants are truly first-generation college students, it is worthy of note that all participants identified as such. Some participants self-identified as first-generation college students because they were the first in their families to attend a college or university in the U.S. They very much believed that this U.S.-based education differed from the higher education contexts that their parents had experienced. To be clear, Laila, Mai, and Judy all had access to one or more parents with bachelor’s level postsecondary experiences or higher. Even though their parents were educated outside the United States, they seemingly maintained the advantage of having access to knowledge of the academic, social, and emotional expectations of the postsecondary environment that enabled them to navigate higher education in the United States successfully.
Even with the support that Mai received, she noted the implications of being the first in her family to attend college in the United States. For Mai, the idea of being a first-generation college student, as she understood it, was not something she had thought about prior to or even during the college application process. However, she realized the potential implications of being a first-generation college student on her first day of college. During her interview, she said:

Waking up that's when I actually experienced being in college with the realization of being a first-generation college student. That was just mind-boggling. You know no one to personally talk to. There are so many advisors that you can talk to. There are so many people that will advise you on what to take, classes, schedule but not someone who can personally relate to that, you know? And that was something that every first-generation college student experiences regardless of how many people help them go through college and experience what college is like and give them advice that they need. There's still something missing.

Mai’s journal entry echoed a similar sentiment. However, her words alluded to an even stronger tie to the relationship between being a first-generation college student and having that refugee identity. In reflecting on her navigation of the higher education environment, Mai wrote:

I believe the most challenging aspect of being a refugee or as I had always seen it, as a first-generation college student, was not having prior subjective interaction, conversation, and discussion about college. It was something I had to learn while I was still going through the hurdles of being a college student. It was already difficult enough attending one of the largest universities in the nation as a 17 year old, but the additional stress of really not knowing what to expect made it more difficult. I do not think the journey of self-reflection of being a refugee and navigating through higher education ends at the 4
year college level. I think it’s something that one will always struggle with. Because [your] experiences shape the kind of person you are and effect the decisions you make. One other thing that was important was understanding the value of time. As a first-generation college student, if you want to succeed, one would need to put the extra time into all course work while possibly working full-time or part-time. At the same time, it really teaches you to learn how to compartmentalize your life and to create priorities since your time is very valuable.

The issues raised in the aforementioned journal reflection are issues that the majority of college students grapple with, but even more so if they are the first in their families to attend college. Being a first-generation college student means that those students do not have access to information about college in the U.S. from the people closest to them – family members. In this way, they might encounter additional difficulties in negotiating this new site of learning. As Mai noted, “there’s still something missing” and she “really [did not know] what to expect.” These comments reflect the reality that being a “first-generation” college student is not simply about whether your parents have a college degree or not, but rather also includes knowledge of how postsecondary education is structured and experienced in a particular national and cultural context. In other words, simply having a postsecondary degree does not translate to familiarity with the cultural and social nuances of U.S. postsecondary environments. As a result, participants’ parental educational attainment may have helped to inform their own educational goals, but it was not relevant for the participants as they learned how to navigate U.S. colleges and universities.

Another relevant nuance of SRBs’ stories regarding the perception or actual status of being a first-generation college student is the role of family. From a sociocultural perspective,
family is of the utmost importance to SRBs and their families. To the participants of this research, being a first-generation college student was a personally noteworthy achievement, but was even more meaningful for their families. This was true whether students did or did not have immediate or extended family with collegiate experiences. Again, some students who identified as first-generation college students acknowledged that other family members had attended college outside the United States. Mai, for example, mentioned an older sister who had attended college overseas. Jared also mentioned the educational attainment of his older siblings, but still commented on the importance of his first-generation status:

I’m the first-generation college student. My parents didn’t go to formal school. They just got cultural and religious education from religious teacher in village in Bhutan. But two of my brothers were engineers, so they inspired me for higher studies. Here the curriculum is much more applied/research based with lots of on-going evaluations. In Nepal, the sole performance of students was/is judged from the comprehensive examination held at the end of the academic year.

These words underscore the impact of being a first-generation college student. His comment also raises the issue of whether the definition and understanding of being a first-generation college student is truly limited to U.S. enrollment, or if it is a term relevant to educational experiences anywhere in the world.

Through the narratives, five out of six participants mentioned aspects of their postsecondary experience that could be collectively thought of as elements of college culture. Mai mentioned the importance of knowing and learning “the culture of college.” She believed that not having that exposure to college culture distinguished her from other types of students. She said, “learning the culture of college was something that I had to go learn.” When asked to
explain her understanding of the “culture of college.” Mai referenced experiences, habits, and assumptions. She said, “Learning how to study, how to talk to your professors, dealing with people you sometimes don’t want to deal with, following a career. That’s how I see the culture of college.” When Vince was asked to explain his understanding of the culture of college, he responded, “I don’t really know…maybe like jobs, filling out forms, having to study all the time. That’s what you mostly need to know.” Laila’s response to defining the culture of college was to say “tests, deadlines, fun, friends. Figure out how to finish. That’s what I’d say the culture of college is to people.” When Judy mentioned the culture of college, she said, “it all depends on the culture of the university and how big or small a university is. It plays a large part on how they treat students and things like that.” From these responses as a whole, when looking at this group of students from refugee backgrounds, it is clear that there is no one way to define the culture of college. However, even when acknowledging that, it was evident that the culture of college, for this group, tied to academic markers such as exams and testing, and the relationships that they established.

The enormity of being a first-generation college student also affected Vince, who completed community college courses intermittently over the past few years. He cited the fact that he is the first in his family to attend college – in the United States, Cambodia, or elsewhere - as one of the main reasons why he continues to struggle in school, or to focus on his studies:

I wish I had known a little bit more . . . other people that started with me . . . . they’re already ahead of me, like far ahead. . . . They know more, probably because their parents went to college. But since I didn’t really have that background, I had more questions, and more questions just means more time and more time. . . you slow down, sometimes way down.
In general, for Vince, there appeared to be some confusion about the college environment as a system. He questioned, 

. . . like, how does it actually work?  It seemed like a lot of people around me knew a lot of things, but I knew nothing, my family didn’t know. . . it was just not easy at all in the weirdest ways that some people don’t even think of.

When asked to provide examples of information that he felt he did not have, Vince mentioned financial aid. He said, 

I heard of financial aid and knew about it, but it seemed hard to get, and I didn’t really understand the paperwork. And on top of that, my mom couldn’t read the forms in English. Even later, when I tried to go back to school, I still didn’t know how college gave money out, or if it was free, or if there were strings attached. I asked the advisor guy, “Do you know if the program gives additional money?” He told me to check out work study, fill out the FAFSA, blah , blah, blah, but I didn’t know what to fill in.

Anyway, even if I got the job, the pay seemed really low, and I made a lot more working in restaurants.

Analysis of Vince’s statement shows the importance of understanding the logistics of the postsecondary environment. Not knowing how to navigate his institution affected his ability to move through the system successfully towards degree completion. The other five participants did not raise issues pertaining to affordability and understanding the paperwork associated with accessing higher and postsecondary education as barriers to entry. Rather, other participants acquired support from family, local support agencies, and/or precollege advisors in secondary schools, to help them navigate that aspect of the educational pipeline.
Ultimately, for the students from refugee backgrounds who participated in this study, negotiating identity in the postsecondary environment led to the construction of a bicultural identity. As a reminder, the very environment of the higher education space compelled participants to consider how to present themselves to the world. Whether participants struggled to balance a burgeoning U.S. identity with that of their country of birth, or reflected affinity with the first-generation college student experience, the creation of SRBs’ personal sense of self was an important consequence of active and ongoing engagement with the U.S. higher education environment.

Connection to a Community of National Origin

For five of six participants, having a sustained connection to a community of national origin shaped their ability to access and navigate postsecondary education in the United States. These sustained connections grew out of close proximity to a broader refugee community, or by affiliating the individual or family unit with communities representative of one’s birth nation and/or culture. Such sustained connections allowed participants and their families to place a high value on education. Additionally, these connections to a community of national origin equipped student participants with the skills necessary to seek support as needed when navigating the postsecondary environment.

Community cultural value for educational attainment. Communities of national origin played a strong role in how participants understood and learned about the value of education. The participants in this study upheld the value of educational attainment. This value was also a shared priority for their parents and the local communities with which they had connected over time. Jared wrote, “Education is always just for you. Getting my masters is about dreams, my career goals, and doing better for my family. But the degree also does a lot for
all Nepalese like me.” Laila offered a similar written reflection about the value of education as it related to her local community. She shared, “everybody wants me to do well. My success is their success, and I know I would just be in so much trouble if I didn’t do well. It’s just not an option.” It is clear that, for these two participants, academic success empowers them to reach their goals. However, it was equally as important to the communities with which they affiliated since resettling to the U.S.

To five of six participants of this study, knowing that they had the support of their community accelerated their motivation; community support encouraged participants to persist towards degree completion in the postsecondary environment. In contrast, Vince, who lacked community connections, did not have access to this kind of additional support. His primary source of support was his mother. Although she viewed education as an advantage, she also deemed supporting the family as equally important, if not more so. Moreover, when asked where he received messages about the value of higher education versus other priorities, Vince shared, “My mother mostly. She matters. I have to help out, you know? We know people, but helping my mom is what matters. I also listened to my friends from high school a lot. We still support each other.” Interestingly, of Vince’s core group of friendships maintained since high school, only one person has earned a four-year college degree. Once again, this differs from the experiences of other study participants. Laila, Nikki, Judy, Mai, and Jared all associated with peers who advocated for college persistence and understood the demands of postsecondary education, unlike Vince. Additionally, of the remaining five participants, their peers had already attained a college degree or higher, or were working towards similar academic goals.

Drawing from participants’ stories, it was evident that moving from one country to another, transnational experiences, resettlement selection, and community support all had a
strong influence on their lives. In reflecting on those subjects, the idea of valuing education emerged as a central aspect of participants’ journey to and through higher education. Nikki, Laila, Mai, and Judy all cited the perceived value of a United States education as a critical factor. They viewed postsecondary education as a tool that could positively alter the course of their lives. In her journal entry, Nikki wrote:

So, my experience as a student at [Institution] has been one of the best experiences in the country since I arrived and have enjoyed working hard and get[ting] the grades I had, I’m so thankful I have been allowed to stay and work towards my goals no matter how hard and painful it’s been.

For Nikki, there are no regrets, at least not as they related to U.S. resettlement and her pursuit of a bachelor’s degree; education is obviously important to her. Judy voiced a similar priority placed on education. She said, “My mom, my parents wanted us, wanted me to do my education here and do college here.” Judy also indicated “. . . in my family, education is really important so I knew that I had to go to college and do something and I actually love school so that makes it even better.” From those words, it is also evident that education was a vehicle for upward mobility.

The ability to move through the pipeline from high school to college was extremely important for the four participants who shared the youth refugee experience. The role of childhood socialization was also critical, and when sharing the process of how she moved from high school to college, Laila discussed the types of messages about the value of a college degree that she received from her parents. Laila said:

College. . . I always knew I was going to go. My mom talked and talked and talked about it all the time. And when I finally got there, there are always those times when you just
don’t want to deal with anything. But when I wake up in the morning, I think and knowhow lucky I am. I knew that college was going to change everything. We didn’t come all this way for me not to go to college.

To Judy, college created an opportunity to establish new goals, and was a gateway to a future without boundaries. From her perspective, the advantage of going to college in the United States was that, “I get an opportunity to do whatever I want to do. Study whatever I want to study and be whatever I want to be.” Likewise, Mai viewed college as extremely important, and pointed out that the possibility of her attending college in the United States was the key factor that drove her family’s resettlement choice.

Mai, like her parents, viewed college as a tremendous opportunity. Her mother believed that an education in the United States would create opportunities, and specifically looked to the U.S. as the ideal resettlement location. Consequently, access to postsecondary education seemed inevitable and was a consistent goal throughout her high school years. Mai shared:

We didn't have that conversation that you have “Oh you're a senior in high school. Are you thinking about college?” That conversation never took place. It was more of a “You're a senior so you're going to college. . .” That's the whole point [of moving to the United States] is to get an education but it's not like you know I had a moment where I said, “Oh maybe college is not for me.” It was - college has to be for me. . . it was just an opportunity that my mother never got to experience you know? She just worked hard to give us this opportunity for us to just say, “Okay, I’m just going to do whatever I want to do.” It wasn't an option in our household. Education was important and it was something you had to do, not something you chose to do.

Mai’s recollections highlight the extent to which her mother wove together U.S. resettlement,
educational opportunity, and a premium placed on education. For Mai, it was impossible to separate these factors. It is vitally important then, to notice that these factors also emerged as critical cornerstones of the SRB experience across the six participants.

The aforementioned factors emerged as critical experiences at different points in the lifeline of the participants as students, and as refugees. For example, because Nikki resettled to the United States as an adult, her perspective differed, even as the premise of education as a priority remained unchanged. Her words provide evidence of her belief that education was a priority. Her words also demonstrated her view of education as the vehicle for achieving long-term goals for her and her children. This was especially apparent when Nikki vocalized her educational priorities in terms of the future it could create for her three young children. We see then, education being valued as a priority as it flows from parent to child (the study participant), and/or for the child (the study participant) to be applied towards their own goal setting. This was true for Laila, Nikki, Judy, Mai, Jared, and Vince. However, we also saw education being valued as a priority from the parent (study participant) to the child, as was the case for both Nikki and Jared. Nikki shared,

I don't want my kids to live the same life I lived and to go to college when they are much older because of other reasons . . . I have those goals of raising my kids and in college and finished with their education . . . the reason as to why I have all those goals is because of what I've been through myself . . . I want them to not just finish with the education but have the skills and be fruitful in the country where they are in and be useful to other people.

When combined as a portrait of the value of education as a priority, Mai and Nikki’s recollections highlight the extent to which education shaped individual and family priorities. For
these SRBs, it appears that participating in higher education moved not just one person forward, but the entire family.

**Impact of community cultural connections on college choice.** Five out of six participants identified their refugee status as playing a critical role in their educational choices and decision-making. For these students, the decision to participate in postsecondary education was not accidental. It was an intentional, conscious, and thought-filled choice. For example, in considering the impact, if any, of refugee resettlement on the choice made to attend a particular college in the United States, Nikki asserted that resettlement was an extremely important factor. Resettlement influenced her ability to attend college and had an effect on her life in general. This is especially true because resettlement and the associated documentation influenced her ability to remain in the United States lawfully, and to persist to degree completion. Perhaps for that reason, for Nikki, it seemed quite difficult to consider resettlement and educational opportunity in the United States as separate challenges. From her perspective:

If the government doesn't decide to approve your case then you know there's no way that you can stay in the area where you are. If you have a deportation, if you have a case that's pending, you cannot go to school because you have to be working and most of the time you don't even have the work permit yet. And even when you have the work permit it would be very hard for you to pay for your education because it would be costly because there are so many benefits that you don't have access to. So it does push you into going to school or go for just one class or decide to take something online. . . . So it does influence what college you will go to because of your status.

Nikki also wrote about how she was able to navigate higher education, and shared the reasons why it was so important to her. She indicated:
As a refugee, you come in the country and you have so much fear of your past and troubled past, but you still have to hold it together and build a new life with yourself or with your family, which is not easy at all. You have the fear of what your status will be after you get your application accepted by the government, but mostly of what your future holds. I decided to go back to school because that was one of the chances or opportunities that my past stole from me, and I joined [name removed] which became like a family to me since I joined not long ago after I settled in the country with my 3 young children. I have had to learn the culture, adjust to raising 3 young ones and teach them what is right or wrong. . . Around [Institution] I have come to learn so much not only in the classes, but being around the learning environment, made friends around campus, knowing the instructors have been so caring and work hard to help you succeed. I have been blessed to have all wonderful instructors that have helped me pass my classes with extra help when needed to.

Her words highlight the role of teaching staff, student services, and even a general sense of social connectedness with her peers as being important to her experience of higher education.

For other participants, refugee status was not the sole factor to influence their final college/university choice. Participants chose institutions where they thought they would be comfortable and could fit in. Other participants selected institutions that they had heard others reference positively. Jared, for example, said that he chose his university because he had a friend who attended the institution. For him, it was a bonus that the research and the teaching assistantship awarded to him related to his career goals. As he said, “There was [school X] as well. They also accepted me but since I had friends in [University] and since the research was a little bit related here so I opted to come to [University].” It is clear, from that statement, that he
based his institutional selection on word-of-mouth reputation and endorsements.

Other participants incorporated considerations of their family and community’s cultural values into their college choice process. This consideration of values external to their own was an attempt to merge personal goals with one’s allegiance to their homeland. Factors such as institutional cost, perceived educational quality, and relevance of the curriculum also surfaced as important factors in college selection. Mai, for example, identified three priorities when recalling her decision to attend her undergraduate institution – commitment to family, finances, and educational goals. She said:

When I was applying. . . I was literally the valedictorian of my high school so the teacher was like. . . you need to apply to Harvard, Brown, and this and that and I'm thinking no there's no way. I can't afford Harvard. I can't afford any of these Ivy League schools. . . I applied to tons of schools. Tons of schools. But, at the end of the day, because I'm family oriented and in my culture, it would be a lot more respect[ful] if you stayed at home, lived at home, so I went to [Institution].

Like Mai, Judy had a number of postsecondary options to consider, since she applied to 12 institutions. Nine institutions accepted Judy, causing her to wrestle with those options. Judy had to balance multiple priorities during her decision making process. Her parents, both educated in other countries, “wanted it to be my choice, as long as I made a choice.” In fact, Judy recalled her mother asking, “How are you going to decide?” To that question, Judy remembered that she had a system to guide her decision-making process:

I sat on the bed and then I. . . just started dwindling it down. . . Before I even applied I had stipulations like I’m not going to any school with the name [of state] in it. And, I’m not going to any school with the name ‘State’ in it. That happened and then just like that,
I dwindled it down. . . I didn’t want a TA teaching me. I told my mom: I want an actual person with a degree teaching me. Like a PhD teaching me.

From this narrative shared by Judy, it is clear that her values and goals as a student from a refugee background guided her decision to pursue postsecondary education. This was true for other participants as well, and college choice was not a decision lightly made.

In general, participants’ connection to a community of national origin was critical to students’ navigation of higher education in the United States. Not only did it shape identity construction, but it also informed college choice. In contrast to the connections to a community of national origin that Laila, Nikki, Judy, Mai, and Jared experienced, Vince was isolated from a local Cambodian community following his resettlement to the U.S. As he said:

No, I didn’t grow up with other Cambodians. We’re kind of hard to find, I guess. We know other refugees, mostly those arriving through churches, but mostly, I’m around a lot of regular Americans, a lot of Chinese, and American Chinese normally.

Without a doubt, with regard to sustained connections to a community of national origin, Vince stands out as a negative case. Unlike the other participants of this study, his family unit failed to connect to a local community of national origin – Cambodian transplants to the U.S. Missing the resources often available through local communities of national origin, such as culturally relevant religious spaces, heritage language communities, and peer groups with Cambodian roots may have inhibited his retention and persistence in higher education. While Laila, Nikki, Judy, Mai, and Jared were able to draw on their refugee peers and local national origin community members for additional support, Vince relied exclusively on his immediate family unit in addition to the resources of his local college to assist with his navigation of the postsecondary environment.
Sources of Support for Persisting in Higher Education

Students from refugee backgrounds in this study relied on multiple sources of support to facilitate persistence in higher education. Their ability to identify and have access to sources of support deeply enhanced or detracted from their navigation of the postsecondary environment. They often relied on support from people outside of the higher education environment. Remembering how participants’ movement from one country to another varied, what was common for all was that their families had scattered, and in most cases, had dispersed across the globe. Laila noted that while some family members remained in Somalia, many of her extended family now lived in England, Canada, and Finland, in addition to the United States. Four participants mentioned the importance of relationships in facilitating their relocation and resettlement process. Nonetheless, for those participants, the relationships that were most useful came from outside the postsecondary environment.

Many participants described the adjustment to college as difficult, but not overwhelmingly so. Participants also felt prepared for the academic and social challenges of postsecondary education, and likewise felt capable of managing the experience. In discussing their experiences in postsecondary education, it became clear that for a number of study participants, specific offices supported their educational journeys, and many times, in subtle ways. For other participants, formal programming was a source of support, some of which existed in a systemic fashion at the governmental level. Specifically, having accurate knowledge of critical immigration policies and an awareness of one’s immigration status was central to entry into and through the higher education ecosystem.

Immigration policy and documentation. The impact of immigration policy and documentation of immigration status cannot be underestimated when considering access to
higher education in the United States. In many college admissions processes, applicants are required to provide evidence of citizenship, permanent residence, or lawful immigration status. The ongoing public debate (Yates, 2004; Pèrez; 2014; Flores, 2015) regarding immigration reform and the treatment of undocumented students in the United States calls attention to this very issue. Access to higher education for undocumented students varies according to the laws of individual states, and can often have an impact on one’s eligibility for in-state tuition rates. Pèrez (2014) noted, “Even with a growing number of states enacting friendly tuition-equity laws, 32 states continue to require undocumented students to pay out-of-state tuition rates at public colleges and universities” (p. 6). Refugees, however, may apply for federal and state funded loans and tuition assistance (Federal Student Aid, 2016). However, without documentation of lawful immigration status (citizenship, etc.), it is possible that SRBs might be treated as undocumented student applicants for the purposes of tuition benefits if their refugee status has expired.

For all participants, an agency or an individual initiated the procedures for resettlement and sponsorship that enabled them to obtain refugee status. Those agencies and individuals also provided some level of assistance in identifying and securing educational opportunities. For Laila, it was her older brother who enabled the family to receive sponsorship to live in the United States: “We had a choice because our brother was in the U.S. and he sponsored us. But if we had any other choice, we would come to America anyway.” Nikki was able to resettle to the United States “by the help of friends that I had met through reconciliation conferences in Rwanda.” Those same friends, who she met through reconciliation conferences intended to help the nation heal in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, also helped her explore college options in the United States, and ultimately helped her to enter the postsecondary environment.
Jared also pointed to agencies outside of the university who helped him to resettle to the United States and ultimately enabled him to access higher education. After migrating from Bhutan, Jared and his family lived in Nepal as refugees. He explained that he was . . . hosted by the Nepal government. Sponsored by the United Nation[s]. And then the U.S and some other countries opened the third country resettlement program, and my resettlement process was [by] the International Center of Migration.

Jared found the process of applying to university to be relatively easy. However, he did mention that he had help through one of the local support agencies. He noted that this was an important step because it verified his eligibility to apply. As he said,

. . . coming to a graduate school is challenging. You have to go to through lots of formalities… transferring your credits, your documents. But once you figure out the process it is not that hard so if you think that you want to get, to go to graduate school here…you have to follow the steps. So the first thing is check all of your documents whether you are ready or not. Second thing is standardized test scores. Next, be on time, pick schools that fit into your interest and ability.

Although much of his experience was not necessarily unique to SRBs, the importance of accurate and valid documentation is essential and of special consideration to SRBs. Without the appropriate documentation pertaining to his immigration status, Jared would have been unable to qualify for university admission or financial support, both of which he received.

For Judy, her father’s employment facilitated their initial move out of Sierra Leone and to Saint Vincent. However, knowing that the daily reality of life in Sierra Leone was now unstable, her family ultimately resettled to the United States through an immigration lottery system that targeted specific countries in distress. As she remembers it,
My mom actually got a friend of hers to play the lottery because at that time under civil war was going on and was really bad. So we actually won and we got to come here but we never actually really moved here all the time until much later. We visited every year just to keep our status. At that time, you had to come to the country every year to keep your status and we did.

For Judy and Jared, immigration status was an essential part of accessing the pathway to postsecondary education. Without the appropriate immigration status and its related documentation, enrollment in a U.S. college or university would have been out of reach. Nikki and Jared also confirmed the significance of immigration documentation on college access. They both discussed the implications of having a valid student visa in brokering access to higher education. Jared even referenced his friend who

\[\ldots\] didn’t take care of his refugee papers right away. I told him, ‘you have to do it like right away.’ So, now he has no papers which means no school, no jobs, not legally anyway. He should have got those papers. Things are really not so good for him [and] his family.

From these statements, it is clear that immigration status, and the resultant documentation, are one of many critical factors that shaped the experience of navigating U.S. higher education as a student from a refugee background.

**Institutional resources.** From the stories shared by Judy, Mai, Laila, Nikki and Jared, support when navigating the higher education environment was also present from within the institution. Several offices, staff members, and professors assisted these SRBs throughout their time in the postsecondary environment. The availability of campus resources like computer labs, science labs, commuter services, and late access to the library positively contributed to their
perception of the higher education environment. Another example includes the institutionally supplied technology and services that allowed them to maximize study time. As Laila said,

I have a tendency to study late, so I liked that the library was open till 2 in the morning. I also used the free printing and the commuter lab. I lived at home, so those little things made a lot of difference.

Jared, like Laila, valued access to the library and the science (physics) laboratories on campus. However, he also mentioned resources made available to him as a student who struggled with English. He specifically noted the English as a Second Language (ESL) classes he took at his university,

... they have language classes, English classes as well. Of course we were not required. I was not required but they are there for those who are international students there. I found the ESL classes help them to understand the language. It helped me, yes. Even the computer classes which helped... with the computer illiteracy.

Judy, like Jared and Laila, also appreciated having access to computer labs and free printing. As she said, “College is expensive you know. So anything they provide, the service, free printing, free food, free tutoring, I use it all up. When you grow up not having stuff or seeing people like struggle, struggle just to, like live, then you know not to turn help down.” From that statement, we again see how important physical resources and specialized student services were to her overall perception of the postsecondary environment.

When asked to describe her experiences navigating higher education, Judy wrote about the culture of college. She described it as a subject that she had to learn about with time. Unafraid to ask questions and learn about what she needed to do to succeed, it became clear that the inability to self-advocate could make the journey towards degree completion especially
difficult for SRBs. This is seen in her journal entry, where she penned the following words:

Thinking about it, maybe that why some refugee students have trouble with higher education, they are afraid to ask and it is not in their culture to bother their professor or administrator. My philosophy is if I am paying for my education, I have the right to ask you anything that will be beneficial to my experience.

Her words highlighted several sources of support within the university. Judy viewed faculty as well as university staff as key information sources. She also suggested that money was an important resource in navigating higher education. By referencing “paying for my degree,” it is clear that Judy had an awareness of the cost of the college, and viewed her studies as an investment towards the goal of earning her degree.

**Student Affairs staff.** Support when navigating higher education also presented itself though readily available faculty and student affairs staff. Although no participants uttered the term “student affairs,” the scope of work described, and the types of offices mentioned by participants, traditionally fall under the umbrella of student affairs. Some of the support that students received included advice on managing financial aid paperwork, counsel on course selection, and tutoring services. Participants also mentioned relationships that they had developed with staff who coordinated and publicized co-curricular activities such as social events, activities during holidays in which the college/university was closed, and club sports.

At times, knowing there were available resources was comforting, even if they ultimately chose not to use them. For example, although Laila did not recall ever seeking out support services on campus, she acknowledged that she knew they were there: “There were places to go, but I didn’t feel like I really needed them. I had people in the community who could give me advice and tell me what to do.” Judy, like Laila, also noticed that there were many offices to
help students. Like Laila, Judy shared that she never intentionally sought out those services, nor did she feel compelled to utilize those services:

I just figured it out on my own. I had a plan that my first semester I would definitely get an on campus job and then I was going to do classes. I was going to focus on that my first semester before I start joining clubs and being out there on campus. So I just figured it out on my own. I'm actually good at just figuring things out on my own. I don't like to rely on people to figure things out for me. I just figured it out and it worked okay for me.

Campus employment and co-curricular activities are all elements of student affairs work. Mentioning those elements of her time in college exemplifies how student affairs can influence the perceived quality of an educational experience.

Unfortunately, for some students, the service received through student affairs roles was not as helpful as it could have been. Mai, for example, believed that the process of getting help within the institution felt extremely disjointed at times. Many times, staff support and counsel did not line up with information provided to her by other staff. In her journal, she wrote, “it just seemed like people who worked there didn’t always talk to each other, and sometimes the advice they gave would be the exact opposite of what somebody else had said.” Such contradictory information was extremely frustrating, and at times, extended the amount of time she felt that was necessary to complete a task. Furthermore, Mai found that staff could only advise and offer assistance on targeted aspects of her university experience. Mai explained the situation in this way: “Everyone had these strict roles and you could only talk about these issues but there was not that subjective person that you could talk to and just let it all out.” She realized that there were several support services made available to her, but from her perspective, those services did not seem coordinated. To Mai, examples of support services that did not seem coordinated
included her orientation as a first year college student. She said, “The question was, ‘How can I be in two places at once? Do I need to go to freshmen orientation or the orientation for my major?’” She also discussed discrepancies in the outreach she received from the university. Although she was not technically treated as an international student, she was invited to social events targeting that subset of the student body. As she remarked, “I guess I just couldn’t figure out how I got on whatever lists they had.”

Another indicator of the impact of student affairs on SRBs’ negotiation of the postsecondary environment is present in Laila’s discussion of exposure to diverse experiences. Laila shared that her college years exposed her to levels of diversity she might not have been able to experience firsthand in any other context. She also described living on campus in a positive way:

My campus was about fifteen minutes away from home. But, I didn’t live at home. I lived on campus. I feel like people who live at home you don’t get that much experience in college. I mean I know people do it but... I knew two people who didn’t live on campus. They lived at home. And, they made that sacrifice to always be on campus so they could get more involved. People like me... I would not have gotten involved in some of the things I did. So I think being able to open to experience things, new things like that it’s just interesting. I mean when I was there it was the first time I ever did a Passover meal with the Jewish community. God. It was interesting. When would I ever do that again?

It is important that those functional areas – residence life and multicultural affairs – are cornerstones of student affairs at most colleges and universities in the United States. From the examples provided by the participants of this study, it is clear that an important part of their
postsecondary experience was not just what happened inside the classroom, but what occurred outside the formal learning space.

Student affairs practice claims an important space in molding SRBs’ navigation of the higher education environment. Study participants perceived opportunities facilitated by student affairs departments as valuable, even if they did not use the professional language commonly used by student affairs practitioners. In other words, although the participants of this study did not talk about the impact of residence life, financial aid, or multicultural affairs, they did discuss and describe the scope of work common to such functional areas. Jared, for instance, discussed aspects of services provided through student affairs departments. As an example, when asked about activities he was involved with outside of class, he mentioned both social and community service-oriented programming. He stated,

I was involved in some volunteer activity, like I volunteered for the graduate student orientation last year and international student orientation. I'm involved. There were clubs and backgammon clubs. I go play there, do some exercises, so yes it's a pretty good engagement.

Jared also pointed out that it was helpful to have ways to connect with other students from other countries. At times, he felt that his accent separated him from connecting with domestic students. Jared also believed that students viewed his accented English as a language barrier, in part because students suggested this as an area of improvement on teaching evaluations. However, Jared also found it helpful to connect with students who had somewhat similar experiences – the international students. He found that the “International Students Club” acted like a support group in that he could discuss challenges and even talk to at least one other person in his native language. He further elaborated,
. . . you know they make some classes, some lectures to talk about what Americans do and don’t like. Things like space, smell, teaching. All helpful yes. They also had some social engagements. Very fun, and I could bring my family too.

In addition to structured help about social norms, Jared also referenced programs like Global Connections. He described the active outreach they did to “people who are new to the place” and praised their work in building “community among the internationals.”

Both Mai and Nikki referenced specific individuals at their institutions who made an above-average effort to answer questions and provide general support. Specifically, Nikki mentioned a student services staff member as well as her academic advisor. Both administrators not only gave suggestions and dispensed advice on coursework and registration, but also appeared to offer a high level of emotional support, thus reassuring Nikki that she could succeed in college. Nikki reflected,

I remember going to the student services and a woman that was there, called Cathy, really kind of opened her heart and I could see that and she made it easy. She didn’t make me feel bad and it was nice for me to know and see. I guess people recognized that I needed much more help. . . Today it's an experience that I really count like a blessing. . . It was amazing. My advisor too: she is a wonderful person. She's made my college experience very easy.

Similarly, Mai praised administrative staff at her university, an institution that she repeatedly described as “phenomenal.” In terms of the staff support she received, she realized that, “everyone had roles in the university. . . You had an advisor, you had a minority advisor, you had a college advisor. . . they had amazing programs to help freshmen [sic] like myself adjust to university life.” Again, the staff that she referenced are all associated with services typically
facilitated through student affairs administrators. Like Mai, Laila praised student affairs administrators. She commented,

…the [university] has all these people who are there to help you, answer questions, guide you, make things better. There are people to tell you about classes, what classes to take, when to take them, who to take…well, maybe not who, but they tell you what other students said in the past. That is all super helpful and made me feel less alone.

In addition to services provided through student affairs, teaching staff also made favorable impressions on the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds.

**Faculty.** Professors seemed to make a tangible difference in how SRBs felt as they moved through the college environment. Laila, for example, mentioned that her professor eventually became her advisor, and she praised him for “always being around. Even now, I’m graduated, but he’s doing a lot to help me get the right experiences and do the right things to get to nursing school.” Nikki shared that she felt that instructors sincerely wanted students to achieve, and were always readily available to students. She detailed their accessibility in a number of ways, such as in terms of office hours, answering questions, and their general attitude towards students.

When comparing her perception of faculty in the United States to those she interacted with in Uganda, she made the following comments about her U.S. postsecondary experience:

You can go to the office and ask them questions. You can follow them, you can email them. Where I was before [outside the U.S.] it was even hard to be able to talk to the instructor. Once you have them in the class that's it. If you have a question you can ask the fellow student but if you don't ask your question in the class you're going to end up with having no answers for that.
Clearly, Nikki observed significant differences in the attitude towards students’ ability, or right, to interact with professors outside of the classroom. She noted that there are more services in general in the U.S. as compared to other countries. For example, when comparing her postsecondary experiences in the United States to her university studies in Uganda and Rwanda, Nikki said, “there is much more here. And when the instructors come [to activities outside of the classroom] that's something I've never seen before in my education background.” Mai voiced a similar observation about the differences in the college environment in the U.S. compared to what she is told about the college environment in Sierra Leone. She believed,

College back home would have been so different. I can’t even imagine. Here, everybody says to talk to the professor. Back home, you just don’t do that. The professors have more important things to do. You don’t get to know them, not like you know your teachers here.

Jared also found professors in the United States to be extremely helpful. For him, professors were helpful by dispensing academic advice, and in helping me to keep up with the academic load as he adjusted to university life as an adult learner. He noted,

I had a long gap between my previous academy and the graduate school here. It took a while for me to catch up with the things that I had forgotten but it was okay. It was a little bit challenging but since we have the support of the professors here I could catch up with that.

His reflections echo the other participants’ sentiments. Across these participants, it appears that the caring attitude of teaching staff deeply shaped their experience of college and university culture in the United States.

**Personal support: Finding inner strength.** Due to the experiences shared in
participants’ interviews and journal entries, it is apparent that the postsecondary educational experience is complicated by refugee status. From these stories, it is also clear that being a SRB does shape navigation of the postsecondary environment. Moreover, an undercurrent of resiliency, that ability to find and rely on inner strength to persevere, was threaded throughout the psyche of all participants. All participants, for that reason, were successful in their own way. While Laila, Nikki, Judy, Mai, and Jared persisted to degree completion, Vince showed success with his employment record and voiced pride in having developed tangible skills related to his employment trajectory. He said, “I’m a hard worker, never been fired. That means something. I go to work, train people, and work lets me provide for family.” Without a doubt, Vince prided himself on having been able to support his family financially and will likely continue to pursue his associate degree. Vince said:

This is the United States. College is for everyone. For school, I might not be where I want to be, but I’m still proud. I just keep putting one foot in front of the other. And now I know a little about what to do so my kids will get to college faster.

By referring to his future children, Vince’s view of the value of education from generation to generation is consistent with the sentiments of other participants.

Jared and Nikki also emphasized the importance of educating their children at the college level or higher. Nikki wrote:

I persisted no matter how much harder it was as a single mom with 3 kids, going through a divorce at the same time, work, and not having all the answers or all needs met for myself and my kids. But all I have [in the U.S.] is enough so I woke up every morning and refused to give up.

The persistence that Nikki mentioned surfaced in the stories of each participant regardless of the
topic at hand. For example, participants spoke about continuing to remain in school even when they felt bullied based on accent and/or immigration status. Other participants, like Vince, continued to strive towards degree completion in spite of the competing demands of work, college, and family, or for all participants, the pressures of financing a college degree.

In reflecting on successes in their lives, participants showed an abundance of inner strength. The ability to find and maximize this inner strength is an important part of what it means to be a refugee, and to be a student from a refugee background in U.S. higher education. When discussing what success in higher education means to her given her refugee background, Laila shared the following reflection on refugee status:

Oh, it’s in the back of my mind, not something I sit and think about every day. It’s something that is just there. Like, I know I’m one of the lucky ones to get here and not have to worry. Do you know how many refugees just exist, survive waiting desperately for something to change? My family, we’re the lucky ones. Everyone is depending on me to be a good example. And, I know that I’ll be the first to really go far.

These words portray Laila’s determination to succeed, and her awareness of what success means to her family and community of support. Mai offered a similar reflection that highlighted her inner strength. She shared that it was the college experience that allowed her to see “what I was capable of, what I can endure, about human tendency, about being an independent person, being a person who can synthesize information, can really and most importantly it taught me that I really wanted to be a researcher.” For Mai, her initial navigation of the higher education environment enhanced her character development, instilling in her a sense of resiliency. The undergraduate experience also paved the way for her set a new goal: that of earning a doctoral
degree. Ultimately, what all six participants had in common was the ability to persevere in spite of the adversity imposed on their lives by forced migration.

Only one participant, Vince, mentioned a lack of support in navigating the postsecondary environment. It is worth noting that he is the only participant who had not completed a bachelor’s degree. Whereas the other five participants positioned education as a high value for themselves and for their families, for Vince and his family, the attitude towards education appeared to waver between ambivalence and confusion about the process and logistics of the overall experience. Although Vince was unable to articulate why education was or was not important, it was clear that there was a path from the notion of the usefulness of education to having support to pursue education to the decision to continue or discontinue his navigation of the educational system. For Vince, the experience of higher education needed to tie to a direct skill and have a specific purpose. His journal entry provided great insight on his attitude towards higher education. In his written response regarding his experiences when navigating postsecondary education in the United States, he shared:

College never came together for me. Like I said, I take classes now and then but work seems to get in the way. College seems like a good thing and I hope to finally finish the degree sometime. . . I thought about going to college, but it just never happened. I kept getting work, and being Cambodian, you have to be practical. I took classes here and there but it didn’t seem relatable. No matter what, I had already made it in the world and out of a dark place, and I was already so much better off than other people, so college. . . it was just an idea.

During a follow-up conversation, Vince clarified that he was continuing his enrollment in community college courses. Based on that point of clarification, when he wrote about college as
“just an idea,” I inferred that he views the accessibility of a four-year degree quite differently from a two-year program of study.

However, even with that distinction, at the time of his interview, Vince had yet to complete his two-year degree. Perhaps paradoxically, during his interview, Vince also said, “Going to university was the dream for me, and for my whole family for me. There is so much to figure out though. Making it work is hard, harder than they knew, and after a while, I think it just got too hard, so I left. I think about going back, but who knows?” For Vince, there is some tension between balancing the practicality of college with the vision of going to college as a metric of achievement and success. His reflections also suggest that certain critical knowledge bases about the postsecondary environment were missing. Some of those knowledge bases included knowing how to ask for help, knowing whom to ask for help, and having the ability to manage his academic course load with his work responsibilities.

Peers and the knowledge they gained through personal relationships strongly aided almost all of the participants’ journeys to and through college or university. Interestingly, none of the four participants who resettled to the United States as children referred to high school resources as a source of knowledge or guidance. Vince declared, “I didn’t get any advice. I didn’t get any help from anybody.” Judy, on the other hand, did receive advice. However, she did not obtain this advice through her experience in United States schools. She said, “My big sister had already went through the process, so she was like my personal guidance counselor. I really didn’t need anyone at the high school.” These thoughts, shared by Vince and Judy, frame the first subtheme of this section: the importance of locating support from people and places external to the postsecondary environment.

Broadly speaking, two sources of support when navigating the postsecondary
environment emerged through the data collected. The first source of support stemmed from factors external to the college environment. Examples of support external to the college environment included support from extended family, peer culture, and a general understanding of the U.S. admissions process and procedures. Above all else, the first tiers of support, for all participants, were their parents. Every participant mentioned the influence of a mother, father, or both. Jared said, “My parents support me and my entire family. It’s great to be here together and they are proud of me for doing so well in an American school.” Similarly, when reflecting on the overall impact of family support in her journal, Judy typed the following words:

Students’ family and relatives have a bigger part in supporting students with a refugee background. I think if they don't have a home support, getting a college degree might become difficult. For me, having the support of my family helps, especially my mom. She is my rock in getting through all the difficult parts of school (both undergraduate and graduate).

From the aforementioned sentiments, Jared and Judy valued the ongoing support of their parents. Having that support, by their own admissions, was a source of encouragement that enabled them to persist in the higher education environment.

Summary

The intent of this research was to explore the lived experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in higher education. Accordingly, the research was directed by a single research question: *What is the essence of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds when navigating postsecondary education in the United States?* Across the stories shared by participants, common feelings and experiences surfaced through quotations and excerpts from participant’s journal entries. These commonalities blended to create five key themes that
captured the essence of the SRB experience in higher education in the United States. The themes representing the phenomenon under investigation are (1) mobility and higher education, (2) U.S. English language acquisition, (3) negotiating a bicultural identity, (4) connection to a community of national origin, and (5) sources of support for persisting in higher education.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study employed phenomenological methodology to explore the essence of the experience of students from refugee backgrounds navigating postsecondary education within the United States. The findings of this research built upon previous research about refugee populations and their experiences within education. Based on an analysis of participants’ interviews and journal entries, I identified five key themes: (1) mobility and higher education, (2) U.S. English language acquisition, (3) negotiating a bicultural identity, (4) connection to a community of national origin, and (5) sources of support for persisting in higher education. This research is significant for two reasons. First, within the context of higher education, this study improves general awareness of the diversity of students born outside the United States and SRBs, in particular. Second, this research challenges faculty and administrators to think differently about how to meet the needs and preferences of this unique student subpopulation. Ultimately, this study invites us to consider that the dominant view of diversity within higher education should not be so myopic. Instead, the prevailing view of diversity should extend beyond the traditional barriers of race, gender, and ethnicity to include the experiences of students representing a range of nativity and immigration statuses.

Relevant to the particular scope of this study, further research would facilitate a better understanding of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds when navigating higher education. As the level of turmoil and forced migration across the globe persists, it is likely that the United States will also continue to be a leader in resettlement efforts. Given that children are a growing demographic within the resettled refugee population, and as long as the U.S. government continues to allocate K-12 funding in support of their specialized needs, it is only natural to consider the unique supports that are needed to foster their continued educational
success. Furthermore, consistent with immigration laws and policies, even those refugees who
resettle to the U.S. as adults must ultimately navigate the pathway to citizenship. Ultimately, to
ignore the space that students from refugee backgrounds occupy within society and higher
education is an unconscionable failure of U.S. colleges and universities to facilitate educational
access, opportunity, and success.

The insights and understandings gained through this research, and the findings that
flowed out of it, should serve as an impetus to explore further the ecosystem of higher education
and the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds within it. There is tremendous
educational value for postsecondary institutions, as well as the faculty, staff, and student affairs
practitioners who collaborate on a daily basis to create high quality educational experiences for
all students. For that reason, this concluding chapter draws connections between those results
and the extant literature. As I highlight the implications of the findings of this research, I also
explore connections to what is already known and is being debated in the extant literature about
refugees and postsecondary education. Finally, I provide an overview of the current refugee
climate, share suggestions for future practice and research, and offer my concluding reflections
as the researcher.

Overview of the Study

This study sought to answer the research question, “What is the essence of the
experiences of students from refugee backgrounds when navigating postsecondary education in
the United States?” A scant amount of literature pertaining to SRBs’ experiences with
postsecondary education exists. In fact, much of the literature about SRBs is set against the
backdrop of K-12 schooling (Dwyer, 2010; Hastings, 2012; Roxas, 2011). Additionally, a great
deal of the previous research studied SRBs within the context of Australia, Canada, and England
(Earnest et al., 2010; Ferede, 2010; Harris & Marlowe, 2011), or explored students’ educational experiences within refugee camps (Mareng, 2010; Wright & Plasterer, 2010). Furthermore, there is very little qualitative exploration of the lived experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in the context of the United States. In order to understand my motivation for studying SRBs specifically, I highlighted the legal definition of refugee status and drew attention to the forced migratory experiences that have brought these students to institutions across the United States. Challenges to SRBs’ navigation of the United States and its postsecondary system were also detailed; some of the challenges addressed in the literature included English language proficiency, recovery from trauma, and cultural adjustment.

Philosophically, the paradigm that grounded, informed, and shaped this phenomenological research was social constructivism, which values multiple realities (Creswell, 2013). Jones et al. (2014) noted that social constructivist approaches to research find meaning from multiple perspectives. Furthermore, this approach to research assumes that factors such as history, culture, and society influence meaning (Creswell, 2013). Accordingly, through this research design, I aimed to delve deeply into multiple participants’ lived experiences, and in doing so, centered the voices and experiences of those participants. In addition, the way in which participants understood their experiences in navigating higher education in the United States fully framed the way in which I answered the research question: “What is the essence of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds when navigating postsecondary education in the United States?”

This study was rooted in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, which studies interpretive structures of experience. The hermeneutic phenomenological tradition allowed me to generate knowledge about how students from refugee backgrounds experience higher
education in the United States. Analysis of the data resulted in findings that encompassed five categories of experiences common to all participants of this study. These broad themes comprised the essence of the SRB experience in higher education. Data emerged from a set of two semi-structured interviews per participant, and the submission of a journal entry. Positioned between the first and second interview, I distributed the journal prompts to participants via email as well as through a Cloud-based communication system. However, the journal entries failed to yield data as rich as had been anticipated. This is likely because five out of six participants began to speak about their postsecondary experiences as they discussed resettlement to the United States. Five out of six participants viewed educational opportunity as a critical factor in selecting the U.S. as the site of resettlement. Given that, participants shared that they did not know what else to say about their postsecondary experiences, or that they were unsure how to respond to the idea of ‘navigating’ higher education.

**Summary of findings.** This study treated the college experience as a mosaic of several significant factors: access and motivations to pursue higher education, college choice process, campus involvement and support, and persistence and graduation. In other words, my understanding of the scope of the college experience in the United States was not restricted to in-classroom experiences or campus involvement. For that reason, a single research question guided the direction of this study: “*What is the essence of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds when navigating postsecondary education in the United States?*” Five themes emerged as common to participants’ understanding of the central story of being SRBs in U.S. higher education: (1) mobility and higher education; (2) U.S. English language acquisition; (3) negotiating a bicultural identity; (4) connection to a community of national origin; and (5)
sources of support for persisting in higher education.

Study participants were highly mobile in their pursuit of higher education. From resettlement in early childhood or as adults, to viewing the United States as a premier destination, mobility and higher education were critical to SRB access to higher education. Language-based discrimination led to the second theme, U.S. English language acquisition. Participants noted the degree to which mastery of U.S. English eased the transition to and through the postsecondary environment. Language also played a role in the family dynamic and reflected participants’ desire to maintain cultural heritage through native language use. Negotiation of a bicultural identity emerged as the third theme of significance. In addition to feeling an affinity with the experiences of first-generation college students, participants also shared how they united a strong feeling of refugee identity with U.S. expectations. The adoption of a bicultural identity was highly fluid, as students identified in different ways depending on the circumstance in question.

Connection to a community of national origin offered a fourth lens in which to further understand SRBs’ experiences in U.S. higher education. Many participants pointed out that living in or in close proximity to communities of similar national, ethnic, or language backgrounds were highly desirable. Moreover, ties to these communities strongly influenced the value placed on higher education, college choice process, and attitudes towards academic and personal achievement. These community bonds forged a strong group identity among participants and their families, and participants and the broader national community. Finally, the fifth theme, sources of support for persisting in higher education, reflected the wide range of resources that SRBs relied on in order to navigate higher education. Participants clearly identified a number of resources internal and external to the academy. For example, advice from
parents and community members were valued in much the same way as counsel provided by faculty and student affairs staff. Participants also noted a wide number of campus-based resources, such as commuter services, computer labs, ESL offerings, and academic libraries that shaped the college experience. In addition to those institutional resources, support for persisting in higher education was even more critical at a federal level. For example, maintaining an awareness of immigration status and pertinent federal policies had tremendous implications for the widening or narrowing of the pipeline from K-12 to higher education, or from the transition from another country to the U.S.

The themes previously mentioned were common to the six participants of this study. I intentionally centered participants’ description of their lived experience as students from refugee backgrounds in U.S. higher education. In this way, the themes provided are consistent with Crewell’s (2013) definition of a phenomenological study: one that “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (p. 76). Similarly, Rockenbach et al. (2012) argued that phenomenological research identifies the essence of, or what is central to, the phenomenon under study. However, in practice, it is crucial to realize that those who experience a common phenomenon are not monolithic and those differences may result in departures from the essence as manifested for a majority of a group. Thus, this perspective sheds light on the lack of uniformity among participants of this study, particularly as it relates to Vince’ experiences within higher education.

*A unique case: Vince. In this study, disconfirming evidence largely related to a single participant, Vince, who had not completed a postsecondary degree despite his entire schooling being in the U.S. Data from Vince’s lived experiences when interacting with higher education differed in significant ways from sentiments expressed by other participants. To review, Vince’s*
mother struggled financially upon her arrival to the United States with two young children. This financial hardship made it more challenging for Vince to persist through the postsecondary environment.

Vince raised the issue of money as important to his career selection and often referenced the cost of pursuing his two-year degree as prohibitive. He also seemed unaware of how to access financial support, and referred to it as a “secret” on more than one occasion. In contrast to his experiences navigating the financial aspects of the college environment, Laila, Jared, Mai, and Nikki shared an awareness of the institutional structures that had made it more financially feasible to move through the collegiate environment. Vince’s lack of knowledge about higher education, in addition to his low socioeconomic status, is consistent with the existing base of literature pertaining to the academic challenges associated with the absence of/few/limited financial resources. Higher education scholars have drawn a link between socioeconomic status and degree completion, and the impact of being a first-generation college student (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

For study participants, home environment and the level of parental support received played a role in higher education access and persistence. This knowledge helps to explain why Vince’s higher education experience differed so significantly from those of other participants. Examples of these differences include the fact that Vince’s family did not view higher education as an ultimate goal or as a singular marker of success. Although Vince had contemplated going to (and graduating from) college, it was not a pressing concern for his family. Quite the opposite, other participants stated that one of the driving factors in selecting the U.S. for resettlement was the possibility of pursuing higher education within the U.S. Clearly then, the
motivations for U.S. resettlement and educational attainment were quite different.

As previously mentioned, unlike his peers in this study, Vince lacked meaningful information about college. Whereas Laila, Judy, Mai, and Jared benefited from learning about higher education through the influence of parents and/or siblings, Vince was a first-generation college student without any social or family ties to postsecondary education. Even in a comparison of the first-generation college student experiences of Vince and Nikki, there are still important differences in their ability to seek assistance when appropriate. When asked how his high school experience in the U.S. prepared him for the college application process, Vince remarked, “I didn’t get any advice. I didn’t get any help from anybody.” Similar to his interview comments, Vince’s journal entry highlights the impact of external factors on his ability to complete his two-year degree. Not only did he juggle multiple priorities, but Vince also focused on building his work history. As he wrote in his journal,

I don’t know what I think about college. I’m still here, I guess, and have been here for a long time. There’s people you can talk to [for] help, but I don’t really know those people or what to say or what to ask. I keep thinking I’ll figure it out. I’m still taking classes but don’t know when I’ll finish. It costs a lot of money and it takes a long time to finish when you only can take 1 or 2 [at a time??]. But, I like being in college. It’s a good thing, and it should help me get an even better job one day. But I have a lot of other things to take care of too.

Unable to access knowledge about college from his high school, family, or peers, Vince also lacked the necessary skills to self-advocate when enrolled in community college. This missing knowledge shaped his college selection and affected how he navigated the postsecondary
Another factor contributing to differences in the higher education experiences of Vince as compared to the other participants of this study is the role of a community of national origin. In the end, the other participants resettled to neighborhoods where they could build community ties among people of comparable, if not the same, national and/or religious backgrounds. In contrast to those choices, the community where Vince grew up was unconnected to a locally based microcosm of Cambodian culture. Laila, Judy, and Mai’s families intentionally selected communities where they could create linguistic, religious, and/or cultural connections to complementary ethnic communities. Similarly, Jared and Nikki, who resettled to the United States as adults with young children, made concerted efforts to maintain linguistic and cultural ties to their children through parenting and by taking advantage of local community activities.

Yet another significant difference between Vince and other participants is the degree to which he embraced an identity incorporating both the U.S. and their national heritage. While Vince expressed that he viewed himself, at times, as both Cambodian and as American (from the U.S.), the converging influences of early childhood resettlement and missing connections to a community of national origin eroded a substantive sense of self as it related to his homeland of Cambodia. A final point of difference between Vince and three of his peers was his age of migration to the U.S. during early childhood. In contrast to Vince’ early childhood resettlement, Laila, Judy, and Mai migrated to the U.S. as youth between the ages of 8-14. Vince, on the other hand, moved to the U.S. at three years of age.

Completing his schooling in the United States from the age of three through the close of his teenage years had a negative effect on his educational persistence. Vince mentioned several difficulties in moving through the higher education system, including not understanding the
financial aid process, balancing work and school, and an inability to connect in a meaningful way with academic support services at his community college. These factors contributed to his intermittent enrollment in college, which is yet another contrast with the other participants, who all attended college and/or university full-time without breaks between semesters. Although Vince embraced a bicultural identity in many of the same ways as did his peers in the study, his articulation of a bicultural identity failed to provide him with the essential support needed to facilitate timely degree completion.

It is possible that the pervasive dissonance between the experiences of other members of this cohort of participants and Vince stemmed from the implications of his racial and ethnic background as an Asian American, and in particular, as Cambodian. The dominant narrative surrounding the academic performance of Asian Americans is that of a "model minority," an overtly biased, simplistic, and misleading myth. According to Wang (2008), the crux of the idea of an Asian American model minority rests on the idea that “Asian Americans, by virtue of self-improvement and hard work, had successfully overcome racial discrimination against them and had assimilated into mainstream America” (p. 23). Much of this narrative is a consequence of widely publicized data about Asian Americans in the academic environment, particularly as it related to school performance, excellence in math and science, and college attendance (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). For example, a significant proportion of Asian American adults over the age of 25 (49%) have earned at least one four-year degree, and a large body of research shows that Asian American students typically earn the highest test scores and GPAs within a high school or college cohort (Pew Research Center, 2016). However, I believe that a disaggregation of the data allows for a deeper understanding of race, ethnicity, and academic achievement as it relates to Asians and Asian Americans. This is
critical, as scholars frequently overlook the diversity of the Asian and Asian American population, which encompasses people from the Far East, Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

In spite of significant differences in culture, history, religion, language, socioeconomic status, and length of time in the United States, Varma (2004) and Museus and Kiang (2009) found that people continue to view Asian Americans as a uniform group. Museus and Kiang attributed this homogenization to “the practice of racializing and oversimplifying” (p. 7). Similarly, Museus (2009), Poon (2014), and Teranishi (2007) argued that the racialization of Asian American students as model minorities hides differences in educational attainment, race based microaggressions, and socioeconomic status among subpopulations within the broader demographic of Asian Americans. This diversity within the broader category of Asian Americans is further affirmed by research put forward by the Pew Research Center (2016). According to the Pew Research Center, 83% of the Asian American community is comprised of members of Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese descent. However, in contrast to their Chinese and Japanese peers, the degree completion rate for South Asian groups like Laotians, Cambodians, and ethnic Khmer is markedly lower. The National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (2010) reported that during 2006-2008, the three-year average for educational attainment was quite low for Cambodian Asian Americans. Although 65% of this population aged 25 or more had earned a high school credential, less than 20% had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher. In contrast, nearly 70% of Asian Indians, more than 50% of Korean Asian Americans, and more than 50% of Chinese Asian Americans had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher.
With the previously mentioned demographic data as highly informative context, it is evident that Vince’s educational journey is far more reflective of that of South Asian American students as opposed to a more generic ‘Asian’ hierarchy. Vince’s educational trajectory is also congruent with the existing body of literature about Cambodian and Cambodian-American student experiences and degree attainment, which documents language barriers (Wright, 2004) and low academic achievement (Kim, 2002). Socioeconomic status also emerged as a concerning factor, as South Asian American educational trajectories often mirror those of Black and Latino students from impoverished communities. In this regard, South Asian, Black and Latino students’ academic achievement aligns with the scholarly assumptions of Ogbu and Simons (1998), who explored what it means to be a ‘minority’ in the context of the educational environment. In their scholarship, Ogbu and Simons explored the relationship between voluntary minority status and academic performance. However, for Vince, the conflict between the extant literature and his lived experience may be the consequence of his failure to integrate into an ethnic community that places a high value on education. The tension between Vince’s lived experience and the majority of scholarly work about Asian American’s academic achievement might be the result of his Cambodian heritage.

To that point, the impact of cultural heritage, Ogbu (1989) concluded that the academic success of Chinese Americans reflected migration to the United States by choice as well as their integration into Chinese ethnic communities that valued education. However, it is important to consider the impact of Chinese heritage and values on academic outcomes as compared to Cambodian heritage and values. Cambodian cultural values, whether consciously recognized or not, certainly shaped Vince’s upbringing and his subsequent pathway to higher education. Although Vince and his family may have resettled to the U.S. voluntarily in terms of
resettlement section, traditional Cambodian values incorporate Theravada Buddhism, thereby placing a premium on predetermined fate, or karmic law (Caniff, 2001; Mortland, 1994). Other scholars’ research (Garcia Coll et al., 2002; Smith-Hefner, 1993; Smith-Hefner, 1994; Smith-Hefner, 1999) documented the role of family and parental support on Cambodian students’ achievement. Nancy Smith-Hefner, in particular, argued that Cambodian students often receive modest academic achievement goals from their parents based on parents’ perception of ability, innate talent, and an overall attitude of individualism and nonintervention as it related to students’ education (1993; 1994; 1999). Similarly, Museus (2013), identified several cultural and structural differences that he believed accounted for variations in educational attainment across subsets of Asian American students. To Museus, examples of those cultural and structural differences included national history, ethnic and religious values, parental influence, and the impact of racism and classism in the United States. Given those factors, the core priority of valuing education may not have surpassed the influence of these factors on Vince’s educational trajectory and experiences in higher education.

Other differences in Vince’s higher education experiences and those of other participants can also be attributed to the convergence of low socioeconomic status with the Asian model minority myth, subconscious institutional policies as they related to the perception of automatic Asian American achievement, and Vince’s lack of access to a high-quality K-12 education. A high-quality education, for example, should have prepared Vince for college enrollment in terms of his academic skill as well as his ability to navigate the college environment successfully. However, because the dominant discourse assumes that Asian Americans will do well in school, it is possible that teachers and faculty may have disinvested in Vince’s educational aspirations by assuming he would excel regardless of his personal circumstances. This type of positive
stereotype threat many have changed Vince’s educational pathway by imposing a barrier of non-intervention, limiting his access to additional capital that other participants of this study accessed.

Finally, gender may have also played a role in Vince’s educational trajectory. It is possible that the intersection of Vince’s multiple identities as a Cambodian man who resettled to the United States during early childhood had an even deeper impact on his ability to thrive in the college environment. Surla and Poon (2015) delved into gender differences and academic outcomes; in their research, they identified differences in gender among Asian American students in their approaches to embarking on the college pathway. According to Surla and Poon, men were less likely to move away from home and also associated the usefulness of college with a desire to reach identified employment and career goals. Women also struggled to leave their homes. However, when they did so, women students chose to leave home in order to pursue self-exploration and desired career paths, and to deploy sound financial decision-making.

**Essence of the SRB Experience with U.S. Higher Education**

According to Dahlberg (2006), “Describing essences is a clarification of meaning as it is given…we should be aware that the meaning that we discover belongs to the phenomenon” (p. 15). Van Manen (1990), like Dahlberg, argued that essence is the very nature of the phenomenon under study. Similarly, Moustakas (1994) theorized that the essence of a phenomenon is the entirety of meaning understood by all participants who have experienced a specific lived experience. In the present study, I concentrated on the overarching phenomenon of being a student from a refugee background who is currently negotiating, or has recently navigated, the postsecondary environment. Although individual students from refugee backgrounds claimed unique experiences, certain aspects of identifying as a SRB in U.S. higher
education were consistent across the six participants of this study. Those particular commonly shared experiences are evident in the five themes to emerge from this study: mobility and higher education; U.S. English language acquisition; negotiating a bicultural identity; connection to a community of national origin; and sources of support for persisting in higher education. Altogether, the essence of the SRB experience reflects the interaction of adapting to dominant culture, perceptions of people from other nationalities, and doggedly overcoming obstacles, motivated by their belief in their ability to achieve their educational goals. Being a student from a refugee background who is navigating or has navigated U.S. higher education implies that refugee identity is a component of one’s personal history that will never fade away. Instead, refugee identity creates the framework for the unique identity that SRBs envision and adopt for themselves. Moreover, the essence of the SRB experience is indicative of incredibly high levels of grit and personal determination. For SRBs, the essence of their higher education experience is communal success; their experience is not solely pertinent to the individual, but is a testament to the spirit of courage and perseverance of all who identify as refugees.

Historically, incorporation theory has reflected the interaction of dominant, or mainstream, cultures with that of the new immigrant populations. Moreover, Rong and Preissle (2009) defined incorporation theory as “the idea that immigrant success depends on how people are viewed as well as by what they do” (p. 246). The level of importance placed on the actions and perceptions of people is vital for understanding the ways in which SRB experiences in the United States and in U.S. higher education unfold. Based on the results of this study then, the essence of the SRB experience is closely tied to the experience of figuring how to identify with and fit into society in the United States. SRBs undergo an intense process of adjustment to life in the United States; they are influencing the United States at the same that U.S. tradition, values,
and customs shape their identities and pathways to college and career. Using incorporation theory as a lens for understanding SRB experiences, we see how participants necessarily and forcibly adjusted to life and schooling in the United States. For example, participants shared moments of discrimination based on native language use and English accents. Those memories highlighted tensions between the welcoming resettlement policies and practices of the U.S. and the reality of how people treat refugees. In that spirit, part of the essence of the SRB experience in higher education is the struggle to fit in or blend in, while maintaining national identity. The decision to deploy any combination of strategies reflected what the extant literature has documented as the tension between the assimilation and integration of refugee and immigrant groups.

For students from refugee backgrounds, the acculturative education process shaped their understanding of what it would mean to be successful in the United States. This was as true for those who resettled in early childhood and navigated the U.S. from childhood to adulthood as it was for adult refugee migrants to the U.S. Acculturation relies on the interaction between two or more cultures, a guiding principle in the existing literature about acculturation theories. Berry (1997) pinpointed two aspects of the experience of acculturation: culture maintenance and culture adaptation. Understanding these strands of acculturation improves understanding of the importance of establishing connections to a community of national origin. Furthermore, a more nuanced understanding of acculturation offers greater insight into the role of U.S. English on the social and academic success of SRBs. SRBs in higher education fight to maintain their interpretation of their culture in the U.S., similar to other immigrant groups, by aligning themselves with local national communities and by locating spaces of support and empathy on college campuses. The essence of the SRB experience is not only the ability to maintain a link to
national heritage, but demonstrating a commitment to finding a way to reinterpret that birth heritage by adopting one’s understanding and ongoing experience to the current framework - U.S. society – to produce a bicultural identity. Berry would call this “culture adaption.” For SRBs, culture adaptation is, at its core, the ability to define what affinity to one’s homeland looks like in the context of U.S. society and U.S. higher education. This experience then equates the SRB experience in U.S. higher education to the experience of other students from immigrant backgrounds but still sets them apart from international students who are not seeking permanent residency in the U.S.

Resilience, grit, and self-efficacy provided a way to understand how SRBs were able to set and reach goals over the long-term in the face of multiple challenges: surviving forced migration, learning U.S. English, and understanding an ever-evolving sense of identity. As individuals, Vince, Jared, Laila, Judy, Mai, and Nikki were all overwhelming resilient in their capacity to manage the adjustment to a new country. Indeed, they demonstrated a high level of resilience, which Luthar et al. (2000) defined as competence under adversity. Resilience was evident not just in participants’ memories about forced migration, but also in their ability to negotiate academic spaces, educational achievement, and risk factors (Gordan & Song, 1994; Morales & Trotman, 2004). Kitano and Lewis (2005) argued that risk factors, competence, vulnerability factors, protective factors, and developmental assets, were essential to understanding resilience as a phenomenon. Low socioeconomic status, strong relationships within schools and universities and with community members facilitated positive outcomes for SRBs.

Related to resilience and resiliency are the concepts of grit and self-efficacy. Grit empowered the SRBs of this study to persist towards long-term goal completion. Certainly,
degree completion is evidence of grit, as is the commitment to advancing one’s educational trajectory, even at the associate degree level, which was the case for Vince. What distinguished Vince from other participants is self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief, confidence, and persistence in their own capacity to implement behaviors necessary for the achievement of specific performance goals (Bandura, 1977). Unlike the high levels of self-efficacy demonstrated by Jared, Nikki, Mai, Laila, and Judy, Vince showed low self-efficacy. Low self-efficacy undermined his ability to advocate for his own needs in higher education and seek out the appropriate forms of help as needed. This is consistent with the research of Williams and Takaku (2011), who suggested that people with a high level of self-advocacy do prioritize their needs and exhibit positive help-seeking behaviors. The core essence of the SRB experience then, is the demonstrated capacity to overcome difficult situations, and set and achieve goals. Moreover, the essence of the SRB experience is not limited to academic success or degree completion. Instead, the essence of the SRB experience rests on the attitudes and approaches that these students bring with them to the navigation of higher education.

**Relationship to Extant Literature**

The participants of this study were incredibly successful, which contradicts the dominant scholarly narrative about the many obstacles that infringe upon refugee resettlement and navigation of higher education. The results of this study reflect demographic trends in the refugee population in three ways. First, four out of six participants in this study identified as women, which is consistent with the fact that the vast majority of refugees, globally speaking, are women and girls (United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees [UNHCR], 2015a). Second, the participants of this study reflected the wide age ranges of refugees resettled to the United States. In fact, four out of six participants resettled to the U.S. below the age of 18. As
such, their experiences with the postsecondary environment evolved differently, as they had more time to adjust to U.S. culture and U.S. academic norms. This is consistent with the trend of early childhood resettlement to the United States. Recall that 34% of refugees admitted to the United States during 2011-2013 were less than 18 years old (Martin & Yankay, 2014). Third, the SRBs of this study represented countries documented as critical refugee-producing countries. Aside from these demographic consistencies, there are numerous other connections between the present study and the existing base of literature pertaining to the experiences of SRBs in postsecondary education. The experiences of these participants are largely consistent with the available literature on incorporation and acculturation, resilience and grit, and self-efficacy.

**Incorporation and acculturation.** Findings indicate that participants experienced a complex interplay of incorporation and acculturation processes. I used incorporation theory as a lens to understand and interpret the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds. The relationships between incorporation theory, U.S. culture, and the reproduction of cultural norms in the postsecondary environment were of particular interest. One of the main ways that incorporation theory tied to the findings was in the desire to become Americanized in order to facilitate a sense of belonging. This was particularly evident in how participants discussed learning and using U.S. English, the impact of unusual accents that their peers perceived, and the unfolding of a bicultural identity. Rooted in the United States context, incorporation theory probes the interaction of dominant cultures with new immigrant populations. As defined by Rong and Preissle (2009), incorporation theory is “the idea that immigrant success depends on how people are viewed as well as by what they do” (p. 246). Ultimately, incorporation theory offered insight into the extent to which SRBs’ academic experiences shaped how they perceived they were viewed, as well as their actual experiences. Experiences with being ostracized based
on language accentuation, for example, are exemplars of their postsecondary experience.

Incorporation theory, when explored alongside participants’ perspectives, suggests that issues associated with acculturation and assimilation frame SRBs’ experiences. Classic assimilation theory (Alba & Nee, 2003; Gordon 1964) is especially relevant to the context of SRBs’ experiences. According to the tenets of classic assimilation, refugees’ culture becomes more like the dominant U.S. culture over time. Generally incorporated into the norms of life in the United States, the SRBs of this study adopted much of the culture of the U.S. Thus, the assimilationist underpinnings of incorporation theory are realized in terms of SRBs’ ability to gain proficiency in U.S. English and set aside their own cultural values and norms.

Resettling to the U.S. required adjustments in several aspects of participants’ daily lives: language, employment, educational attainment, social life, et cetera. Over time, the participants of this study adjusted to life and learning in the United States. In a sense, they became acculturated to their ‘new’ environment as well as to the expectations of U.S. higher education institutions. Within the parameters of the longstanding definition of acculturation, SRBs’ cultures and the culture of the U.S. both change. This is because acculturation is best understood as “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups” (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149). However, this acculturative process only affects SRBs because the inflow of refugees does not alter U.S. culture on a large scale.

All participants had to undergo a process of acculturation as they learned about and adapted to the culture of the United States. Traditionally, acculturation targets minority groups adopting the habits and language patterns of the dominant group. When looking at the
relationship between students from refugee backgrounds and their domestic peers, and the context of the United States in general, it is not difficult to interpret refugee status as the minority, and the dominant group as the broader United States context. By becoming acculturated, I mean that the SRBs in this study had already gone through the process of adopting the beliefs, behaviors, and norms of another group – that of the United States. This is evident by how participants discussed their desire for acceptance as Americans. For SRBs, engaging with U.S. culture was acculturating, as they were constantly adopting elements of a second culture. In effects, participants were becoming bicultural individuals.

Participants’ development of a bicultural identity undergirds incorporation and assimilation. A bicultural identity, after all, enabled SRBs to retain some aspects of their national heritage and culture of origin. Thus, a bicultural identity became an additional source of personal capital when navigating the U.S. and its higher education system. This is critical given that there are at least four forms of capital: economic, cultural, personal, and social (Bourdieu, 1986). For SRBs, growing economic capital is a moving target for students and their families, and is often accomplished via workforce entry and educational achievement. On the other hand, cultural capital is often realized in the preference of refugees and their families to sustain connections to communities of national origin, and in the attitudes embraced as it relates to education and educational achievement. Lamont and Laureau (1998) defined cultural capital as “widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” (p. 156). In contrast to the relative ease of accessing forms of cultural capital, social capital is much more difficult to access, particularly when considering the at times tense relationships between refugees and immigrant groups, and the broader U.S. public. It is particularly interesting then, that the SRBs
in this study have created their own form of social capital by constructing a bicultural identity of their very own. For that reason, incorporation theory alone fails to capture the experience of students from refugee backgrounds fully. On the other hand, acculturation allows for both aspects of SRBs’ identity to coexist. In other words, acculturative processes empowered SRBs to forge their own unique bicultural identity.

Participants’ desires to reduce their accents and avoid signifiers of ‘otherness’ reflects this adoption of a second culture. From their words, it was clear that they desired a degree of absorption into this new and adopted culture – that of the United States. Participants wanted to fit in, or assimilate into, United States culture as seamlessly and as quickly as possible. From Laila’s point of view, “people just wanna see you as foreign. Until you learn everything, you can be that cool kid with that funny accent, or a totally uncool kid with the weird accent from some country on the news that everybody sort of hates.” Clearly then, language was an important aspect of SRBs’ navigation of U.S. society as well as the postsecondary environment; it allowed them to blend into, or be incorporated into, the dominant social culture. Counter to this interaction with U.S. culture, participants also were deeply enmeshed in an acculturative process as they actively fought to maintain and honor aspects of their national heritage. This was accomplished by using heritage languages, practicing their religion, and engaging with local communities of national origin. These acts embody the very nature of acculturation, which Berry (1997) argued integrated culture maintenance and culture adaptation.

In the end, participants’ successful navigation of the postsecondary environment was not a consequence of accepting a dominant assimilationist narrative, but was instead the outcome of a carefully constructed bicultural identity. Broadly speaking, the acculturation of SRBs to the United States mandated processes of acculturation as well as enculturation, and had enormous
implications for advancing participants’ comfort with a bicultural identity. The selection of a bicultural identity allowed participants to fuse aspects of their refugee histories and national identities with that of their adopted country of refuge. This new identity, whether it was Nepali and American, or Somali and American, et cetera, allowed participants to perform an identity perceived as advantageous for their movement through the academy. More important still is the understanding that one’s identity can be fluid and wielded as a form of self-protection against possible bias in society and within higher education specifically.

Incorporation and acculturation illuminate the essence of the experience of students from refugee backgrounds in U.S. postsecondary education. This is most visible in the decision of some SRBs to blend in, or assume an ‘American’ identity. Choosing not to be seen as a refugee or choosing to identify with a wider ‘international student’ status was a way of incorporating oneself into society in a manner that invited less scrutiny. However, incorporation does have assimilationist undertones, as the interaction between immigrants and the host country is presumably a one-way process. In that process, immigrants are compelled to become more like the host country’s dominant group.

Acculturation was a much stronger influencing factor than incorporation. Unfortunately, the acculturative process also led to higher levels of stress as students navigated the higher education environment and negotiated their identity. From being forced out of their homeland to resettling to the United States to learning U.S. English, their entire lives were shaped by life-altering moments. Torres et al. (2003), in explaining the possible ramifications of acculturation noted, “choosing between the majority culture and the culture of origin places additional stress on how these students function in the college environment” (p. 53). In spite of this stress, the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds reflected a great deal of resilience and grit;
participants overcame multiple obstacles stemming from forced migration and resettlement.

**Resilience and grit.** For students from refugee backgrounds, the combination of resilience and grit facilitated the ability to thrive in spite of forced migration. Resilience and grit also enabled students to refine and understand their own identities within the academy. In terms of positive educational outcomes, resilience and grit empowered participants to secure measures of academic success and establish an overall sense of belonging within higher education. In the end, although participants found aspects of their journey to and through the postsecondary environment difficult, resilience and grit enabled students from refugee backgrounds to overcome those circumstances.

Although closely related, there are distinct differences in how resilience and grit illuminate understanding of how people react to difficult circumstances and achieve goals. Grit, also known as a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), is concerned with the ability to overcome challenges in addition to one’s commitment to long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). Resilience, however, is distinct because it refers to the degree to which people cope with and adapt to stressors or risks (Braverman, 2001) and demonstrate competence (Easterbrook et al., 2013; Luthar et al., 2000). Gordan and Song (1994), like Morales and Trotman (2004), specifically explored academic resilience, a form of resilience relevant to academic spaces, educational achievement, and risk factors.

The context of this study, higher education, played an important role in understanding participants’ resilience and grit. All participants of this study identified at least one long-term goal: to earn a two-year or four-year degree. In fact, for five of six participants, U.S. educational opportunities were a driving factor in why refugees selected the United States as the final resettlement option. Moreover, resettlement shaped SRBs’ resilience and grit, even for those
who resettled to the U.S. as children. Although those resettled as youth could not recall the
details of resettlement, three of four participants had vivid memories of the challenging transition
to a U.S. school. In spite of the difficulties encountered, SRBs adapted to the stressors imposed
by refugee status and the adjustment to life and schooling in the U.S. Vince, however, did not
have memories of a transition to a U.S. school due to his resettlement at four years of age. Due
to his early childhood resettlement, Vince never experienced schooling outside of the United
States. Nonetheless, whether participants resettled as children or as youth at the age of eight or
older, experiences within U.S. schools nurtured their academic resilience, enhanced their grit
over time, and supported SRBs’ transition to the postsecondary environment.

For the participants of this study, a discussion about resilience and grit is incomplete
without acknowledging the impact of resettlement selection, whether or not they or their parents
managed the process. Another component of resettlement selection was the wave of secondary
migration that five of six participants benefited from throughout their lives. Takenaka (2007)
described secondary migration as the movement of refugees from one community to another, and
noted that this was common to the pattern of refugee mobility post-resettlement. Five of six
participants noted that a desire to connect with a local community of national origin prompted
their secondary migration. Five of six participants also chose to establish connections to a
community of national origin within the U.S. These connections erected an additional layer of
support that allowed SRBs to excel in the postsecondary environment. Some of the challenges
that Vince encountered related to his lack of an affiliation with a comparable community of
support. From the experiences he shared, it was clear that this missing support eroded his access
to national identity as a motivator, and limited his knowledge of the college environment.

Many factors contribute to resilience, including family and community support, cultural
practices, and employment (Marsella et al., 1994). Both Walsh (2003) and Marsella et al. viewed families and communities as the primary pillars of support for understanding resiliency. Part of SRBs’ success then, stemmed from the extensive base of support that they cultivated through immediate and extended family, college/university staff, and local communities of national origin. In general, access to communities of national origin helped SRBs to maintain their sense of national identity and reinforced their personal goals. For participants connected to a local ethnonational community, they knew that an entire community of people viewed them as an example and wanted them to excel. Additionally, the community of support also provided additional access to knowledge of the U.S. postsecondary environment. This information clarified higher education processes and boosted their motivation, decision-making, and persistence. A constant awareness of the reality of having a larger community of support contributed to their sense that moving through college and achieving academic success was more than a priority for the student-individual; it was a point of pride for the entire family and community.

The resiliency framework consists of belief systems, organizational patterns, and communication (Walsh, 2003). Participants strengthened their resiliency through community and family-based support and by leaning on an adopted bicultural identity. This identity, which wove together U.S. culture and values with those of their homeland, informed the belief system that dictated their behavior in the postsecondary environment. Additionally, common to all participants was a high level of grit within their character development. Von Culina et al. (2014) reported that the ability to pursue engagement and pleasure were key to understanding differences in grit among people. Across participants, a high degree of grit was evident in the
way participants maintained a dogged determination towards their academic goals.

This unwavering determination enabled Laila to graduate from college, motivated Jared to pursue his master’s degree, motivated Judy and Mai to enroll in doctoral coursework, and helped Vince and Nikki focus on their navigation of the two-year college experience. Grit then, enabled these SRBs to persist, and for most, their educational outcomes were consistent with the extant literature that highlights a positive relationship with college achievement, adjustment, and retention (Duckworth, et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). However, whereas grit allowed SRBs to commit to their goals over the long term, resiliency enabled participants to survive challenges with extreme grace, humility, and a strong sense of purpose.

Resilience, as it pertains to the context of U.S. postsecondary education, enabled SRBs to thrive, albeit in different ways among participants. Academic resilience is the intersection of academic spaces and educational achievement (Gordan & Song, 1994; Morales & Trotman, 2004). Academic resilience also takes risk factors, environmental stressors or conditions that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes into consideration (Kitano & Lewis, 2005). As part of the process of managing risk, SRBs demonstrated a strong understanding of self; manipulating the fluidity of their identity to their advantage was one way of managing their negotiation of social structure of higher education. Furthermore, as a group, participants touched on a slew of coping assets and liabilities such as parental support or neutrality, socioeconomic conditions, U.S. English language proficiency, religion, ethnicity, and culture as essential factors of their postsecondary experience. Support, though varied, often stemmed from family and friends, resettlement agencies, student affairs staff, and the higher education institution itself.

Self-Efficacy. Related to resilience and grit is self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (1977, 1995) as an individual's belief, confidence, and persistence in their own ability to follow a plan
of action leading towards goal achievement. I noticed that the construct of self-efficacy arose during conversations with my participants; in spite of the challenges and setbacks shared, participants seemed to have always believed that they could succeed. Based on that belief, what emerged from this study of the essence of SRBs’ experiences in U.S. higher education is that these students reflected the existing literature about self-efficacy as it relates to college and university students. Research shows that deficiencies in college capital and self-efficacy can disrupt the pathway to successful degree completion. However, in the current study, forced migration created the relationship to the U.S. Choosing the U.S. as the resettlement destination forged a pathway to higher education. Once enrolled in a higher education institution, SRBs adopted strategies that enabled them to negotiate higher education successfully. Many of these strategies were rooted in high self-efficacy.

There was a strong sense that participants knew that they had to create their own success. Participants were goal-oriented and demonstrated a general attitude and awareness that they needed to create their own success. Participants largely believed that they could accomplish the goals that they had set for themselves. This belief in what one can accomplish is the core link between self-efficacy, resilience, and grit. All participants in this study acknowledged that being in the U.S. was an extraordinary privilege secured by refugee status, and desired to maximize this opportunity. They were also acutely aware of the potential for their educational experiences to pave the way for upward economic mobility not only for their families, but for their communities as well. Additionally, participants expressed that life in the U.S, as compared to the current climates in their homelands, was truly an opportunity ‘for better life.’ This was true not only in terms of their safety and security, but in terms of educational opportunity. Even without preexisting knowledge of the U.S. higher education environment, or even of U.S.
Culture, participants largely relied on themselves and an intimate circle of support to create a goal-oriented plan for academic and personal success. This orientation towards long-term success and goal setting, and the belief that they could excel, embodies the core meaning of self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is a useful interpretive tool for understanding the resources that SRBs did or did not use when negotiating the postsecondary environment. SRBs were generally confident of their ability to persist to degree completion in higher education. Participants’ self-efficacy also strengthened as SRBs mastered U.S. English and connected with faculty and on-campus advisors. Another source of self-efficacy was the role of influential people, including family, in participants’ lives. For example, Jared mentioned the impact of his older brothers’ career and educational pathways. Equally important, the combination of efficacy expectation and outcome expectation is a marker of high self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Efficacy expectation is the belief that one is competent and capable of implementing a task, and outcome expectation is the attempt and persistence towards a task (Bandura). To that end, Williams and Williams (2010) asserted that individuals demonstrating high self-efficacy were more likely to tackle difficult tasks head-on and self-advocate.

Although self-advocacy is certainly essential for the success of any student, students from refugee backgrounds rightfully claim particularly unique needs. Examples of these unique needs might include U.S. English language support as well as guidance in understanding U.S. culture and formal education. U.S. English skills help SRBs navigate higher education institutions and systems, and without this form of cultural capital, the pathway to deepened integration and success in the U.S. environment is limited. Likewise, in general, credentials awarded through formalized U.S. education are an important bridge to success in the United States. Some of the
hallmarks of self-advocacy are the ability to articulate one’s needs, make decisions about one’s life, learn how to access information, identify people and structures of support, and effective problem solving. Self-advocacy then, is an important skill because it makes it possible for SRBs to participate in decision-making effectively and excel, thereby having an even stronger impact on the academic outcomes.

Williams and Takako (2011) believed that people with a high level of self-advocacy prioritize their needs and seek help as needed. For five of six participants, self-advocacy enabled them to seek help from professional college and university staff as needed. Those supports led to the successful navigation – degree completion - of the higher education environment. Vince, in contrast to the others, demonstrated low self-advocacy. Unable to exhibit effective help-seeking behavior or balance competing priorities, at the time of this study, he struggled to complete his associate degree but still expressed a strong desire to complete the program of study. In that regard, Vince demonstrated high grit, as he was committed to degree completion, albeit in an unspecified timespan. In spite of challenges with his timeline and knowing how to navigate certain aspects of the higher education environment, such as financial aid, Vince still believed that he could and would finish his degree. This embodies the meaning of grit according to Duckworth et al. (2007), who defined grit as far more than long-term persistence. To Duckworth et al., grit is the ability to maintain that effort over time in spite of failure, adversity, and stagnating progress. However, although Vince exhibited high grit, he also demonstrated low self-efficacy and low levels of academic resilience. Unable to seek out the necessary academic support as he navigated his community college experience, Vince was not able to insulate himself, or be resilient against, environmental factors such as parental input, peers’ attitudes towards education, educator disinvestment, or his mismanagement of the logistics of the higher
education environment. On the other hand, Vince excelled, like the other participants of this study, in terms of personal resilience. Ultimately, SRBs who are able to navigate higher education successfully are able to be resilient in their personal lives as well as their academic lives. In other words, SRBs who experience positive academic outcomes have the capacity to integrate and maximize both personal and environmental resources to their advantage.

In order to move through the postsecondary environment, participants needed to develop strategies that would facilitate their academic and professional success. It is likely that participants were able to develop these strategies because of the high value that they and their families placed on education. All of the participants emphasized the importance of pursuing education in the United States. For those who had resettled as youth, learning to value education was rooted in their acculturation to the U.S. For Laila and Judy, who resettled as adults, valuing education was a driving factor in choosing the United States over an alternate resettlement destination. One part of their negotiation of the higher education environment was the ability to manage relationships and resources.

Participants maximized campus resources by using on-campus computer labs, libraries, and tutorial sessions. They also took advantage of mentors, professors, academic advisors, counselors, and international student staff. Additionally, participants maintained ties with family and local community members. These people helped participants to advance towards their next set of academic goals through persisting from semester to semester, engaging with co-curricular activities, and striving for high grades in their classes. Overall, five of six participants achieved a high level of academic success, which complements scholarship showing the extent to which
high self-efficacy is associated with positive academic outcomes like persistence, retention, and GPA (Jones, 2008; Robbins et al., 2004; Vuong et al., 2010; Zajacova et al., 2005).

Limitations of the Study

The goal of this study was to capture and understand the essence of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds when navigating postsecondary education in the United States. This study only included participants who identified as degree-seeking students from refugee backgrounds. The study was further restricted to students aged 18 years or older. Since refugees are a vulnerable population, it was difficult to identify and recruit prospective participants through resettlement agencies, university staff, and locally based support agencies. Reliance on others for access to students and a lack of direct contact initially impeded attracting participants to the study. I discovered that some prospective participants were unwilling to respond to the recruitment materials or participate in the study for fear of being identified within their social and educational communities as SRBs.

The most effective method for participant recruitment was snowball sampling. However, snowball sampling decreased the maximum variation in the sample. First, I found that graduate students were more likely to recommend other graduate students to participate, as those students were a part of their peer group. Second, participants were more likely to refer their friends to the study. These referrals then, led to participants who were from the same national background or region of the world. Third, there was minimal diversity across gender and ethnicity. Four participants identified as African women, and two participants identified as Asian men. These limitations are a byproduct of the voluntary nature of this study, and have important implications for the transferability of the findings. For example, the findings may not correspond with the
experiences of SRBs who are not African women or South Asian men.

The goal of the study was to understand how students from refugee backgrounds experienced postsecondary education. I did not frame this study in a way that was specific to a particular country or region of the world, or gender. However, the use of snowball sampling, and the resultant sample might suggest that the findings are less reflective of SRBs’ experiences with U.S. higher education in general, but of the experiences of African SRBs, women SRBs, or African women SRBs. However, it is important to note that I gathered data for this study through two separate interviews and the submission of journal entries. Participants sent follow-up thoughts following additional reflection as an addendum to the initial journal entry. Participants also submitted follow-up thoughts via email in response to member checking. In every case, the provision of this additional information occurred after the second interview and helped to add depth and clarity to their insights. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each. When considered in conjunction with an extensive member checking process, the data did allow me to learn more about the core essence of being a SRB because common themes did surface for every participant of the study. Common themes emerged across all participants in spite of differences in gender and national origin.

United States Higher Education and the Current Refugee Climate

As of March 2016, there is little debate about the scope and severity of forced migration across the globe. In recent months, newspapers, magazines, and television screens have reflected the alarming numbers of displaced people seeking refuge in European countries. Of the more than one million migrants and refugees who entered Europe during 2015, the highest numbers of people crossed the borders of Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, Spain, Cyprus, and Malta (International Organization for Migration, 2015). The majority of these migrants and refugees hailed from
Syria, Africa, and South Asia. Additionally, countries adjacent to conflict regions, such as Jordan, Pakistan, and Kenya, are experiencing an unprecedented influx of displaced people. I find the statistics pertaining to global refugees fundamentally disturbing, as there are more than 50 million refugees and internally displaced people worldwide. Furthermore, according to the International Organization for Migration, this is the largest combined total of refugees and internally displaced people since the end of the Second World War. Perhaps more troubling is there is an even larger group of forcibly displaced migrants who are unable to attain refugee status, because the term ‘refugee’ speaks to a very specific category of people recognized as such by the UNHCR.

Given the current refugee climate, policymakers, state leaders, and community members are struggling to identify sustainable, meaningful, and humanitarian ways to absorb the influx of refugee newcomers into their borders. There is no doubt that the sheer volume of refugee entrants has tremendous economic, social, and cultural ramifications for host countries. Ideally, not all refugees will need to resettle permanently in host countries. Should the circumstances that forced migration cease, it is possible that many will desire to return to their country of origin. Unfortunately, for many refugees, this scenario is highly unlikely in the near future.

Any conversation about the current circumstances surrounding refugees and refugee resettlement must include the role of the United States. This is critical for two reasons. First, the United States continues to take the lead in global refugee resettlement efforts. As an example, the U.S. accepted two-thirds of the 98,000 refugees permanently resettled in 2013 (Capps et al., 2015). The proportion of refugees permanently resettled to the U.S. is likely to continue to increase, in part as a reaction to mounting upheaval in Syria. In response to the rising number of refugees from Syria, the U.S. government agreed to increase its refugee resettlement quota from
70,000 in 2015 (The White House, 2014) to 85,000 in 2016, and 100,000 in 2017 (Gordon, Smale, & Lyman, 2015). A second reason underlying the importance of the U.S. in a discussion about refugees relates to the financial dimensions of refugee resettlement. For fiscal year 2013, the most recent donor-reporting year available, the United States was the single largest contributor to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) budget of 5.3 billion USD (UNHCR, 2014). According to that UNHCR donor report, the United States’ contribution of $1,041,707,225 was followed most closely by Japan, a nation that donated $252,939,102.

The aforementioned data shows that refugee migration is an important issue. Moreover, the experiences of the students from refugee backgrounds who participated in this study confirm that there is an important intersection between forced migration, refugee status, and higher education. Based on this intersection, five key themes emerged from the data: (1) mobility and higher education, (2) U.S. English Language Acquisition, (3) negotiating a bicultural identity (4), connections to a community of national origin, and (5) sources of support for persisting in higher education. A pressing concern related to refugee resettlement in the United States is the issue of refugees’ ability to adjust successfully. Concerns pertaining to refugee resettlement in the U.S. also extend to the postsecondary environment, which laid the foundation for the first theme, mobility and higher education. Many refugees resettle to the U.S. as legal minors, as is evidenced by the fact that 34% of refugees admitted to the United States during 2011-2013 were below 18 years of age (Martin & Yankay, 2014). Although refugee youth benefit from early exposure to U.S. schooling experiences, and are therefore more likely to be exposed to higher education pathways as they mature, adult refugees lack such educational advantage. There is
still, however, a significant body of adult refugees who may engage with either the two-year or four-year postsecondary system.

Another issue about the current refugee climate pertains to the demographics of the population. Martin and Yankay (2014) reported that 17% of refugees resettled to the U.S. during 2011-2013 were between 18 and 24 years of age, an age bracket that overlaps with the traditionally aged college student population in the U.S. (NCES, 2012). For those young adult and mature refugees, community colleges offer a promising pathway to social and economic integration and postsecondary access (Connell, 2008). This is because, in addition to vocational training, in many cases community colleges offer community-based English language learner courses, and in several communities, have developed formidable partnerships with community based organizations and refugee resettlement agencies. It is imperative that we acknowledge that refugee access to higher education is not limited to the two-year college environment. As part of their unique adjustment process, refugees may seek to continue their education and will pursue middle skill jobs, defined as employment requiring more than secondary school but less than a bachelor's degree (Holzer & Lerman, 2009). My findings show that SRBs can do well in four-year institutions, so this focus on two-year colleges as the only feasible postsecondary options for SRBs may be unwarranted.

Some refugees are already proficient in the English language, and may have attained the equivalent of a baccalaureate degree or higher outside the U.S. Moreover, not all refugees proficient in English will struggle to adjust to the nuances of U.S. English. Nonetheless, U.S. English language acquisition did surface as another important theme. Although English is a language spoken in many countries, and SRBs may have acquired English language skills within another context, mastery of the nuances of United States English is critical to effective
communication and subtly shapes social integration in U.S. educational institutions. This is because some forms of English dialect, accent, or English language origin are privileged more than other forms of English. The notion of ‘privileged’ English has tremendous implications for the higher education experiences of students from refugee backgrounds. Without adjusting to U.S. English standards, SRBs might remain on the fringes of the academy, unable to access the relationships needed to foster greater educational opportunity or lead to experiences that impact future success.

The U.S. higher education environment also stimulates an ongoing process of identity negotiation for students from refugee backgrounds. Prior to interaction with the higher education environment, SRBs’ connections to a community of national origin reinforce the importance of honoring one’s homeland, and the associated cultural, linguistic, and religious emblems of this heritage. In the higher education environment, it might be equally as important for SRBs to find that connection; it acts as an additional form of much needed support and capital. However, my findings do illustrate how SRBs treated their identities as fluid, often displaying elements of their identity differently based on context. The decision to identify as Somali American or as American, for example, was not taken lightly; those decisions were influenced by the perception of how they might be treated. Furthermore, participants’ views of their identities were heavily influenced by their affinity with first-generation college student status. Participants identified as such, even in cases where their parents may have earned four-year degrees or higher in other countries, because of the feeling that they were missing a very specific band of cultural and social capital: knowledge and personal connections related to what it means to be a college student in the United States. However, participants in this study, as they navigated higher education, were able to identify several sources of support that contributed to their persistence.
Suggested Directions for Future Research

Given the current global refugee climate, it is more important than ever to consider the direction of future research. There is a dearth of literature exploring the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds when navigating higher education in the United States. To begin to address this gap in the extant literature, in my study I asked participants to reflect on the process of resettlement and their navigation of postsecondary education. In discussing their navigation of U.S. higher education, I asked participants to recall the challenges, successes, and failures that they encountered in moving through higher education, given their particular immigration status. Above all else, the main objective of this research was to increase understanding of how students from refugee backgrounds understand, navigate, and experience higher and postsecondary education.

Lingering questions show that there is still a great deal more to discover, and those questions can guide future research. For example, this study explored the essence of the phenomenon without regard to a specific national origin. Future research could impose that limitation, and perhaps focus on a specific country or geographic region of the world. In particular, there is a dearth of literature available on the resettlement of refugees from East and Southeast Asia. In contrast, much of the literature has explored the resettlement of African refugees, and refugees from Syria and Iraq. Filling this gap within the body of extant scholarship is important because understanding SRBs’ experiences in U.S. higher education does not occur in isolation; country of origin shapes those experiences. Although there are experiences common to all resettled refugees, the impact of country of origin plays a role in how SRBs will negotiate the higher education environment. For example, the cultural value placed on education, much
like the age of resettlement, will influence access to and persistence within higher education.

Knowledge gained from studying this phenomenon should not be limited to student experiences alone. It would also be valuable to explore the role of parents/adult caregivers of SRBs who obtained postsecondary experiences outside the United States. Greater and more nuanced understanding of first-generation status would be helpful for understanding SRBs’ higher education experiences more fully. It might also expand, to some degree, greater awareness of and sensitivity towards the higher education experiences of immigrant and second-generation students.

It is just as important to examine current United States policies on refugee resettlement, particularly in terms of the factors used to select the resettlement destination. Additional information is also needed about the factors that compel refugees to select a resettlement location and then relocate following arrival. Future researchers may also wish to explore secondary migration patterns and its impact on cultural adjustment, educational attainment, and career pathways.

Other suggestions for future research relate to the usefulness of additional theoretical perspectives. Transition theory, for example, might shed light on the nuances of the transitions stemming from forced migration. Incorporation theory could also be applied to other contexts, particularly those that relate not just to schools and schooling, but also to the higher and postsecondary education environment. Yet another area for future research is a longitudinal study of students from refugee backgrounds that traces their experiences from entry into the postsecondary environment through degree completion, or a formal decision to exit the college or university environment. Furthermore, future research must also examine the extent to which age of resettlement impacts identity, adjustment to U.S. society, and access to higher education.
It would be useful to learn more about the postsecondary experiences of those who arrived as young children, as compared to those who arrived as teenagers and matriculated into college/university through United States secondary schools.

Another prong of research relates to external connections. For those researchers who are able to foster deep connections with a support agency, it is important to consider a quantitative approach to the study of this topic. Many voluntary resettlement agencies currently track data related to the postsecondary enrollment of refugees. However, agency staff often protect this information. Outside these agencies, this information is extremely difficult to track, as refugee status must convert to an alternate arrangement - lawful permanent residency - after one year. Additionally, in light of the amount of money allocated to the support of refugee students in K-12 schools, and the rapid emergence of newcomer schools catering to immigrant and refugee needs, the ability of this demographic to engage successfully with the postsecondary environment is of interest. As increasing numbers of schools and school-based programming focus on college readiness, it is critical to study the support given to SRBs; without careful scrutiny, these programs might inadvertently add to the stratification of U.S. society. In other words, it is important, from a policy perspective, to document and demonstrate that K-12 programs in support of refugee and immigrant youth facilitate the transition to postsecondary education to the same degree as similar programming in support of domestic students.

As the majority of the extant literature on students from refugee backgrounds is qualitative, future researchers may also seek to study larger groups of these students in order to examine the extent to which they adjust to the college environment. Despite feasibility issues, the quantitative study of a larger sample would enable researchers to offer generalizable conclusions regarding the postsecondary experiences of students from refugee backgrounds. In
spite of challenges with feasibility, quantitative research is crucial because it would shed light on aspects of SRBs’ experiences that are applicable regardless of country of origin. Findings of this study, for example, implied that participants’ experiences varied, in some ways, possibly because of the connection to communities of national origin. The interplay of country of origin, Somalia versus Bhutan versus Cambodia, for example, might play a role in how SRBs access the capital that stimulates behaviors leading to persistence. Without studying a larger cohort of students from refugee backgrounds, it will be extremely difficult to draw any conclusions. However, developing research in partnership with the refugee resettlement agencies that support this work would be one way to create the space to engage in research with larger numbers of participants.

In closing, future researchers might also want to explore the intersection of racial socialization and refugee student identity. Findings from the study illustrated the perceived advantage of identifying as American. Participants, for example, shared instances where they chose to identify with a particular racial group or allowed themselves to be identified as such by other people. Based on those shared experiences, the relationship of race in the United States to educational outcomes is crucial. To what degree did racial socialization play a role in SRBs’ navigation of U.S. higher education and society in general? How, if at all, did racial socialization shape refugee identity? Given the historical context of the United States, these questions are especially intriguing.

Implications for Practice

This study allowed participants to share their lived experiences as students from refugee backgrounds who have navigated, or are currently navigating, higher education in the United States. The six participants of this study shared unique stories pertaining to the challenges, achievements, and priorities that underscored elements of their journey through the
postsecondary education environment. From the findings of this research, several implications emerged that can deeply shape the policies and practices that govern the higher education experiences of SRBs.

**Linking K-12 support with higher education support.** One of the themes to come out of this study was the role of childhood socialization on resettlement and the pathway to postsecondary education. Given the significant impact of childhood socialization, there is a pressing need to examine how the K-12 system addresses the preparation of SRBs to participate in higher education. Because refugee status in the United States is only lawful for one year, it is appropriate for schools providing services to SRBs to help students and their families consider their documentation options carefully. It is that documentation relating to immigration status, or lack thereof, that poses a seemingly insurmountable barrier to postsecondary access. Moreover, although not all schools receive specialized funding to target the needs of refugee youth enrolled in their schools, all schools should still do more to address those needs. Since refugee youth are required to enroll in school upon arrival, the school system is aware of this information. The school system documents this information as well.

Based on the previously mentioned legal requirement, schools must consider ways to provide meaningful linguistic and sociocultural support, or should collaborate with resettlement agency staff members trained to meet these needs. The findings of this study showed how important it was for SRBs to understand their immigration status. Ignorance of the actions needed to maintain a lawful immigration status had implications not only on the legal right to remain in the United States, but also on financing options for higher education, and students’ sense of belonging. Linguistic support between K-12 and higher education should also align with overt linkages to the expectation of U.S. English language mastery. What is more, for
SRBs desiring to transition to higher education, linguistic support should build to U.S. English language academic expectations.

In terms of sociocultural support, the findings of this study highlighted the positive impact of establishing and nourishing connections to a community of national origin. As much as it is possible, this pipeline of sociocultural support should be reflected within higher education. If this is not feasible on a nation-to-nation basis – for example, colleges and universities might not have a large number of Bhutanese heritage students – it is even more important to connect SRBs to people on campus who will be actively and appropriately sensitive to the voice of this segment of the student community.

Once SRBs are able to access postsecondary education, it is important to consider the nature of their experiences inside and outside the classroom. In general, institutions should identify ways to increase staff members’ capacity to assist these students adequately. Several participants of this study noticed that the knowledge of university personnel was limited to a specific scope of work, or that resources were uncoordinated. SRBs, however, wanted staff to be knowledgeable about resources at the institution beyond their particular office. In addition, participants found that campus staff were unable to meet certain needs such as advising on immigration status. Although it is unrealistic to expect any one staff member or student affairs office to do all things, at the highest level of systemic change, colleges and universities must have and act on a willingness to collaborate with voluntary resettlement agencies, mutual assistance associations, and support agencies. This could boost the likelihood of SRBs’ application to academic programs and for financial aid. Given that SRBs are afforded all of the rights and privileges of permanent residents during the first year of resettlement, this is an
essential aspect of college access and success.

Aligning K-12 policies and practices with those of the postsecondary environment necessitates ongoing communication between the two education sectors. This can be brought to the fore by implementing effective articulation agreements that ease the transition from high school to a two-year or four-year institution. Complementary policies and practices between K-12 and higher education could also join efforts to ensure that standards for proficiency in U.S. academic English advance appropriately from year to year. For newcomer refugees enrolled in U.S. schools for less than one year, high school staff should provide appropriate college counseling that empowers SRBs to seek out the resources needed to excel in the higher education environment. K-12 educators should also be intentional in articulating differences in the culture of school and college, particularly as it relates to issues sensitive to refugees, so that SRBs are able to anticipate shifts in the nature of their educational experiences.

Support mechanisms within higher education. Support structures come from a variety of reasons that are both external and internal to the higher education system. Colleges and universities must explore ways to seek out refugee students and provide appropriate support, or referrals, as needed. Faculty, student affairs practitioners, and higher education administrators should always bear in mind that students from refugee backgrounds may be on their campuses, and even if small in number, still deserve access to additional support. Without that support, SRBs might not experience academic success and persist to degree completion. For that reason, it is vital that educators consider the potential impact of refugee background and migratory experiences on the capacity of SRBs to thrive in the U.S. postsecondary environment. If needed, SRBs should have opportunities to access supplemental services that cater to their needs as readily as international students, first-generation college students, and students from low income
and other underrepresented backgrounds.

It is important to understand how SRBs are operating in academic spaces. Participants shared stories that highlighted a fluid identity, and a desire to blend in for fear of being ostracized based on immigration status or accent. In seeking participants for this study, I noticed college and university staff were unaware of the presence of SRBs on their campuses. This ranged from lack of SRBs’ presence on campuses at all to grouping these students with international students. Based on that, I urge institutional leaders to become more proactive in identifying the nuances of their student body. SRBs can benefit from greater awareness of their existence on U.S. college/university campuses, and heightened sensitivity towards the resources needed to facilitate their success. In this study, participants cited several campus officers who helped them navigate the higher education environment. The type of resources that the participants of this study engaged with – student housing, academic advising, and financial aid – are normally housed under the umbrella of student affairs practice. To that end then, it would be useful for student affairs administrators to ask students how these students identify. It would also be worthwhile to inquire about SRB affiliation on an institutional demographic survey, simply so that staff members gain awareness of SRBs’ presence on their campuses.

Additionally, colleges and universities can improve their level of engagement with SRBs by widely broadcasting institutional services that would particularly benefit this demographic.

The SRBs in this study placed a high priority on education. They also valued having a positive relationship with faculty members. SRBs also found it helpful to interact with student affairs administrators who could assist with educational logistics or provide general academic and financial counseling as it related to funding their education. To address this concern, and indicate a climate that is welcoming of refugee students, institutions should consider offering –
and publicizing – financial aid and scholarships that target students from refugee backgrounds. Another measure of support towards SRBs would be for student affairs staff and teaching faculty to undergo training that addresses diversity in terms of not only race, ethnicity, religion, and gender identity or expression, but linguistic and national diversity as well. These trainings should be publicized so that SRBs are reassured that faculty and staff are actively engaging with issues related to diversity that include their segment of the student population. Again, this would foster an institutional climate that embraces a wider view of diversity and inclusion.

Furthermore, teaching faculty and student affairs staff should also be able to guide students towards campus resources that specifically meet the needs of SRBs. It would be helpful to establish (and publicize) a single person, or group of people, who are uniquely trained to address documentation paperwork common to SRBs, academic adjustments, and more.

**Availability of language support.** In this context of higher education in the United States, it is of the utmost importance for educators to recognize that students from refugee backgrounds are *United States* English Language Learners. Although some SRBs would have learned English overseas, many will still face the challenge of mastering conversational English and academic English proficiency within the context of the United States. Yet, once students have gained admission to and enrolled in college, and have successfully demonstrated English language proficiency through testing like the Test for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), most will not be required to engage with additional support. However, many SRBs will face difficulty in the U.S. English academic space, and will struggle to adjust at the same time that they are studying core disciplinary content.

All of the participants in this study wrestled with their mastery of *United States English*. During their navigation of the higher education environment, several participants shared
experiences of discrimination based on their pronunciation of United States English. As this is a concern for SRBs, faculty and student affairs administrators should consider the accessibility of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) resources on their campuses. Some of the English language learner support services that could be made available include conversation partner networks. Conversation partners would allow students to practice their English with native or near-native speakers of U.S. English. Another resource would be accent neutralization or accent reduction training. If framed as professional development, the primary purpose of this type of training would be to help proficient English speakers practice speaking with an accent that is more similar to that used in the United States.

Although accents are not, in isolation, a challenge, in cases where it limits effective communication in the academic space, the issue should be treated as a critical academic resource. This type of training could also help students identify specific aspects of their speaking that diminish their ability to be easily understood by native United States English speakers. However, as this type of training is made available to SRBs, and other students who desire it, it is also important to develop an inclusive climate on U.S. colleges and universities that encourages patience, understanding, and sensitivity to variations of academic English. In some cases, the challenge is not so much the accent, but rather the attitudes of receivers of verbal communication who only value U.S. English with a U.S. accent. Campuses must eliminate this bias. In the end, SRBs should not bear the burden of linguistic assimilation. Higher education institutions should celebrate varieties of academic English, as they pose an exciting opportunity to expand the common understanding of what diversity and inclusion truly means in practice. Furthermore, on a practical level, varieties of academic English reflect global diversity.

Acknowledging diversity. Clearly, the growing presence of immigrant and refugee
students expands the level and type of diversity present in U.S. colleges and universities. For that reason, it is critical to have a more nuanced perspective of students’ needs within the postsecondary environment. The experiences of the participants of this study show that successful navigation of the higher education environment is more likely for those who encounter a strong partnership between students, professors, and the institution or institutional culture. Students who were less successful often lacked an understanding of how to access higher education, and may have lacked additional support from their parents or guardians. Given that reality, I recommend that higher education administrators expand their awareness of the kinds of diversity present within their institutions.

To an extent, full immersion in United States culture and postsecondary culture has the potential to erode the integrity of and allegiance of SRBs to their cultural roots. Clearly, refugee resettlement leads to a full immersive experience. Despite that, participants expressed pride in the country of their birth and did not express a desire to reject their homeland. The theme “negotiating a bicultural identity” represents this sense of pride in one’s homeland. For some, the adaption of a hybrid identity, such as Somali-American, was preferable as an option for self-identification. However, study participants did relay concerns about feeling misjudged or discriminated against due to refugee status or national identity. To combat this, participants were generally selective about with whom to share this information, and chose to adopt the identities of other countries, or even parts of the United States perceived to be more socially acceptable.

To address this issue at an institutional level, universities should continue to strive towards culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments. It would also be helpful to provide spaces for SRBs to explore how to integrate their multiple identities without feeling pressure to
value one identity more so than another identity.

Summary

As I conclude, I recall my research question: *What is the essence of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in United States postsecondary education?* In this study, I investigated what it meant to be a student from a refugee background who had navigated, or was continuing to navigate, postsecondary education in the United States. All participants revealed a strong desire to pursue higher education, and to pursue that degree in the United States in particular. Their reflections showed that the essence of the SRB experience in higher education is the ability to maintain education as a priority above all else, and to feed the tremendous desire to earn a postsecondary degree for themselves as individuals as well as for the family. The findings of this study also show that the essence of the SRB experience in the United States are grounded in the struggle to master U.S. English and to learn how to identify spaces and faces of support within institutions. Moreover, SRBs struggle to establish a sense of identity that reflects their adoption of United States cultural elements without eroding their heritage. Finally, the SRB experience intersects with the challenges of being a first-generation college student in the U.S.

From the narratives shared by participants, the integration of the previously mentioned facets of their experiences, however subtle, contributes to what was unique to the experience of being a SRB. What was also true was that the postsecondary environment needs additional support. Although institutions generally provide much appreciated services, in general, colleges and universities must develop a deeper awareness of the existence of SRBs. Furthermore, the level of outreach available to this demographic must be systematically broadened at an institutional level so that SRBs have an equal opportunity, as would any other underrepresented group within the postsecondary environment, to learn about college, master the skills needed to
navigate the environment successfully, and persist to degree completion.
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Dear Students,

My name is Vivienne Felix and I am a student in the higher education administration doctoral program at Bowling Green State University (BGSU). My research interests include college access and equity, and migration and education. At present, I am beginning the dissertation phase of my doctoral studies under the advisement of Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, PhD in the Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs at BGSU.

I am interested in exploring the university experiences of students from refugee backgrounds. The goal of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences of refugee students when navigating higher education in the United States.

This letter invites your voluntary participation in the study. You may withdraw from participating in this study at any time without prejudice. All collected data will be held confidential for inclusion in the study. I will not include the names of any student participants within the dissertation.

If you choose to join the study, you will have an opportunity to participate in two 1-hour interviews and submit at least one journal entry. Eligibility in the study is limited to:

- participants 18 years of age or older that self-identify as a refugee
- participants who have completed at least six credits of undergraduate coursework or three credits of graduate coursework in the United States
- participants who are currently enrolled in a degree-seeking university program on a part-time or full-time basis.

I would welcome an opportunity to discuss my research interests and the possibility of your involvement with this study. I may be reached via email (vfelix@bgsu.edu) or by phone (484-597-0633). Please do let me know of a convenient time for us to speak.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Vivienne Felix
APPENDIX B: FOLLOW-UP EMAIL TO INTERESTED STUDENTS

Dear Specific Student,

Hello! Thank you for responding to my email. I am very excited about your interest in, and possible participation with, this study. As I mentioned, my name is Vivienne Felix and I am a doctoral student in higher education administration at Bowling Green State University (BGSU).

I am using this study to explore the university experiences of students from refugee backgrounds. The risks of participation in this study are no greater than those encountered in daily life. Your participation in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without prejudice. I will not include your name within the dissertation. If you choose to join the study, you will have an opportunity to participate in two 1-hour interviews and may submit at least one journal entry.

Eligible participants must meet all of the following criteria:

- 18 years of age or older
- self-identify as a refugee
- already completed at least one semester of undergraduate coursework in the United States
- be currently enrolled in a degree-seeking university program on a part-time or full-time basis.
- Approve, correct, or edit your transcript in a member-check at the conclusion of your participation. The transcription will include your two interview sessions and response to the journal prompt.

If you would like to participate in this study, please do email me (vfelix@bgsu.edu) or call 484-597-0633. I would like to set up a time for our first interview. Prior to our first meeting, I will send you an informed consent form that fully details your rights and requests your formal participation in the study. I will also share the interview questions with you beforehand. Lastly, at the conclusion of your participation, (two interview sessions and at least one journal entry), I will provide you with a summary of the findings after the completion of the main study.

I hope to hear from you soon! Thank you, again, for your time and interest.

Sincerely,

Vivienne Felix
APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent Form

THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS
IN UNITED STATES POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

My name is Vivienne Felix. I am a doctoral student enrolled in the higher education administration program at Bowling Green State University. My advisor is Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, Ph.D. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University.

Purpose of the Study
You have been asked to be part of this research study because of your status as a student from a refugee background and because of your interest in the study. The purpose of this study is to explore the university experiences of students from refugee backgrounds. There are no direct benefits to participants in this study. However, this research may enhance how colleges and universities meet the needs of students from refugee backgrounds.

The goals of the study are to:
- Identify the experiences of refugee students enrolled in higher education in the United States
- Identify how refugee students understand refugee status

Procedure
The following information is given so that you can make a decision about your involvement in this study. This study is part of dissertation research.

Participants must be at least 18 years of age or older. Participants must identify as a student from a refugee background. Participants must be enrolled as degree-seeking students on a part-time or full-time basis. Undergraduate students must have completed at least six credits in a college or university. Graduate students must have completed at least three credits in a college or university.

To participate in this research, there are three steps. The steps will include two interviews and one journal entry. Each interview will last for nearly two hours. The order of the steps will be interview #1; journal entry; interview #2.

The interviews will occur one-on-one in person or on Skype. All interviews will be digitally recorded. All interviews will be typed. The first interview will ask you to share demographic information. The first interview will also ask about your move to the United States as a refugee.

After the first interview, you will receive one journal prompt. The journal prompt will prepare you for the second interview. The second interview is the last interview. This last interview will ask you to share your experiences in higher education in the United States.
Lutheran Social Ministries of New Jersey
3 Manhattan Drive
Burlington, NJ 08016
Phone 609-386-7171

Contact Information
If you have any questions about this study or your participation in the research, please contact Vivienne Felix via email (vfelix@bgsu.edu) or telephone (484-597-0633). You may also contact my advisor, Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, PhD (dafinas@bgsu.edu, 419-372-6876). You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research.

Thank you very much for your time and involvement with this research.

To participate in this study, please provide your verbal agreement. You may agree to participate by reading the following statements aloud:

“I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits of this study. I have had the chance to have all my questions answered. I have been informed that my participation is voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.”

Participant Fake Name _____________________________ Date _____________________________
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview # 1

Time of Interview:

Date:

Institution:

Interviewer: Vivienne Felix, Doctoral Student

Hello/Good Morning/Good Afternoon. Thank you for participating in my study about refugee students’ postsecondary experiences.

As explained in my email, the purpose of our two interview sessions will be to understand, from your point of view, how refugee status shapes your experiences with postsecondary education in the United States. There are no right or wrong answers. I only want to hear your point of view. I will use your words to identify themes and may quote you – using a pseudonym - in my final report. Your participation and your institution will always remain confidential in this study. Do you have any questions?

-WAIT -

If I ask you any questions that you do not want to answer you do not have to answer those questions. I will move on to another open-ended question.

I would like to record these interviews. A digital recording will allow me to represent our conversation more accurately. I may also take some notes during the course of our conversation. If at any point in time, you would like me to stop the digital recorder, please raise your hand, and I will stop the digital recorder. Do you have any questions?

-WAIT -
To participate in this study, please provide your verbal agreement. You may agree to participate by repeating the following statements aloud:

“I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits of this study. I have had the chance to have all my questions answered. I have been informed that my participation is voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.”

Thank you. Now, let’s begin.

Start digital recording. Begin interview.

To begin, I would like to ask you a few demographic questions.

Interviewee (Self-selected Pseudonym):

College/University: ________________________________

1. What is your name?

2. How do you identify your gender?

3. What is your age?

4. What is your country of birth?

5. How do you identify your race or ethnicity?

6. Did you live in another country prior to living here in the United States?
   If so, what country did you live in before moving to the United States?

7. What year did you resettle to the United States?

8. What is your major/academic discipline?
9. What is your minor/concentration, if applicable?

10. Are you enrolled as a full time student or as a part time student?

11. What is your year in college? (Circle):

   Year 1  Year 2  Year 3  Year 4  Year 5+

Conversation Prompts:

1. You indicated that you were born in COUNTRY X. What was it like to live and grow up in COUNTRY X?

2. How old were you when you left COUNTRY X?

   How old were you when you moved to the U.S.?

3. Who, if anyone, did you move to the United States, with?

4. Why did you (or your parents/guardians) come to the United States and not another country?

5. Tell me about how you left your country and came to live in Ohio/New Jersey.

6. How do you define a refugee?

7. Do you consider yourself a refugee?

8. Please share your experience of resettling to the United States as a refugee.

   What city did you first move to?

9. What impressions stand out in your mind about the process of resettlement?

10. Do you maintain a relationship with anyone (family and/or friends) from your country of birth?

   Where do they live and why?

11. When did you first enroll in school in the U.S.? (primary school, middle school, or high school)
Can you tell me about your school-based experiences?

What did you enjoy most about school?

What did you enjoy least about school?

12. Is there anything I have not asked that you would like to share?

Closing Statement:

Thank you for spending time with me and sharing your thoughts. To confirm, we will next meet on DATE. Before that meeting, I will share three journal prompts. Please submit a response to at least one journal entry before our meeting on DATE. Thank you again for your participation. It was a pleasure to meet with you.
Interview # 2

Thank you again for meeting with me. I appreciate your time. This will be our second and final interview session.

I would like to record this interview session as well. A digital recording will allow me to represent our conversation more accurately. I may also take some notes during the course of our conversation. If at any point in time, you would like me to stop the digital recorder, please raise your hand, and I will stop the digital recorder. Do you have any questions?

-WAIT-

Thank you. Let’s get started.

Time of Interview:
Date:
Institution:
Interviewer: Vivienne Felix, Doctoral Student
Interviewee:

1. When did you begin to think about college/undergraduate education in the United States?
   a. Who, if anyone, helped you with the college application process?
   b. Did you receive assistance in a U.S. high school about the college application process?
   c. What kinds of advice do you remember receiving?
   d. What was it like to apply to college?
   e. What did you think of the college application process?
   f. What schools did you consider and why?
2. How did you make the decision to attend XX University?
   a. From your point of view, did your experience of refugee resettlement influence the choice that you made?

3. What ideas did you have about college and college life prior to the application and admissions process?

4. What were your first impressions when you arrived to XX University? Why?

5. What (or who) influenced your decision to pursue your academic goals? How so?

6. What types of support systems are available to you at XX University?

7. How do these support systems affect your college experience?

8. How would you describe your academic experiences at XX University?

9. Can you tell me about what you remember about your transition to XX University?
   Tell me about a time when you were frustrated with your experience at XX University.
   How do you feel that you ‘fit’ with XX University?
   Tell me about a time when you felt like you did not ‘fit in.’

10. Can you share a time when you felt that XX University was the ‘right fit for you’?

11. How would you describe your social experiences at XX University?

12. What activities are you involved with outside of class at XX University?

13. What does your college experience at XX University mean to you?

14. What does “college culture” mean to you?

15. What has your experience as a college student in the United States taught you about college students in the United States?

16. What do you think college would be like in Country of Birth?
17. From your point of view, how does your college transition experience compare to the experiences of students who are not from refugee backgrounds?

18. What does being a refugee student enrolled in college in the United States mean to you?

19. Would you ever consider returning to Country of Birth? Why or why not?

20. What was the process like to gain residency status in the United States?

21. How do you identify yourself in terms of nationality? Why?

22. Is there anything that you would like to add that we have not discussed?

Closing Statement:

Thank you for spending time with me and sharing your thoughts. I truly appreciate your active participation. I will share a copy of your interview transcript as soon as possible. You will have the opportunity to read, review, and revise your responses as you see fit. Do you have any questions?

-WAIT-

Thank you again. I will be in touch soon.
APPENDIX E: JOURNAL ENTRY PROMPT

Participation in this study is intended to lay the groundwork for self-reflection pertaining to your experience as a college student and your experience as a refugee who has resettled to the United States. Please respond with any words that you feel best represent your response. Your responses will remain confidential.

Describe your experiences as a refugee student navigating higher education in the United States.
APPENDIX F: HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

DATE: May 8, 2015
TO: Vivienne Felix
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [609039-4] The Experiences of Students from Refugee Backgrounds in United States Postsecondary Education
SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: June 4, 2015
EXPIRATION DATE: June 3, 2016
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on June 3, 2016. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hrsb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.