Somali Students' Experiences in a Major University: A Qualitative Case Study

A dissertation presented to
the faculty of
The Patton College of Education of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Education

Abdillahi H. Abokor

August 2016

© 2016 Abdillahi H. Abokor. All Rights Reserved.
This dissertation titled

Somali Students' Lived Experiences in a Major University: A Qualitative Case Study

by

ABDILLAHI H. ABOKOR

has been approved for

the Department of Educational Studies

and The Patton College of Education by

Emmanuel Jean Francois

Assistant Professor of Educational Studies

Renée A. Middleton

Dean, The Patton College of Education
Abstract

ABOKOR, ABDILLAHI H., Ed.D., August 2016, Educational Administration

Somali Students' Lived Experiences in a Major University: A Qualitative Case Study

Director of Dissertation: Emmanuel Jean Francois

Research on Somali students’ experiences is very limited and has been focused mainly on school-age children rather than college students despite their increasing presence in U.S. higher education. So far little is known about the circumstances of those in postsecondary education. The purpose of this study was to explore Somali students’ experiences in a major U.S. university. It particularly investigated the challenges undergraduate Somali students face in college and the support they receive in order to cope with those challenges. A qualitative case study methodology was employed to examine the lived experiences of ten students who participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were analyzed using thematic content analysis.

Findings of the study indicate that Somali students encounter many obstacles in college. The study also found that students cope with their challenges in various ways by drawing support from their institution, family, peers, faith and community, who provide them remarkable social capital and resilience. Findings will have implications for both practice and policy by providing an understanding of the obstacles Somali students encounter in U.S. colleges, as well as directions for future research. They will also be significant for research in that they will contribute to the literature by addressing the existing knowledge gap. Recommendations were made in light of the outcomes of the study in terms of ways that could be helpful for students to overcome their challenges.
This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my late parents, my father Hussein Abokor and my mother Amina Hassan who despite their lack of formal schooling believed in the value of education, and as a result were a source of inspiration for me.
Acknowledgements

Undoubtedly, a dissertation project is a major undertaking. It demands not only the focus, effort and commitment of the individual conducting the research study, but also the input and expertise of other people. Not an exception, this one has been a collaborative endeavor realized with the collective support of my committee the participation of whom this dissertation would not have been possible. I am very appreciative of the unwavering commitment and support they provided me throughout.

First of all, I am greatly indebted to my dissertation committee chair, Dr. Emmanuel Jean Francois whose expertise and determination were instrumental for the completion of this project. I would also like to extend my deep gratitude to Dr. Mona Robinson for her guidance and continuous support. My special thanks to Dr. Bill Larson whose contribution to my doctoral journey goes beyond this project. Not only has he been with me since the start of my doctoral studies but his course was influential in my understanding of organization management and leadership. I would like to extend my thanks to Dr. Edna Wangui for her mentoring, input and encouragement. I am very grateful to Dr. Charles Lowery for acting as my chair while Dr. Jean Francois was out of the country. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Dr. Jerry Johnson whose courses were indeed inspirational, and Dr. John Hitchcock for his help and mentorship in qualitative methodology.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife Zahra and my children Amina, Ahmed and Asli for their patience, encouragement and support.
**Table of Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background and Context</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Research Design</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the Researcher</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Assumptions</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Dissertation</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Literature Review</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of College Education</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap between Minority and Majority Students</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors Related to Student Retention</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic preparedness</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus climate</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and academic integration</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to ed. goals and the institution</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Minority Students’ Perceptions in College</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of Somali Students from Refugee Background</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary .......................................................................................................................... 63

Chapter 3: Methodology .................................................................................................. 67
  Introduction .................................................................................................................. 67
  Philosophical Assumptions .......................................................................................... 69
  Case Study Research .................................................................................................. 70
  Sites and Participants of the Study ............................................................................ 71
  Data Collection Procedure ....................................................................................... 72
  Data Analysis Procedure .......................................................................................... 74
  Trustworthiness: Criteria for Judging Quality of the Study ....................................... 75
    Credibility .................................................................................................................... 76
    Transferability ............................................................................................................ 77
    Dependability ........................................................................................................... 78
    Confirmability .......................................................................................................... 79
  Ethical Consideration ................................................................................................. 81

Chapter 4: Analysis of Results ....................................................................................... 82
  Introduction .................................................................................................................. 82
  Participants’ Demographic Background ..................................................................... 83
  Findings for Research Question #1 ............................................................................ 85
  Academic Challenges ................................................................................................. 85
    Academic preparedness ............................................................................................. 85
    Linguistic barriers ...................................................................................................... 87
    Study skills and time management ........................................................................... 88
    Goal commitment ...................................................................................................... 88
    Interaction with faculty and staff ............................................................................. 89
    Familiarity with and use of resources ...................................................................... 89
  Socio-cultural Challenges ......................................................................................... 92
    Cultural mismatch ..................................................................................................... 92
    Family obligation ...................................................................................................... 93
  Financial Challenges ................................................................................................. 94
  Findings for Research Question #2 ............................................................................ 96
Table 4.1: Participants’ demographic background .........................................................84
Table 4.2: Challenges: Academic ..................................................................................91
Table 4.3: Challenges: Socio-cultural ............................................................................94
Table 4.4: Challenges: Financial ...................................................................................95
Table 4.5: Coping with challenges ..............................................................................98
Table 4.6: Supports ....................................................................................................100
Chapter 1: Introduction

In the past few decades, United States has seen a sharp rise of refugees and immigrants from war-torn countries like Somalia (McBrien, 2005). The settlement of tens of thousands of Somali refugee families in major U.S. cities across the country has not only increased the number of Somali children in school systems but also has resulted in the addition of more Somali students to post-secondary institutions in cities like Columbus, Ohio and Minneapolis where there are large populations of Somalis.

According to the Office of Enrollment Services – Analysis and Reporting at The Ohio State University (OESAR, 2015), in 2015, there were 723 Somali students enrolled at that university (594 undergraduates and 129 students graduate and professional degrees). Although specific numbers are unknown, other universities like University of Minnesota have also many Somali students seeking undergraduate and graduate degrees.

This rapid growth of ethnic minority population particularly refugees including Somalis has brought needs that presented new challenges to the educational system (Koch, 2007). So far, research on the circumstances of Somali refugee and migrant students has been very limited and mainly focused on school-age children and adolescents rather than on those in college whose experiences are quite unknown in the literature (Kruizenga, 2010; Smalkoski, 2005).

The purpose of this case study was to explore Somali students’ lived experiences in a major U.S. university whose perspectives are not yet represented in the literature. The researcher intended to document the experiences of 10 undergraduate students attending the university as they described, in their own words, their stories regarding the
challenges they face in college and the resources available to them. In order to illustrate that, this research study utilized a qualitative case methodology as a means to explore the meanings participants ascribed to their perceptions and experiences.

This chapter of the dissertation begins with a brief overview of the background and the context of the study followed by the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, overview of the research design, the role of the researcher, researcher’s assumptions, significance of the study, and definition of terms. The chapter concludes with an outline of the organization of the dissertation.

**Background and Context**

Demographically, the population of the United States is increasingly becoming more ethnically diverse (Porter, 1989; Seidman, 2005). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), in 2010 the total U.S. population grew by 9.7 percent, from 281.4 million in 2000 to 308.7 million in 2010. In comparison, the White population grew by 6 percent from 211.5 million to 223.6 million; Blacks by 12% from 34.7 million to 38.9 million; Hispanics by 43% from 35.3 million to 50.5 million; Asians grew by 43% from 10.2 million to 14.7 million; and American Indian and Alaskan natives grew by 18.4% from 2.5 million to 2.9 million. But while the White population increased numerically over the 10-year period, its percentage of the total population declined from 75% to 72% whereas the Black population increased from 12% to 13%; Hispanics from 12% to 16%; Asians from 3.6% to 4.8%; and American Indian and Alaskan natives stayed the same at 0.9% (Census Bureau, 2010).
Among the newly arrived refugees and immigrants were Somalis whose population in the United States has sharply increased for the past three decades. Located in East Africa, the state of Somalia was formed on July 1, 1960 from the union of former British Somaliland (currently Republic of Somaliland), which got its independence from Great Britain on June 26, 1960 and former Italian Somaliland, which got its independence from Italy on July 1, 1960 (Koch, 2007). After a brief period of democracy, however, the president of the republic was assassinated on October 15, 1969 and five days later the civilian government was overthrown in a coup d’état by the military on October 21, 1969 (Kusow, 2006; Putman & Noor, 1993). This marked the end of the civilian rule in the country and the debut of a brutal military dictatorship that has ruled the country with an iron fist for the next 21 years before armed factions ousted it from power.

With the collapse of the Somali state in 1991 and the full scale civil war that ensued, Somalia descended into anarchy that created a massive exodus of refugees as Somalis fled their country in great numbers, abandoning their homes and belongings. Since that time millions of Somali refugees have been displaced with tens of thousands of them relocated to the United States, making them one of the largest African refugee groups in this country (Gambino, 2014). The majority of those refugees who came to this country settled in big cities like Minneapolis and Columbus, Ohio. While the exact number is not known, Ohio is believed to be the home of the second largest Somali population in the U.S. after Minnesota with an estimated 38,000 Somali immigrants and refugees living in the Columbus metropolitan area (Walker & Schemenauer, 2014).
According to The U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, mass Somali refugee settlement to the United States began in 1992, during which they initially immigrated from Somalia or predominantly from refugee camps in Kenya to Virginia and Minnesota (Walker & Schemenauer, 2014). Beginning 1994, Somalis living in the greater Washington DC and Virginia started to relocate to Columbus, Ohio where they found more affordable places to live and work. These settlers, according to Walker and Schemenauer, set the stage for the migration pattern of Somalis to Columbus as a popular destination where they came to find warehouse and factory work as well as affordable housing. Since then this pattern has continued as more Somali joined their relatives and family members for support.

Moreover, the heavy presence of Somalis in Midwestern U.S. states like Minnesota and Ohio can be largely explained to the strong economy and low employment rate of the 1990s, as well as efforts by the voluntary agencies (VOLAGs) who sponsored and assisted refugee programs (Abdi, 2012). According to Abdi, because VOLAG assistance is limited, the majority of refugee families qualify for food stamps, cash assistance, subsidized housing, and medical care, through their federal and state human and health services departments. In addition to these vital services, refugee choice of location of residence was influenced by the presence of other family members whose support was also important for their adjustment and survival.

Meanwhile, the demographic trend of ethnic minorities in the United States is reflected in higher education as college enrollment has become more ethnically diverse. Like society, the American college campus has experienced an expansion of racial and
ethnic diversity (Szelenyi, 2001). According to the U.S. Department of Education (NCES, 2012), enrollment of undergraduate minority students in U.S. postsecondary institutions generally increased between 1980 and 2010, during which the number of Black undergraduate students who were U.S. residents increased 170% (from 1.0 million to 2.7 million), whereas Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander enrollments increased by 487% (from 433,000 to 2,544,000) and 337% (from 249,000 to 1,088,000), respectively.

Despite the increase in the number of ethnic minority students in U.S. higher education, research indicates that there is a growing gap between traditional ethnic minority students and majority students in terms of persistence and graduation rate (Seidman, 2005; Swail, 2003). Unfortunately, many ethnic minority students do not realize their dream of degree attainment and drop out of college before they graduate as college education is generally pretty challenging for many students but in particular for minority students. Because of their unique experiences and educational needs, it is even more daunting for those who come to the United States as refugee (Kock, 2007; McBrien, 2005).

Statement of the Problem

Qualitative studies begin with authors stating the research problem of the study, the intent of which is to provide a rationale or need for studying a particular problem or issue, and to frame one’s study within the ongoing literature about the topic (Creswell, 2007).
Literature documents well that ethnic minority students such as African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans in U.S. higher education lag behind White and Asian American students in terms of persistence and graduation rate (Carter, 2006, Seidman, 2005; Swail, 2003). It is also known that many of them leave college prematurely without ever earning a degree, which is mainly attributed to their precollege characteristics such as lack of preparedness as well as institutional variables. Because obtaining an undergraduate degree is extremely important for all students in general and particularly for minority students, the consequences of failing to do so is detrimental in terms of economic loss and lack of personal development (Carter, 2005; Swail, 2003). According to The Wall Street Journal, college dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, earn less and default on loans than those who graduate (Casselman, 2012).

In addition, research on Somali students’ experiences is quite scarce and is limited to school-age children and adolescents who were found to have suffered a great deal of psychosocial trauma in their journey as refugees, and encounter academic, social and cultural difficulties while integrating into new societies. Several studies (e.g. Bigelow, 2011; Earnest, Joyce, De Mori, & Silvagni, 2010; Kruizenga, 2010; McBrien, 2005) document the grim circumstances experienced by refugee children and their families before their migration and the challenges they face in their new home countries. According to those studies, children and youth from a refugee background including those from war-torn countries like Somalia had endured enormous traumatic situations when their lives were disrupted by the refugee experience, which contribute to the difficulties in their adjustment to a new country and adversely affect their learning.
While there is a body of research on students’ experiences in college in general and minority students in particular, this research found little or no studies available about the needs of Somali students in U.S. postsecondary education particularly major universities in terms of the challenges they face in their undergraduate years and the support or resources they receive in order to tackle those challenges. Despite the demographic reality and the increase in their number in post-secondary institutions as well as the anticipated challenges of college education for ethnic minority students, the circumstances of Somali undergraduate students in U.S. major institutions of higher learning are yet to be studied. This not only leaves a gap in the literature but also forgoes the opportunity to understand their circumstances in college and to make changes that could help them succeed in college.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore experiences of Somali students at a major U.S. university. In particular, the investigator intended to understand their perceptions as they pertain to the challenges they face in college and the support they receive in order to overcome the perceived barriers. Exploring students’ experiences in college are important to the success of students in general, and minority students in particular (e.g. Cummins, 1986; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) because they can help understand their challenges and support, which is useful in informing policy and practice.

A qualitative methodology was employed for this study because it is the most appropriate paradigm to explore the experiences of Somali students in college and obtain
an understanding of the perspectives of the participants. This is because qualitative research recognizes the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in their interaction with the world (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002).

Data was obtained through in-depth interviews, which were concurrently transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic content analysis. Since experiences are subjective, findings of the study shed light on the unique obstacles faced by undergraduate Somali students in college and the support they get in order to tackle those challenges. The study was a narrative case study in the sense that it captured the detailed stories or life experiences of participants by situating individual stories within participants’ personal experiences and by focusing on how they made sense of events and actions in their lives (Creswell, 2007).

**Research Questions**

Unlike quantitative studies, which identify certain variables and seek to determine their relationship, qualitative studies seek to better understand attitudes, perceptions, and processes (Glesne, 2006). According to Maxwell (2005), research questions specifically address what are to be learned by conducting a study and as such are at the heart of the research design. Questions were developed for the study in order to carry out its purpose and shed light on the identified problem. This study is guided by the following central question: How do Somali students from a refugee background experience U.S. major colleges? In particular, this study seeks answers for the following questions:

1. What are the challenges Somali students encounter at a major university (academic, socio-cultural, financial, etc.)?
2. How do Somali students cope with these challenges?

3. What kind of support (institutional, social, cultural, etc.) do Somali students receive in order to tackle these challenges?

**Overview of Research Design**

This research study used qualitative case methodology. The researcher interviewed participants who were purposefully selected based on the criteria that they are ethnically Somali, 18 years of age or older, of refugee background and enrolled as undergraduate students. Participants were recruited from the Somali student population at the university using invitation letters, from whom ten were selected. The primary method of data collection was in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. In order to frame this study within the on-going research, find gaps in the literature, and justify the rationale behind the proposed study, a comprehensive review of the literature was performed (chapter 2).

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant in several ways. First of all, because it utilized a qualitative methodology, the study created an opportunity in which participant’ voices be heard and their perspectives made known to others. By exploring Somali students’ experiences in college, this study exposed the needs and factors affecting their success in college and highlighted the unique challenges they face and the support they get in order to overcome those barriers. In doing so, this study will contribute to the body of literature by bridging the gap in the literature overlooked by previous research as a result of the lack of attention to this area of scholarship.
In addition, the findings of the study will be significant for policy and practice by providing information and insights about the unique needs of Somali students in U.S. higher education. Even though findings of this qualitative study were not meant for generalization, they can be transferable to similar situations, and as such will be useful to administrators and counselors of colleges and universities whose institutions serve similar student populations. Moreover, findings of this study may also be relevant for those who intend to expand the scope of this line of research further. In other words, findings will be significant in creating potential directions for future research.

This study is also relevant in that it will help facilitate the economic and social integration of Somali refugees in the U.S. This is because when Somali students succeed in college they will be able to move up the economic ladder and support themselves instead of becoming burden on government assistance and tax payers’ money. This will be beneficial for the tax payer and the society at large because it will save money.

**Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative studies, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and as such is required to describe his/her biases, assumptions, expectations and experiences that qualify him/her to conduct the study (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). To provide a short background about my education, I was born and raised in Northern Somalia (currently Somaliland), where I attended both my primary and secondary education. I finished my bachelor’s degree in chemistry (specialization in biochemistry) in Canada before I came to the U.S. to complete a master’s degree in teaching in 2000. After some years working as a high school teacher in Detroit, I moved to Columbus, Ohio to join Columbus City Schools to teach
ESL science in high school. While working as a teacher in Columbus, I was admitted to this doctoral program in education administration at Ohio University.

My interest in this particular topic of the study stems mainly from my profession and the ethnic and cultural ties with my students. As a teacher with Columbus City Schools, I spent many years teaching academic subjects to refugee and immigrant students particularly Somali children many of whom, because of their circumstances as refugees, had little or no prior formal education. Many of them had also parents that did not speak English or had no adequate formal education that would help them support their children. During these years, I saw those students struggle academically in school.

My involvement with my students provided me insights not only about the long and rather precarious journey they had gone through before their arrival but also about their struggle in school, which made an impact on my outlook. Because I shared with them ethnicity, language and culture, I found my engagement with them helpful, however, I wondered about the faith of those who continued their education beyond high school. My interest was further reinforced by the fact that current literature did not give the attention this topic so deserved, despite the increased presence of Somali students in U.S. higher education.

As far as my qualification in conducting this study is concerned, in addition to the research methodology courses I took at the university, I spent many days reading books and studying articles on qualitative research methodology from which I learned the importance of methodological rigor in conducting qualitative research, which entails, among other things, exercising reflexivity or self-reflection as well as keeping an audit trail, a chronological narrative entries of research activities throughout the process of data collection and analysis (Creswell,
In addition, as the primary instrument of the study, in order to protect its integrity, I fully understood the importance of being ethical and objective in an enterprise that is intimately human and subjective.

**Researcher Assumptions**

In performing this research, the researcher made the following embedded assumptions regarding its usefulness:

1. Participants of the study will be willing to cooperate by answering research questions to the best of their knowledge and by providing insights into their attitudes and perceptions.
2. Questions and activities of the investigator will generate the responses sought by the questions of the interviews.
3. Attitudes and perceptions will shed light on the barriers to the success of participants and the resources they have to overcome them.
4. The findings of this case study will be transferable to similar settings or cases where they can be applicable and useful.

**Definition of Terms**

- **First-generation college student**: A student who is the first in his/her family to go to college. (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora (1996).
- **Halal food**: refers to food the nature, origin, and the processing method of the food product
- **Hijab**: veil worn by Muslim women to cover their head.
• Minority student: a student identified as an Alaska Native, American Indian, Asian-American, Black (African-American), Hispanic American, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander.

• Refugee and immigrant: The difference between a refugee and an immigrant is merely about motive and circumstance. While both of them relate to moving from a native country to another country, they are quite different (McBrien, 2005).

• Refugee: “Any uprooted, homeless, involuntary migrant who crossed a frontier and no longer possesses the protection of his former government” (Encyclopedia Britannica)

• Resilience: “resilience refers to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Windle, 2011, p. 5).

• Retention and persistence: In the literature, the two terms are often used interchangeably but they are not the same. According to Reason (2009), retention is an organizational phenomenon as colleges and universities retain students while persistence is an individual phenomenon as students persist to goal.

• Retention rate: Percentage of first-time students who return to the same institution to continue their studies the following fall semester (NCES, 2011).

• Persistence: to continue college enrollment without interruption through graduation (NCES, 2011).

• Undergraduate student: a student who is studying for his/her first degree in college. (Cambridge Dictionary).
University: a postsecondary institution that typically offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees. The term is often used interchangeably with college or school (Narayan, 2015).

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters of which chapter one introduces the dissertation in terms of the problem being studied, its purpose and significance, research questions, the role and assumptions of the researcher, and definition of some terms. Chapter two presents the review of the literature, while chapter three discusses the methodology used by study. Chapter four presents the analysis of results in regard to the themes that emerged from participants’ responses, whereas chapter five presents interpretation and discussion of the findings of the study, highlighting its implications for policy, practice and for future research as well as its limitations.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In general, students have a wide range of experiences in college some of which are common to all students while others are shared only by ethnic minority students. There are also experiences that are unique to cultural ethnic subgroups like Somali students in college (Banks, 1999). The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the experiences of Somali refugee students in a major U. S. university. Due to the lack of availability of literature on Somali students’ experiences in U.S. colleges and universities, this study considered the review of experiences of minority students as well those of refugee students including school-age Somali children and adolescents as relevant to this project. As a result, this chapter of the dissertation encompasses the review of the available relevant literature in those areas.

The chapter begins with a section on the conceptual framework of the study, followed by a discussion of the importance of postsecondary education and the gap between minority and nonminority students. The chapter continues to report on the literature review of five major factors related to student retention in college, the experiences of minority students in college, and the experiences of refugee students including Somali students in pre- and post-secondary schools. It concludes with a summary of the literature review.

Conceptual Framework

Recognizing the importance of student voices as a way to access their direct experiences and the perceptions they make from those experiences (e.g., Jones et al.,
2002), this study utilized a qualitative approach and a conceptual framework that addresses the question “How do Somali students from a refugee background experience U.S. major universities?” Because no single theoretical perspective is complete enough to account for all the factors that influence college students’ experiences regarding their success or failure in college, this study approached the issue from an experiential perspective within the framework of existing theories of student engagement and involvement as they relate to ethnic minority and refugee students experiences in college in regard to their persistence and retention. While the main subject of this study is not about persistence per se, it is its proposition that students’ experiences in college shape perceptions, which in turn affect their persistence and success.

Students’ persistence and retention in higher education has been the subject of research for many decades during which numerous studies have been conducted to investigate factors that are related to the success or lack of success of students in college. Findings from this extensive research have offered invaluable insights on the issue and identified many factors pertaining to reasons why students stay or leave college. They have also produced many theoretical models used to explain student persistence in college. In order to understand Somali students’ experiences in U.S. higher education, this study drew upon some of the theoretical conceptualization provided by Tinto’s (1975,1987), Astin’s (1975) and Swail’s (2003 ) models. Because they recognize the critical role of student experiences to their persistence and success in college, relevant literature in light of these models as well as cultural perspectives were reviewed.
Arguably, among those models, Tinto’s model of student departure (Tinto, 1975, 1987) is perhaps the most prominent theoretical framework used in research to examine the predictors of attainment and persistence that contributed significantly to the understanding of factors affecting student persistence in college (Carter, 2006). The model explains student leaving behavior from a sociological perspective, stating that it is the interaction between the student and institution characteristics or variables that influences whether students stay or leave college. According to the model, dropout is a multidimensional process that results from the interaction between the individual and the institution and is influenced by the characteristics of both elements (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975).

Tinto’s (1975) theoretical model suggests the notion that perceptions are central to the process of dropout. He argues that perceptions of reality have real effects on the observer and that persons of different backgrounds may hold different perceptions of apparently similar situations. According to the author, perceptions of the individual, which are influenced by both the characteristics of the individual and those of their environment, are important for their integration into the academic and social systems of the college. College student departure is a reflection of the social and academic communities in which students experience colleges and universities (Tinto 1987). This is because students who academically and socially integrate into the fabric of campus community increase their commitment to the institution and are more likely to graduate (Tinto, 1975).
In addition to Tinto’s theory, this study was guided by Astin’s theory of student involvement, which also highlights student experience as an important dimension to persistence in college (Astin, 1975). Astin believes that “highly involved students, who devote considerable energy to studying, participate in student organizations and interact frequently with faculty members are more committed to their institutions” (Seidman, 2005, p. 11). As a result, according to the author, positive things that are done to enhance a students’ commitment to their goals and to the institution will enhance their social and academic integration and therefore promote retention; the higher the commitment to the institution, the higher the likelihood of success.

Central to Astin’s (1975) theory is the concept of student involvement, which refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience such as engagement in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel (Astin, 1984; Seidman, 2005). According to the theory, the greater the student’s involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development; with positive factors likely to increase student involvement in the undergraduate experience, whereas negative factors are likely to reduce involvement (Astin, 1984; Seidman, 2005).

In addition, since minority students’ perceptions and experiences in college are influenced by their cultural background (e.g. Kuh et al., 2006; Museus & Quaye (2009), it is important to recognize the relevance of minority including Somali students’ culture to this study. Moreover, cultural perspectives explain the challenges many minority
students encounter in college, which make it difficult for them to use the resources of their schools for learning and personal development (Kuh et al., 2006). Because of that, this study was also informed by the cultural aspect of student experiences.

Importance of Postsecondary Education

The impact of education on both the individual and society cannot be overstated. Not only does a postsecondary degree have far-reaching potential for the economy and the society at large, it is also the surest way to increase one’s social and economic level and a means to overcome the barriers of poverty and deprived social conditions (Swail, 2003). According to Pike & Kuh (2005), “the baccalaureate degree represents the single most important rung in the educational attainment ladder in terms of economic benefits and achieving upward social mobility” (p.276). Regardless of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, college graduates reported better living conditions than those who did not earn a degree (Williams & Swail, 2005). As Swail (2003) observed “the odds are increasingly stacked against those with the least education and training. The more education one has, the more—on average—one earns”(p.6).

There are many benefits associated with a college degree (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, E., & Hagedorn, 1999; Hill, Hoffman & Rex, 2005; Swail, 2003). From an individual perspective, according to the U.S. Census of Bureau, on average people with a bachelor’s degree earn twice that of high school graduates and those with a professional degree earn twice as much as individuals with a bachelor’s degree (Swail, 2003, p.4). The author observed that the differential earnings between those groups over a life time were tremendous. A study by Abel and Deitz (2014) found that college
graduates earn $1.2 million more in a lifetime than high school graduates. In addition to the economic benefits, earning a bachelor’s degree is also linked to long-term cognitive, social and health benefits to individuals, which are passed from one generations to another to enhance the quality of life of the families of college-educated persons, the communities in which they live, and the larger society (Kuh et al. 2006). Moreover, according to Baum, Ma, and Payea (2013), college education not only increases the chances that adults will move up the socioeconomic ladder, but that those with higher levels of education lead to healthier lifestyles and are more active citizens than others.

From a societal point of view, postsecondary education is the key to a stronger national workforce and a better quality of life for citizens. Better educated people clearly have a greater chance of obtaining stable jobs that pay higher wages, provide opportunities for advancement, and offer better health and retirement benefits than do those who with less education levels (Barfield & Beaulieu, 1999). College graduates are also less likely to be unemployed and far less likely to commit a crime compared those with only a high school diploma (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). According to Hill et al. (2005), in addition to the monetary societal benefits of educational attainment, regions with greater numbers of educated workforce enjoy lower crime rates, greater civic participation, improved personal health, and have less burden placed upon social services.

Post-secondary credentials can also influences economic well-being by having a direct impact on expenditures by the institutions, their students and employees on the local economy by providing financial and other benefits to individuals and to society in general through the creation of knowledge (Hill, Hoffman, Rex, 2005).
Furthermore, because of the impact of globalization on America’s workforce and its postsecondary institutions, six out of every ten jobs require some form of postsecondary education and training. According to U.S. Department of Labor (2013), in 2012 occupations that required postsecondary education for entry generally had higher median wages ($57,770) and were projected to grow faster (14%) between 2012 and 2022 than occupations requiring a high school diploma or less. Therefore, to maintain the nation’s competitive economic edge in the global economy, our workforce must have education and training beyond high school, which demands that postsecondary institutions must attract and retain a growing number of students (Lotkowski, Robins, and Noeth, 2004). In other words, a greater percentage of our college-age population must enroll in postsecondary education and complete a degree in a timely fashion.

As a result of those benefits, the demand for postsecondary studies has tremendously increased over the past several decades, which made college degree a replacement of the high school diploma as an avenue for economic self-sufficiency and responsible citizenship (Kuh et al. 2008). The attainment of these benefits, however, is dependent on the persistence of college students to graduation, which makes student retention in college a serious national issue. Seidman (2005) contends that “attrition results in a severe loss of resources by society, students, and by colleges that spend to provide programs and services to help retain and graduate students” p. 71. He argues that students who leave college prematurely not only fail to graduate but have to pay any incurred debt, while the college may lose future funding. In addition, students who drop out of college often suffer personal disappointments, financial setbacks, and a lowering of
career and life goals (Ramist, 1981). According to Johnson (2012), leaving college prior to completing a degree is a missed opportunity and a lost investment for many students especially for those from low income background.

**Gap between Minority and Majority Students**

While the value of postsecondary education for the individual, community, and the nation is acknowledged in the literature, so is the growing disparity between ethnic minority and majority students with respect to their access and success in higher education (e.g. Allen, 1992; Porter, 1989; Seidman, 2005; Swail, 2003). Baum, Ma, Payea (2013) noted an increase in financial return associated with college credentials and the gap in earnings by education level. Research documents that ethnic minority students are not only more likely to drop out of postsecondary institutions than students from ethnic majority (Nora & Cabrera, 1996), but that the gap between the two groups of students with respect to their educational attainment and retention is quite persistent (Szelenyi, 2001), making educational opportunity and success uneven by income and by race and ethnicity (e.g. Swail, 2003). According to Ward (2006) low level of academic achievement on the part of racial and ethnic minorities remains a problem of national concern.

For racial/ethnic minority students, it is more of success than access that counts when it comes to graduation. In the literature, it is documented that minority students are leaving postsecondary at a faster rate than majority students (Carter, 2006; Kuh et al., 2006; Lavin & Crook, 1990; Palmer et al., 2011; Seidman, 2005). According to Swail (2003), African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans continue to earn degrees at
substantially lower rates than whites and Asians. For example, according to chronicle of higher education almanac (2003), of the 1,244,171 of students who attained a bachelor’s degree in 2003, 111,309 (9%) were Black and 77,745 (6%) were Hispanic compared to 927,357 (75%) Whites. Seidman (2005) also observed that ethnic minority students continue to leave college at a higher rate than nonminority students despite entering higher education at a higher rate than previous years. According to Lavin and Crook (1990), minority students demonstrated less academic success all along the way and were far more likely than whites to leave college without any degree (Carter, 2006). The authors found that half of the African American and Hispanic students attending community colleges never earned any credentials. In another study, Porter (1989) used data from a national survey of 28,000 high-school seniors to study the persistence behavior of undergraduates at American major colleges and universities. He also found that Black and Hispanic completion rates lagged seriously behind Whites and Asian Americans.

The gap between ethnic minority students and ethnic majority students in terms of their persistence in college and their attainment of higher education degrees (Allen, 1992; Carter, 2006; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; Myers, 2003) is particularly detrimental because of its effects on individuals’ long-term social mobility (Carter, 2006). Referring to the growing numbers of students of color in the K–12 student population who disproportionately were not graduating from college, Carter (2006) highlighted the seriousness of this long-term problem. According to Malveaux (2003), the attainment of any postsecondary degree, particularly a baccalaureate degree, often
resulted in a greater net dividend for minority students. For example, in 2004, the median African American family income was $35,148 which is 62 percent of the median white family income ($56,723). However, when data are analyzed only for individuals who received baccalaureate degrees, African Americans, on average, earn 95% of what white individuals earn, which underscores the implication of obtaining a baccalaureate degree for individuals of underrepresented minority group with respect to their social mobility, and the necessity of understanding retention issues (Carter, 2006).

In the literature, many reasons have been proposed to explain issues of persistence and degree attainment in postsecondary education as well as the disparity between minority and nonminority students. Some have blamed the problem on students’ pre-college characteristics such as their academic preparedness (e.g. Arbona & Nora, 2007; Cole, Kennedy, & Ben-Avie, 2009; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Tinto, 1987). Others attribute the difference between the groups to institutional inequities and factors that limited the social and economic mobility of racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. for a long time (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Still others have maintained that a combination of many factors could explain the problem related to the persistent gap between ethnic and racial minorities.

Whatever the case, however, this study explored Somali students’ experiences in college within the context of minority students’ experiences as they pertain to five major themes that emerged from research which relate to the retention of students in general, and to minority students in higher education in particular (Swail, 2003). These factors are academic preparedness, campus climate, social and academic integration, commitment to
educational goals and the institution and financial aid. They are discussed in the following sections.

Factors Related to Retention

Academic preparedness. In the literature, students’ demographic characteristics and the skills, behaviors and attitudes they bring to college have been consistently found to relate to the academic performance and experiences in college, which in turn influence their academic achievement and persistence in higher education (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Cole, Kennedy, & Ben-Avie, 2009). According to Swail (2003, p. 51) academic preparation refers to students’ precollege academic performance as measured by one or more of high school GPA, high school rank, college entrance test scores, high school college preparatory courses, advanced placement courses, the quality of high school attended, and quality and intensity of high school curriculum. Research indicates that between 30 and 40 percent of all entering freshmen are unprepared for college-level reading and writing, while 44 percent of all college students enrolled in at least one remedial course in math, writing, or reading (Swail, 2003).

In a review of the literature, Hoffman and Lowitzki (2005) found both high school grade point averages (GPAs) and scores on standardized tests such as the SAT or the ACT as strong predictors of success in college for students of all races. Students who have good high school academic background are very likely to persist in 4-year postsecondary institutions (Adelman, 1999; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez 2000). Studying undergraduate persistence and completion at four-year colleges and universities, Porter (1989) found significant correlations between academic preparation and
persistence. In a study that investigated the influence of academic and environmental factors on Hispanic college degree attainment, Arbona & Nora (2007) observed that academic resources students bring to college in terms of the quality and rigor of their high school curriculum was a strong predictor of bachelor degree attainment (p. 251). Nora and Cabrera (1996) also found that precollege academic ability played significant role on the academic performance of both minority and nonminority students in college.

Students’ pre-college characteristics such as academic achievement are particularly important for first-year grades and persistence (Kuh, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008). Cole and Kinzie (2007) studied precollege student expectations and attitudes regarding first-year and found that students who reported high levels of activity in high school generally expected to maintain that behavior in college. The authors determined that 85 percent of the students who reported average grades of B in high school and expected overall of those grades in college actually earned them by the end of their first year, an indication that high school grades and grade expectations predicted the first-year grades of many of these students. Nora and Cabrera (1996) determined that at the end of their first year in college, students’ cumulative GPA were three times more important in college persistence for Hispanic and African American students than they are for their White counterparts.

Because many of the minority students enter college with significantly lower academic readiness and possess less requisite academic skills to succeed than white students, academic preparedness is a critical area that disproportionately affects minority students’ persistence in college (Carter, 2006; Seidman, 2005; Swail, 2003). Several
researchers (e.g. Tinto, 1987) believe that academic preparedness is the main variable to account for the differences in persistence rates between minority and nonminority students. According to Tinto (1987), the overall differences in persistence rates between minority and nonminority groups are primarily due to differences in their academic preparedness which arise from prior educational experiences at the elementary and secondary level rather than their socioeconomic status. Swail (2003) observed that ethnic minority and low-income students consistently scored well below white and Asian students on SAT.

Pre-college academic resources of students also include the social capital in the form of parental or community support which play an important role in student persistence and degree completion (Arbona & Nora, 2007). Parents’ level of education and their encouragement and expectations regarding degree attainment for their children are crucial for the success of their children in school. This is demonstrated by findings from empirical studies on first-generation students in college, which illustrated the important role of parental social capital on students’ precollege college characteristics as well as their success in college. Studying 2685 (825 first-generation and 1860 traditional students) who completed their first year in 23 diverse institutions nationwide, Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora (1996) found that first-generation students were different from their traditional peers in both entering characteristics and college experiences. They also found them less likely to attend workshops and less likely to see faculty as being supportive.
Overall, this line of research suggests that first-generation students generally face a number of challenges that impede their success in college including being from ethnic and racial minority background, older, and have more likely to have more obligations outside college (Engle and Tinto, 2008). As a result, they tend to have lower scores on college entrance examinations, possess less skills than their peers, are likely to enter college academically less prepared, and as a result have more problematic transition from secondary school to college than other students (Bui, 2002; Engle, 2007; Terenzini Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora., 1996).

**Campus climate.** In addition to academic preparation, research indicate that campus climate or institutional environment is crucial for the persistence and retention of students in college (e.g. Allen, 1992; Astin, 1993; Carter, 2006; Hurtado and Carter, 1997; Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler, 1996; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Peterson, and Allen, 1998; Kuh, 1995; Myers, 2003; Pascrella and Terenzini, 1991; Swail, 2003). According to Astin (1993) institutional environment plays a critical role by offering a variety of social and academic opportunities to become involved with people, new ideas, and experiences (Pascrella & Terenzini, 2005). Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Peterson and Allen (1998) conducted a multidisciplinary analysis of the literature in which they concluded that campus climate affected the retention of students. They provided a framework for understanding dimensions of campus climate, which included the psychological climate of perceptions and attitudes between and among groups as well as the behavioral climate dimension, characterized by intergroup relations on campus. Because campus climate mediates undergraduates’ academic and social experiences in college (Swail, 2003),
students’ connection to the campus environment is an important factor in the retention of students (Kuh, 1995).

Moreover, the context and the climate in which student interactions occur influence the social and learning outcomes of college students (Pascalella and Terrenzini, 1991). Carter (2006) observed that welcoming and inclusive institutional environment which allowed students to connect had been linked to persistence. In a comprehensive review of retention programs, Myers (2003) also came to the conclusion that institutional environment had a powerful impact on students’ satisfaction and success in an institution. The author argued that students’ retention was successful in institutions that were responsive to the academic, social, and cultural needs of their students. As Allen (1992) stated, “students, like most humans, develop best in environments where they feel valued, protected, accepted, and socially connected” (p.39).

Campus climate is a significant factor that affects achievement and attitudes of students of color during their college experience (Doan, 2011). In order to understand the factors that affect Latino student adjustment in the first and second year of college, Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) examined data from a national, longitudinal survey completed by Latino students. They found that dimensions of the campus climate affected all forms of student adjustment, as did transitional experiences that were common to most students in the first year. Comparing data from a national sample of freshmen African American students at predominately white colleges and universities (PWCU) to those at historically black colleges and universities (HBCU), Allen observed that black students at HBCU had higher academic achievements, higher levels of social
involvement, and more favorable relationships with their professors despite the fact that students at PWCU tended to come from families of higher socioeconomic status and had better academic backgrounds. He concluded that HBUs provided more positive social and psychological environment for African American students than PWCUs.

As racial and ethnic diversity is an important factor of campus culture and climate, creating a campus environment inclusive for students of color ensures their academic achievement and success (Doan, 2011). According to Allen (1992) college campus racial composition is a strong predictor of academic achievement as it is positively associated with social involvement. In addition, institutional diversity goes beyond the racial and ethnic demographics of undergraduate students and includes, among other things, ethnic student organizations, which offer a crucial venue for the social integration of students of color at PWIs. Harper and Quaye (2007) argue that racial-minority students join ethnic student organizations to express their cultural and racial identities. Umbach & Kuh (2003) identified two forms of diversity: one that involves the number and nature of diversity-related programs, and diversity that involves interactions and ideas. A major contributor to experiences with diversity is peer interactions, which substantially and positively affect all students and across a wide range of desirable college outcomes (Hurtado et al. 1999; Kuh et al. 2006; Umbach and Kuh 2006).

**Social and academic integration.** Another critical factor that relates to students’ persistence and success in college is integration. Research acknowledges that student persistence and retention in college are a function of the degree of the individual
student’s integration into academic and social systems of institution (Nora, 1987; Terenzini & Pascarella, 2005; Tinto, 1975). According to Pascarella & Terenzini (2005, p.54), integration is defined as the “extent to which the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership in that community”.

Research addressing college success in terms of student retention is mostly based on Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model of withdrawal, the main focus of which is on social and academic integration of students into their institutions of higher education (Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Swail, 2003). In his model of student departure, Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) devotes a great deal to the role of social and academic integration on students’ persistence in college by articulating a model in which students’ level of academic and social integration with the university and their goal and institutional commitment are considered major factors in their ability to persist in college (Kuh et. Al, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Swail, 2003). Tinto argues that it is the interaction of college and students variables that influences staying or leaving behaviors of students. According to the author, individuals’ pre-college attributes such as family background, prior schooling, skills, and abilities form their goals and commitment and interact over time with institutional experiences in the form of formal and informal academic and social systems (Seidman, 2005). In other words, the extent to which students integrate into the formal and informal academic and social systems of a university is important to their ability to prevail through graduation.
A study by Terenzini and Wright (1987) explored whether students’ levels of academic and social integration were reliably related to their reported personal development during four years of college. The authors observed that social and academic integration in one year were consistently and positively related to the social and academic integration in succeeding years. They also found that integration strengthened students’ commitment to both their goals and the institution, while lack or weaker social and academic integration led to the isolation of the student within the institution, which resulted in lower rates of college persistence and student departure (Baker & Velez, 1996; Hippel et al. 1998; Kuh et. Al, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Seidman, 2005).

Early integration into the academic and social fabric of the institution is also correlated with both persistence and student’s social and academic growth (Tinto, 1975).

Social and academic integration involve students’ social and academic experiences in college which are mediated by their interactions with faculty, staff, and other students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Swail, 2003). Such student interactions with academic and nonacademic staff of the institution as well as fellow students have been found to be an important factor in the retention of students in college (Johnson, 1998). In a six-year longitudinal study, Johnson (1997) followed college students to explore factors that determined student persistence in college and found that faculty and staff student interaction and connection as the most important characteristic distinguishing the retained students from those who dropped out. According to Astin (1993), student-faculty interaction has its strongest positive correlations with student satisfaction and the quality of instruction as well as the overall college experience such as
academic attainment outcome like college GPA, degree attainment, and graduation. He maintains that finding ways to encourage greater student involvement with faculty could be a highly productive activity on most college campuses (Astin, 1984).

Moreover, student retention rates are affected by the nature and extent to which students relate to faculty and staff outside the classroom, as well as by the degree to which students interact with academic and social support systems available to them (e.g. Astin, 1977; Nora, 1987; Terenzini & Pascarella, 2005). Absence of sufficient student interaction with other members of the college community such as faculty and fellow students has been repeatedly observed as a factor of student withdrawal from college (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977, 1991). In order to be productive, however, the desired interaction must go beyond the formal expected environment of the classroom and the limited contact with mentors or academic advisers, to include sustained informal contact among members of the college community such as faculty members, counselors, and peer groups outside the classroom (Hippel et. Al, 1998).

According to research, peer-group associations are also important for social interaction that is directly related to individual social integration and a powerful source of influence on the undergraduate student’s academic and personal development. Astin (1993) suggests that the amount of interaction among peers has effects on nearly all areas of student learning and development but has its strongest positive effects on leadership development, overall academic development, self-reported growth in problem and critical
thinking, and cultural awareness (p.4). Dennis et al (2005) argue that lack of peer support is a negative predictor of college adjustment and a predictor of lower GPA.

Student involvement is also important for integration. In his longitudinal study of college dropouts, Astin (1975, 1984) identified environmental factors in the college environment that significantly affect the student’s persistence in college such as place of residence, participation in extracurricular activities and honors programs, holding a part-time job on campus, academic involvement, student-faculty interaction, participation in sports, and involvement in student government as specific forms of positive involvement. The author found that time students spend on campus such as living on campus or part-time employment increased their chances for more interaction on-campus which positively affect retention.

While integration is important for the retention of students in general, it seems to be even more crucial in the retention of ethnic minority students at largely majority institutions (Hippel et. Al., 1998). Involvement for students of color, especially those attending PWIs, is especially influential on student success. According to Braddock (1981) and Fleming (1984) the amount of faculty contact plays a critical role in both the retention and academic performance of African American students, more so at predominantly White universities than at historically Black colleges as interaction contributes to institutional identification and development of a sense of belonging among minority students (Hippel et. Al., 1998). According to a study conducted by Ugbah and Williams (1989) which involved a mentoring program at Ohio University in Athens,
Ohio, 91 percent of the African American protégés felt more confident as a result of their mentor (Swail, 2003).

Saenz, Marcoulides, Junn, and Young (1999) examined the relationship between college experience and academic performance among minority students, and identified variables considered to be indicators of college experiences related to scholastic grade point average. In addition to students’ background variables, they identified academic and social variables. Anaya and Cole (2001) used a national cross-sectional sample of 836 students to examine the influence of student-faculty interactions on the academic achievement of Hispanic students, and found that academically related and personal interactions with faculty, as well as the perceived quality of relationships with faculty, were positively associated with academic performance. According to the study, informal contact with faculty such as talking with a professor enhances academic achievement through socialization while student involvement in educationally related academic interactions with professors seems to promote student’s academic performance. Furthermore, student achievement was enhanced when students perceive academic staff as accessible and supportive. In addition, Hispanic students were found to have favorable perceptions of their interactions with faculty. As Hippel et al (1998) noted, for minority students at predominantly White universities faculty seems to serve as institutional brokers helping them connect to the academic and intellectual mission of the university. This interaction, according to the authors, may contribute to minority students’ institutional identity and sense of belonging, which is particularly important for African American students.
Commitment to educational goals and the institution. In order to succeed, college students need to commit to their educational goals and to their institutions. Institutional and goal commitment respectively refer to the students’ commitment to the institution in which they are enrolled and to their educational goals such as the goal to graduate from college or to obtain a certain degree level (Tinto, 1993). Research shows positive relationship between students’ commitment to their postsecondary institution, career and educational goals, and their persistence in college (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Tinto, 1993). As students enter college, they bring with them a sense of purpose and a commitment to educational goals and the institution, which significantly influence college performance and persistence (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Tinto, 1993). According to Tinto (1993), the level of students’ educational or occupational goals correlates positively with their chances of completing the degree. In other words, students are more likely to graduate when they are strongly committed to their goals and institutions (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993). Arbona and Nora (2007) observed that students who were strongly committed to their goal were more likely than those who were less committed to participate in academic and social activities that provided the support they need in college.

Research also shows the importance of the congruence of student goals to those of the institution. For example, Astin (1977) studied the relationship between career goals and student persistence and found that students whose academic majors corresponded closely to their career goals were more likely to achieve their goals than those students with no identifiable career goals. According to Swail (2003), the level of congruence
between the educational goals of the student and institutional goals is an important factor that influences persistence. He observed that students were less likely to persist when their educational goals were not congruent with those of the institution. According to Spady (1971) more than any single mode of social integration, it is the individual’s commitment to the institution which is most directly related to persistence in colleges.

Tinto (1993) proposed a relationship between institutional commitments and educational goals and student’s social and academic integration. The author stated that institutional commitments and educational goals are strengthened and students are more likely to stay enrolled if they experience positive social and academic integration, whereas if students’ experiences in the academic and social systems are more negative, their goals and commitments are weakened and as a result are less likely to remain at the institution. In other words, according to Tinto (1993), increased integration into academic and social campus community results in greater institutional commitment and student persistence, which in turn increases the likelihood a student to persist and graduate. He argued that commitment and integration into the life of a campus is a developmental process achieved through engagement with faculty, peers, courses, and activities, which is critical in the first year but continues throughout the college years. According to Arbona & Nora (2007), gains that students experience in their academic and social lives through the encouragement and support received in their interactions with faculty and fellow students in both the academic and nonacademic arenas help solidify their goal of obtaining the undergraduate degree.
Moreover, the level of goal commitment, which is affected and modified by the individual’s experience in the college, determines students’ decision to remain in college. Positive experiences and interventions reinforce persistence by enhancing individual intentions and commitments in terms of student’s desire to earn a degree and willingness to spend the time and energy necessary to obtain it, whereas negative experiences weaken such intentions and commitments (Seidman, 2005). According to Tinto (1975) low levels of commitment to the institution and to the goal of college completion can precipitate withdrawal from the institution. He argues that when goal commitment is sufficiently low, individuals tend to withdraw mostly as a result of insufficient rewards from the social and academic systems of the college.

For minority students, educational goal commitments were positively affected by their parents’ encouragement and support, academic and intellectual development, and positive academic experiences during the first year in college; while academic experiences with faculty and academic staff followed by academic and intellectual development, and parental encouragement were the most important factor contributing to institutional commitment of minority students (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Research on Hispanic college students has shown that students’ commitment to the goal of obtaining a degree and the extent to which they engage in academic discussions and activities on- and off-campus influence their decisions to remain in college (Cabrera et al., 1999). It also affects their first-year academic performance, which in turn influence their decisions to stay in college (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). According to Swail (2003), institutions should
integrate students into the culture of the campus early by helping them identify their career and academic goals through collaborative academic and career counseling.

**Financial aid.** There is no doubt that economic circumstances play an important role in whether and where students go to college, as well as how long they stay (Pascalella & Terenzini, 2005). According to the authors, much of the literature on financial aid is focused more on the effects of financial aid on student decisions about whether and where to go to college rather than on its effects on students’ subsequent decisions to persist and graduate. Because financial considerations are common among most low income and minority groups (Carter, 2006; Seidman, 2005), for many students, availability of financial aid drives enrollment and persistence (Swail, 2003).

Given the rising costs in tuition and related college expenses, it is not surprising that the number of students attending college whose financial needs are not met has increased dramatically (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education 2002), increasing the number of students who depend on financial aid as a method of gaining access to higher education (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). According to Swail (2003), because low-income students and minority students experience a greater need for financial assistance in order to attend college than are middle- and upper-income students, they tend to be more responsive to tuition increases.

Addressing the issue of ability to pay on college persistence, Cabrera, Stampen, and Hansen (1990) concluded that ability to pay has a direct effect on college persistence. Examining the role of finance on college persistence, Cabrera, Nora, and Castafieda (1992) found that financial aid is not only important in equating opportunities between
affluent and low-income students, but also in facilitating students’ academic and social integration into their institutions and influencing their commitment to study in college. According to St. John and Noell (1989, cited in Baker & Velez, 1996), financial aid facilitates college attendance for all students including minority students.

As the most common form of financial aid, grants decrease the burden of family of access and ability to remain in college on family financial conditions (Porter, 1989), which tend to facilitate and promote persistence (e.g. Carter, 2006; Fenske, Porter, and DuBrock, 2000; Porter, 1989; Swail, 2003). For instance, according to Porter (1989), regardless of their background, most of students who received grants in their first year continued to be enrolled in the second semester. Berger (2000) examined the decision making patterns of college students and how they relate to their socioeconomic status (SES). The author found that insufficient grant aid adversely affected the persistence of students from low SES background whereas inadequate amounts of loans and work-study were more likely to affect working-class students.

Unfortunately, recent financial aid policies have led to disparities between the availability of grant and loan aid, which worry some researchers (e.g. Huelsman, 2015; Porter, 1989) who blame the composition of federal assistance and the patterns of higher education financing on the decline in minority student college participation. For example, Porter (1989) noted a correlation between the growth of student loans at the expense of grants and the decline in minority student college participation. According to Huelsman (2015), need-based aid pays less in grants and as a result covers less of the college cost which creates a system that forces more students to borrow despite the fact that a
substantial portion of borrowers mainly underrepresented students take on debt and drop out with debt.

In an attempt to determine the college choice and persistence patterns of African American students, as compared to White students, St. John, Paulsen, and Carter (2005) found that African American students value financial aid offers more than their White counterparts, regardless of the amount or type of assistance, which was positively associated with persistence for this ethnic group. According to the authors, students’ financial status is an important factor in their decision to choose college, as college prices affect their college experiences and ultimately their persistence. In other words, there is a connection between students’ financial reasons for attending college and their behavior to persist.

These research findings suggest that a link exists between the availability and receipt of financial aid—particularly grant aid—and student persistence. Low-income and minority students who receive grants generally are more likely to persist than those who receive loans. However, according to Swail (2003), because of the rising costs of attending college, it is unlikely that low-income students will be able to receive bachelor’s degrees without any loan aid, which highlights the importance of educating students in strategies to borrow available student loans wisely and only the amount that is needed to persist in college. Shifts in aid from grants to loans and from need- to merit-based programs adversely affect both enrollment and persistence for minority students as many of the students who have trouble with debt are those who borrow more than their financial need (Swail, 2003). Therefore, according to the author, reversing the current
financial aid trends may be necessary to increase college access and success for low-income and minority students.

**Ethnic Minority Students’ Perceptions in College**

From the preceding literature review on factors related to retention, it is obvious that traditional ethnic minority students experience college differently from students of ethnic majority (Jones et al., 2002). Because ethnic minority students are more likely to come from families with low socioeconomic and/or first generation families, they tend to be academically less prepared (e.g. Arbone & Nora, 2007; Carter, 2006; Seidman, 2005; Swail, 2003), experience financial difficulties in college (e.g. Admon, Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Swail, 2003), have negative perceptions of the campus climate of their institutions (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, Hurtado, & Allen, 1998; Nora & Cabrera, 1996), which could affect their academic and social integration and involvement, their goal and institution commitment, and ultimately their decision to stay or leave college (Hippel et al., 1998; ). As Saldana (1994) notes minority status itself adds an additional burden of stress on ethnic minority students and would be associated with an increased risk for negative outcomes beyond those attributable to the stresses of being a student at a highly competitive academic institution (Jones et. Al, 2002).

Research on college student retention clearly shows the importance of students’ experiences in college to the success of students in general, and minority students in particular (e.g. Cummins, 1996; Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler, 1996; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1983). Students’ experiences in college have been shown to affect their adjustment to and persistence in college more than do their background (Hurtado, Carter,
and Spuler (1996). According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) students’ experiences after they arrive on a college campus are more important for student persistence than students’ background characteristics such as high school GPA and test scores which according to the authors have no direct influence on persistence (Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005).

Minority students face a range of challenges in college. In addition to their precollege characteristics and educational experiences which affect their academic preparedness for college, their perceptions of school quality have also been shown to have a significant effect on their intent to persist (Eimers and Pike, 1997). Student perceptions of the institutional environment and dominant norms and values influence how students think and spend their time (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2006). According to Seidman (2005), positive experiences and interventions reinforce persistence by heightening students’ intentions, involvement and commitments, whereas negative experiences weaken students’ intentions, involvement and commitments. Cummins (1986) argues that students who are empowered by their school experiences develop the ability, confidence, and motivation to succeed academically. In addition, when students perceive the campus environment as unwelcoming or being characterized by racial, ethnic, or religious tension, they tend to have lower levels of sense of belonging and as a result their desire to continue attending college is diminished (e.g. Hurtado and Carter, 1997; Zea, Reisen, Beil, & Caplan, 1997).

A number of studies have attempted to understand students’ perceptions of racial and prejudice in college campus, which indicate the divergent perspectives regarding
features of campus among students of diverse racial and ethnic background (Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr, 2000). Rankin and Reason (2005) surveyed 7347 students from 10 campuses and found that students of color experienced racial harassment at a higher rate than White students. Cabrera and Nora (1994) studied the dimensionality of perceptions of prejudice and discrimination among different ethnic groups. They tested the interrelationship between the different factor structures associated with each group and students’ sense of alienation from their institution, and found that students of color were more sensitive to different forms of prejudice and discrimination.

In an attempt to explore student perceptions of campus cultural climate, Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) studied several hundred students of various ethnic backgrounds and found significant differences between perceptions and experiences of ethnic and racial groups on multiple dimensions of the campus cultural climate. According to them, African American students consistently reported more negative experiences compared with Asian American, Latino/a, and White American students. Nora and Cabrera (1996) investigated the role that perceptions of prejudice and discrimination play on the adjustment of minority students to college, and the extent that role differs among minority and nonminority students. They found that even though minority students encounter negative racial experience, they still tend to adjust and survive in PWI’s. The authors argue that culturally related environmental and institutional factors may also combine to negatively influence their decision to persist (p.142).
Using data from the National Study on Student Learning, Cabrera et al. (1999) compared how perceptions of discrimination affected 1,139 White first year students’ and 315 African American students’ college experience. They found that perceptions of discrimination negatively affected African American students’ social experience and caused them to feel less committed to their college or university. Their decision to persist, however, was affected more by the support they got from their parents rather than by these perceptions. In addition, student adjustment and transitional experiences were found to be affected by dimensions of the campus climate, and students of color were more sensitive to different forms of prejudice and discrimination (Cabrera and Nora, 1994; Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler, 1996).

Furthermore, under-representation and a sense of alienation are some of the key challenges facing minority students (Loo & Rolison, 1986; Schwitzer et al., 1999). Allen (1992) presents the results of a quantitative study in which he compared the college experiences of black undergraduate students who attended historically black colleges and universities and those who attended predominantly White colleges and universities. He found that African American students experience exclusion, racial discrimination, and alienation on predominantly White campuses. Investigating the experiences of African American college students at PWI, Solorzano and Yosso (2000) concurred that African American students, as a result of negative racial climate, struggle with feelings of self-doubt and frustration as well as isolation. Using qualitative research methods, Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, and Thomas (1999) investigated African American college students’ social climate experiences. They identified perception of racism, sense of
underrepresentation, and barriers involved in approaching and familiarity with faculty as challenges in their adjustment to predominantly White campuses.

From a cultural perspective, many ethnic minority students encounter challenges in college that make it difficult for them to take advantage of their school’s resources for learning and personal development (Kuh et al., 2006). While navigating through the college system is, in general, challenging for most students, it is particularly stressful for minority students attending a predominantly White institutions (PWIs) who due to being inadequately prepared for non-academic challenges can encounter additional stresses, and as a result experience culture shock (Swail, 2003). Smedley, Meyers, and Harrell (1993) found that minority status stresses which undermine students’ academic confidence and ability to bound to the university come from internal sources as well as from the social climate and composition of the institution.

Experiences of Somali Students from Refugee Background

Unlike the Literature on ethnic minority or first-generation college students, that of college students from refugee background is relatively scant. In general, little is known about the experiences of students who came to this country as refugees. Due to their recent arrival, even much less is known about the experiences of Somali students in U.S. schools, and in particular those who are in postsecondary institutions. Anything known about the experiences of Somali students in the United States is quite limited to school-age children and adolescents rather than students in college (Kruizenga, 2010).

In the literature, the term refugee is often used interchangeably with the term immigrant but while refugees and immigrants share similar characteristics and
motivations, there are differences as well. Unlike immigrants who often leave their homes by choice, refugees do not leave voluntarily but are rather forced out in violent circumstances such as civil war, many of whom take up residence in temporary refugee camps (Kilbride & D’Arcangelo, 2002; McBrien, 2005; Ogbu, 1982). As a result, refugees leave their native countries involuntarily and as such have quite different experiences from those who normally come to the U.S. as voluntary immigrants.

According to United Nations definition used by the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol (McBrien, 2005), a refugee is defined as:

- a person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or
- who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (p.333).

Research on refugee students documents the grim circumstances experienced by refugee children and their families before their migration and the challenges they face in their new home countries. Several studies (e.g. Bigelow, 2011; Joyce, Earnest, De Mori, and Silvagni, 2010; McBrien, 2005; Kruizenga, 2010) described the numerous traumatic situations experienced by most refugee children and youth when their lives are disrupted by the refugee experience, which also compound the difficulties in their adjustment to a new country and adversely affect their learning. According to the authors, pre
immigration factors coupled with acculturation contribute to the stresses that affect the ability of refugees to cope with and succeed in their new surroundings, while distress and economic struggles endured by adults add extra problems for refugee children in terms of emotional difficulties and school-related issues. This means, acculturation, the process of cultural transition from one country to another, encompasses every aspect of the refugee life and is associated with what is called acculturative stress such as anxiety or depression as refugees try to adapt to a new culture (Joyce et al., 2010; McBrien, 2005; Sinclair, 2001).

In an extensive literature review of the educational needs and barriers of refugee students in the United States including those of Somali origin, McBrien (2005) reported that psychosocial adjustment and language acquisition were affected by experiences of trauma and the availability of parental and social support. In a review of reports of psychosocial trauma in young children, Sinclair (2001) noted that the trauma experienced by refugee children could impede their ability to learn. Arguing that early educational responses support social and emotional healing and help restore a sense of hope and normalcy, the author stressed the need for successful adjustment in order to meet the psychological and social needs of stressed and traumatized children through education. In a study that involved a diverse population of African refugee students in Canadian high schools, Kanu (2008) came up with a similar conclusion. Despite the national and ethnic variation among the students targeted in this study, the author observed remarkable parallels in their educational needs and challenges for their integration and school success, a reflection of the common experiences shared by refugee students from war-
affected countries and disrupted schooling. Findings from this study suggest that the interaction of multiple, complex, and interrelated factors pose academic, economic, and psychosocial challenges to successful schooling and social integration for war-affected African refugee students.

Literature on experiences of Somali children in the United States and elsewhere also highlight the many challenges faced by these children and their families. Due to the nature of their immigration, as well as their history, culture and religion, Somali students present a unique challenge to educators (Koch, 2007). In a qualitative study, Pearce (2013) examined the transition challenges faced by immigrant Somali students entering U.S. public high schools and found that Somali students face considerable challenges due to shortages in resources and transportation and a lack of outreach programs. In an attempt to explore the needs of Somali students and their families in the education systems, Koch (2007) reviewed the literature and identified a number of educational concerns of Somali students related to immigration, parental concerns and involvement, social interactions with peers, and systemic challenges related to education.

Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) examined school belonging and psychosocial adjustment among a sample of 76 Somali adolescents resettled in the United States. Regardless of the level of past exposure to adversities, the researchers found that a greater sense of school belonging was associated with lower depression and higher self-efficacy. According to the authors, the results of the study suggest that exploring ways of improving school experiences would be particularly useful in the effort to combat mental health issues among young refugees in schools.
Educational concerns include children being placed in age-appropriate rather than academically-appropriate classes, the need for native language instruction to support English language instruction, and that students felt pressured to pass standardized tests (Koch (2007). For example, Bigelow (2007) found a strong correlation between native language proficiency that linked a close personal tie to their parents, arguing that this gave youth access to many sources of social capital which, according to the researcher, could possibly led to the growth of cultural capital and is thus linked to social mobility. Investigating the relationship between literacies, school and community cultures, Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar (1999) explored literacy events in primary school Somali children. They observed that, due to personal and community literacies that are seldom represented in the school culture, children’s school-based literacy practices are often less accessible to non-mainstream children. The authors underscored the importance of acknowledging differences within school culture in order to help students regain voice, power and self-worth and avoid experiencing marginalization. They argued that proposing a pedagogy of difference and drawing upon students’ personal experiences, educators can chart possibilities for inclusion by weaving multiples literacies in school culture. The authors also urged teachers to learn about the cultures and experiences of their Somali students in order to facilitate their acquisition of language and academic skills as well as provide the children with a sense of voice and a link between school and community culture (kruizinga, 2010).

From a parental standpoint, research indicates that while Somali parents value the involvement in the education of their children, because of their circumstances and the
barriers they face, it is not always possible to do so (e.g. Bigelow, 2011; Koch, 2007). Because of misunderstanding, conflicting cultural beliefs, and language difficulties, parents may feel a loss of control and may experience identity problems when their children must take on adult roles for them. Immigration-related stress such as being in a new culture, separation from family and friends, language difficulties, isolation and homesickness as the fact that many refugee families are headed by single mother or unaccompanied minor may also contribute to the problem (Koch, 2007).

From a cultural point of view, immigrant children and youth often experience a mismatch between home and school values. According to Bigelow (2011), with a loss of the sense of safety and security on the part of the children, family conflicts increase and children may feel that they do not belong anywhere, as they become alienated from their parents while at the same time are not truly accepted by their peers. In an attempt to understand the perceptions Somali parents had about their children’s schooling and their own roles in their children’s education, Nderu (2005) conducted a qualitative study in which she concluded that many recent Somali immigrants do not fully understand the English language or educational norms in the United States, and that cultural differences can easily create misunderstandings about the degree of parental support exhibited by Somali parents.

As far as social interaction is concerned, for Somali students interactions with peers are often complicated with misunderstandings and with racial and religious discrimination (Biglow, 2008; Koch, 2007; McBrien, 2005). According to Koch, Somali students often face alienation within the school setting as they try to learn socially
acceptable behavior in schools and balance their own culture to fit into the new school culture. Bigelow (2008), explored the issue of race and religion as they pertain to adolescent Somali immigrants and their lives at school, among their families, and in their communities. She noted that Somali immigrant and refugee adolescents experience racialization and Islamophobia in schools. According to Bigelow (2008), Somali students experience discrimination because of their religious practices related to their prayer, refusal to date, or clothing such as asking girls to remove their scarves for school ID photos, which is often due to misinformation and cultural misunderstandings. The author argues that such experiences can adversely affect Somali students’ performance in school and their persistence. In addition, gaps in their education created by their refugee experience make it difficult to understand school subjects, while inability to make friends in school and the unavailability of resources for help is also a concern for their schools.

McBrien (2005) also observed in the literature some obstacles that prevent refugee student success including parental factors, rejection, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination.

While Somali refugee students have many challenges, research also acknowledges the availability of social and cultural capital. In her article, Social and cultural capital at school: The case of a Somali teenage girl, Bigelow (2007) highlights the importance of social and cultural capital for students in schools. She argues that in public education, immigrant and refugee adolescents are often characterized by their deficiencies rather than their strengths. Studying the case of a Somali teenage high school girl, Bigelow found the richness of her participant’s family and community as a source of social and
cultural capital for students in school. Telling the story of a Somali teenage girl, Bigelow (2007), maintains that while much of the success of her participant can be attributed to the social capital the girl brings to school, she lacked key cultural capital that would provide her easier access to postsecondary opportunities. In her study of Somali students, Hardt (2005) also noted such social and cultural resources. The author found that, despite the existing language and cultural barriers that Somali children face in elementary and secondary schools, there exists a great deal of social and cultural capital within their communities in terms of their religious beliefs and close ties to their extended families as well as their strong sense of community, which they can call upon throughout the educational process.

As noted earlier, research on Somali students’ experiences in U.S higher education is very limited. In her master’s thesis, Smalkoski (2005) explored two generation 1.5 Somali women’s perceptions of their academic progress and acculturation in college, and the nature and impact of family support, socio-cultural and identity issues, and past and present experiences in and out of middle school, high school, and college classrooms. The results of the study showed the complexity in the lives of the participants as they progress through college. They also suggest a need for intensive mentoring and advising focused on study skills and time management as well as emotional support; increased opportunities for English language acquisition in content coursework across the curriculum; and the availability of more Somali mentors, advisors and teachers in ESL and bi-lingual classrooms.
Summary

This chapter presented the results of the review of the literature relevant to the proposed study of my dissertation, the purpose of which is Somali students’ experiences in U.S. postsecondary education. From this literature review several important points emerged. In general, reviewed studies highlighted the value of postsecondary credentials for ethnic minority students, the persistent gap between ethnic minority and majority groups in terms of persistence and degree attainment, and the many challenges that contributed to their lack of success including unfavorable pre-college academic preparedness and unsupportive institutional factors. They also indicate that students’ success in college is a function of the interplay of many and rather complex factors, some of which students bring with them to college as academic preparation while others are related to what happen to them during their college years. In particular, research establishes the link between students’ experiences in college and their persistence and graduation, and the need of making campus climate more favorable in order to help minority students integrate socially and academically into the institution, and as result make their college experiences more pleasant.

Moreover, this review shed light on the paucity of research on Somali students’ experiences in the literature particularly those in colleges and universities. Understandably, while this may be due to the recent arrival of this ethnic group to the U.S., studies conducted on refugee children nonetheless exposed the dimension of refugee experiences such as the psychosocial traumas endured by Somali children and their families as a result of the pre-immigration and resettlement process as well as the
challenges they encounter in this country. An important point found in the review, therefore, is the gap that exists in the literature as a result of lack of sufficient empirical material on Somali students’ experiences in American postsecondary institutions. In other words, despite the availability of extensive research on students’ experiences in U.S. higher education pertaining to their persistence and success in college, little is known about the experiences of minority students and particularly about refugee students. Literally nothing is known about the college experiences of Somali students from refugee background.

In addition to the gap, reviewed studies have their own limitations. For example, Nora and Cabrera (1996) observed methodological flaws in the studies investigating the role of perceptions of prejudice-discrimination on persistence decisions, arguing that most research designs had been descriptive and cross-sectional rather than longitudinal in nature. The authors noted that the studies focused on either the correlation of perceptions of prejudice with non-cognitive factors or the extent to which students surveyed recall negative experiences at PWI with the assumptions that perceptions predicted persistence. According to them, with few exception, little evidence had been found regarding the predictive validity of these perceptions in relation to persistence. Lack of control for relevant cognitive and college related-factors may also have posed restrictions as to the internal validity of the findings. The authors recommended use of longitudinal research designs to systematically assess perceptions of prejudice and their effect on persistence process based on sound models of student departure.
Moreover, there were limitations involved in the data collection methods. Many of the studies reviewed used qualitative approaches which used relatively small number of participants, making generalization of the results quite problematic. On the other hand, validity of surveys used in quantitative studies has been questioned in the literature. For example, Porter (1989) raised some concerns about the validity of survey questions. He argues that typically a college student survey question has minimal validity which means they are not measuring what we think they are supposed to measure. In addition, responses were self-reported and might lack true representation. According to Donaldson & Grant-Vallone (2002), self-report bias affects the outcome of studies as individuals tend to respond in a socially desirable ways by over-reporting behaviors viewed as appropriate, while behaviors thought to be inappropriate by researchers or other observers are under-reported in order to look as socially acceptable as possible.

Finally, there are shortcomings involved in student retention models used in the framework of this study. While research using Tinto’s framework has significantly contributed to the understanding of what affects student departure and student persistence, and the usefulness of the Tinto’s model in predicting college student attrition has been widely recognized and accepted in the literature, it nonetheless has its flaws. Some researchers (e.g. Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson, 1997; Tierney, 1992, cited in Carter, 2005) have challenged the limited application of Tinto’s model to minority students. These researchers questioned the assumption of Tinto’s concept of integration that students must detach from their own culture when they attend college where a culture exists that does not align with their own, or inserts minority students into the dominant
culture. In this study, however, it is assumed that minority students can integrate socially and academically into the culture of their institutions in order to develop themselves intellectually while at the same time preserving their own culture and identity.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted” Albert Einstein (Patton, 2002, p. 12)

Introduction

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore experiences of Somali students in a major U.S. university. In particular, the researcher intended to understand their perceptions as they pertain to the challenges they face in college and the support they receive in order to overcome the perceived barriers. This study was guided by the following central question: How do Somali students from a refugee background experience a major U.S. university? In particular, this study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What are the challenges that Somali students encounter at major U.S. university (academic, socio-cultural, financial, etc.)?
2. How do Somali students cope with these challenges?
3. What kind of supports (institutional, social, cultural, etc.) do Somali students receive in order to tackle these challenges?

To obtain appropriate responses for these open-ended questions and gain an understanding of the meaning research participants ascribe to their perceptions demand that the investigator of this study be in the field, engage open-ended interviews with the participants and listen to their stories, which entail using qualitative research methodology; a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand the essential nature or qualities of a phenomenon in context-specific real world settings where the phenomenon of interest unfolds naturally without the manipulation of the researcher (Brantlinger,
According to the authors, the key to understanding qualitative research is the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in their interaction with the world or reality, which contrary to positivists’ claim, is not a single fixed measurable phenomenon but rather multiple constructions and interpretations that are in flux and changeable. Denzin & Lincoln (2005, p.3) define qualitative research as:

- a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field-notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their naturalistic settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

According to research (e.g. Brantlinger et al., 2005; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002), qualitative research is characterized by being inductive in nature; the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the search of meaning and understanding; and that the end product is richly and descriptive. This chapter discusses this qualitative case study in terms of its philosophical assumptions, narrative case study research, site and participants of the study, data collection and analysis procedures; and trustworthiness and ethical issues.
Philosophical Assumptions

Designing a qualitative study involves the investigator stating the broad assumptions central to qualitative inquiry, a world view consistent with it, and a theoretical lens that shapes the study (Creswell, 2007). Unlike quantitative research approaches, which claim the existence of a value-free fixed reality that can be epistemologically known through objective observation and measurement, the ontological basis of qualitative research approaches portrays a world in which reality is complex, relative, ever changing, and above all socially constructed, which can be known through the interaction and subjective explanations of participants about their experiences and perceptions (e.g., Glesne, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002).

Therefore, in choosing qualitative methodology for this study, I made the assumption that perceptions are complex, multiple, changing, and subject to human experiences, which are accessed and understood solely through the interaction between the researcher and participants (Creswell, 2007). In addition, according to social constructivism, individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work by developing subjective meanings of their experiences about objects or things, which are complex, varied and multiple (Creswell, 2007). By using social constructivism as the philosophical underpinning and worldview of this qualitative study, the researcher assumes the notion that truth is relative and views are complex and dependent on the participants’ perspectives of the situation, which needs an understanding of their subjective meaning. In other words, it is an assertion that is based on the idea that
knowledge is constructed and that learners construct their knowledge and understanding of the world out of their experiences (Creswell, 2007).

**Case Study Research**

In addition to philosophical assumptions and worldviews, it is also important to describe the approach used in designing this study. There are many approaches in qualitative research such as narrative, ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, and case study (Creswell, 2007). This study utilized a narrative case study approach, which is an empirical inquiry involved in the investigation of a phenomenon or an issue explored through the detailed in-depth study of one or more cases within its bounded real life context (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Case studies are used when they are of special interest and can provide researchers with an understanding of complex social phenomenon, the main intent of which being to maximize what can be learned about it (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009).

According to Merriam (2002), qualitative case studies share common characteristics with other forms of qualitative research such as the researcher being the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and a richly descriptive end product. However, it distinguishes itself from other forms of qualitative studies in that the investigator explores a bounded system or a case such as a group, individual, setting, event, or a phenomenon, using in-depth data collection, which involve multiple sources of information and reports of case description and case based themes (Creswell, 2007).
Narrative is basically an interpretive approach that documents the subjective meaning research participants ascribe to their experiences through the use of storytelling methodology. In a narrative research, an investigator selects one or more individuals who have stories or life experiences to tell and spend considerable time in order to capture the detailed stories of their life experiences, which are analyzed for key elements of the story (Creswell, 2007). Used to record different viewpoints and interpret collected data to identify similarities and differences in experiences and actions, the narrative approach of analyzing interviews has the ability to capture social representation processes such as feelings, images, and time; offering the potential to address ambiguity, uncertainty, complexity and dynamism of individual, group, and organizational phenomena (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003).

Site and Participants of the Study

Unlike quantitative research methods, which typically depend on large randomly selected samples, qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples selected purposefully; the logic behind lies in selecting information-rich cases that show characteristics of interest to the researcher, and from which a great deal of important information as well as in-depth insights can be learned (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002).

This study utilized case study approach. The site of the study was a major university in the Midwest of the United States with a main campus and several peripheral campuses in the Suburbs. The rationale for using this university was the fact that it is not
only a major university but that it has a sizable population of Somali students (about 723) and is located in a city with the second largest Somali community in the United States.

Ten Somali undergraduate students were selected as cases for in-depth investigation regarding their experiences in college. Since the principal criterion in selection of participants in qualitative case study is to obtain participants who will provide opportunity for better meaning and understanding rather than generalization, balance and variety was be given a consideration (Stake, 1995). Therefore, participants were selected purposefully based on the criteria that they are ethnically Somali from a refugee background, 18 years of age or older, and officially enrolled as undergraduate. Consideration in the selection was also be given to diversity in gender, availability, willingness to participate in a tape-recorded interview, and willingness to participate in a follow-up interview if necessary (Creswell, 2007).

The rationale for choosing Somali students as a target group for this study was the expectation of the researcher that the results of the investigation would eventually help universities understand the needs of Somali students and help them succeed, which in turn will benefit them and the community at large in many ways. Undergraduate status was particularly chosen because of their vulnerability to stresses related to transition and adjustment in college (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993).

**Data Collection Procedure**

There are three main sources of data in qualitative research: interviews, observations, and documents (Brantlinger et al., 2002; Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). Since this study involved understanding of perceptions,
having interviews with participants would yield the most relevant information. According to Patton (2002), the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to enter into the other person’s perspective, assumed to be meaningful, knowable, and accessible. Patton argues that because we cannot directly observe things like feelings, thoughts, intentions, behaviors, as well as experiences and their meaning, asking questions about these things in order to know them is necessary.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were the main source of data collection for this study. Since the quality of information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer and in part determined by the kind of relationship researchers have with their participants, it is essential to establish a trusting and committed relationship in order to access the richness of their experiences (e.g. Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). However, while it is necessary to have good rapport or a trusting relationship with participants, the researcher also understood the importance of being reflexive and self-aware of the potential effects of self in the field throughout the process in order to avoid influencing participants’ responses (Glesne, 2006). In addition, the strategy used to collect qualitative data was also determined by the questions of the study, so it was important to ask questions that can illicit best information (Merriam, 2002; Seidman, 2013).

Interview questions (Appendix B) were designed to generate participants’ knowledge and understanding regarding the issues sought by the study to explore within the context of the research questions such as the various challenges students encountered and the support they had.
Data Analysis Procedure

In a qualitative research, data analysis involves preparing and organizing what has been observed into data, reducing them into themes through a process of coding, condensing the codes and representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion in order to make sense of what has been learned (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006). According to Creswell, for a case study, analysis involves making a detailed description of the case and its setting.

In this study, interview tapes were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy as data were analyzed simultaneously with data collection in order to observe emerging concepts, themes, and categories against subsequent data, and to make adjustments along the way (e.g., Merriam, 2002). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative data analysis involves data reduction which is the process in which the raw mass of data is reduced and organized through coding and summaries; data display, which involves displaying data in a graphical format such as tables, charts, or networks; and conclusion drawing. Stake (1995) identified four forms of data analysis and interpretation in case study research: categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, patterns, and naturalistic generalizations; while Miles and Huberman (1994), recognized three approaches to qualitative data analysis: interpretivism, social anthropology, and collaborative social research.

Since the study involved narratives of participants’ personal experiences about concrete life situations in college, it seems that interpretation of participants’ narratives using thematic analysis will be appropriate to use in order to obtain the meaning of the
stories provided by the participants. Thematic analysis involves several steps including familiarization in which the researcher immerses himself or herself in the raw data in order become familiar with them. This is followed by the identification of key themes and issues, and then indexing or coding. Emergent themes were then interpreted using charts and finding associations between them (Lacey and Luff, 2001). According to Riesmann (2005), thematic analysis is particularly useful for theorizing across a number of cases, finding common thematic elements across research participants and the events they report, and is applicable to stories that develop in interview conversations and group meetings (p.3).

**Trustworthiness**

In traditional positivist approaches, concepts of validity, generalizability (external validity), reliability, and objectivity are used as criteria for judging the quality of research. Advocates of those approaches often question the trustworthiness of qualitative research, arguing that it does not meet the rigor needed to ensure quality. In addressing those concerns, Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintain that establishing trustworthiness demands different criteria from those inherited from traditional social science, and propose four corresponding criteria or constructs that correspond to the criteria used by positivists (Shenton, 2004, p.64):

- Credibility (in preference to internal validity)
- Transferability (in preference of external validity/generalization)
- Dependability (in preference to reliability)
- Conformability (in preference to objectivity).
These strategies are discussed in the following sections.

**Credibility.** Internal validity is one of the key criteria used by quantitative researchers in order to ensure that their studies measure what they are supposed to measure or how congruent one’s findings are with reality (Merriam, 2002). But, according to the authors, in qualitative research understanding reality involves the researcher’s interpretation or understanding of the phenomenon of interest which is directly accessed through observations and interviews. In qualitative research, the equivalent concept that corresponds to internal validity is credibility in which investigators attempt to demonstrate that a true picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny is being presented (Shenton, 2004). According to research (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002), there are several credibility techniques such as triangulation, prolonged engagement and observation, member check, negative cases analysis, peer review and debriefing, reflexivity (clarification of researcher bias), and rich, thick description, some of which will be utilized in this study.

One of the most important credibility techniques is triangulation, which contributes to the trustworthiness of the data using multiple data-collection methods by comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means within qualitative methods in order to illuminate various aspects of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). According to Glesne (2006), the purpose of combining various techniques and multiple sites to collect research data is not to negate the utility of a study based solely on one technique, but rather to strengthen its credibility. As the author notes “the more sources tapped for understanding, the richer the data and the more
believable the findings” (p.36). In this study, the investigator triangulated data by using multiple-session interviews conducted in multiple sites.

In addition to triangulation, prolonged field engagement or spending adequate time in the field is also important. As a credibility technique, prolonged engagement means spending extended time in the field in order to develop rapport and trust with participants, persistently observe in order to identify, focus and collect data relevant to my study, and to involve with the site long enough to detect any distortions that might contaminate the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, it is important to seek and consciously search for discrepant or negative cases of the phenomenon because systematic search for negative cases, alternative themes, divergent patterns, and rival explanations enhances credibility (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002).

To further enhance the credibility of my findings, the researcher used peer debriefing (peer review), which involved making the dissertation available to my committee members for familiarity and review purposes, and to provide critical feedback (e.g. Patton, 2002) by making sure to utilize the expertise of my dissertation committee’s review in order to get an opportunity to expose my study to the scrutiny of experts for assessment and feedback (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Using member checking by sharing participants with their own data so as to check with them that the data is accurate is also a crucial technique for establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Transferability.** External validity or generalizability, from a positivist standpoint, involves the idea that one can generalize or make inferences in a statistical sense from a
random sample to a population (Merriam, 2002). But, according to the authors, statistical generalization is not possible in qualitative research because small nonrandom samples are selected purposefully, and because qualitative research draws from different assumptions about reality. However, generalizability can be made possible in qualitative research when viewed from the perspective of transferability by considering the fact that knowledge and skills learned from an in-depth analysis of a particular situation or incident can be transferred to another situation (Merriam, 2002). In other words, while a case study seems a poor basis for generalization, much can nonetheless be learned from a particular case through the researcher’s detailed description of the case (Merriam, 2002; Stake, 1995). In this study, in order to allow transferability, sufficient detail of the context was provided in order to allow readers apply information to other situations or settings (Lincoln et al. 1985; Merriam, 2002).

**Dependability.** In quantitative research, the concept of reliability is used to determine the extent to which research findings can be replicated which is normally achieved through replication of results and standardization of instruments, the goal of which is to minimize errors and biases in a study (Merriam, 2002, Yin, 2009). However, according to the authors, in qualitative research reliability in that sense is not possible because the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, human behavior is never static, and replication of a qualitative study will never yield the same result. In addition, because qualitative research takes place in the natural setting, it is difficult to replicate its findings. Instead, qualitative researchers are more concerned with dependability or consistency rather than reliability, which is the extent to which the
results are consistent with the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). In order to ensure for consistency and dependability, the researcher exercised prudence throughout the process by using techniques like audit trail, triangulation, and peer review, (Merriam, 2002).

**Confirmability.** Objectivity is given a high value in traditional science which, as Patton (2002) notes, considers it as the “sine qua non of the scientific method” p.574. Because of that, according to Patton, positivists consider biased and unreliable any data collected and analyzed by subjective means. But, in contrast to quantitative research, which for the sake of creating objectivity and reducing bias requires distance the researcher from participants, qualitative researchers strive to access directly the experience within them (Merriam, 2002). Moreover, qualitative rigor has more to do with the quality of the researcher’s observations than the distance between the researcher and the participant or the instruments used in quantitative research such as questionnaires and tests, which themselves are designed by human beings and as such are subject to human error (Patton, 2002). Addressing the issue of objectivity, qualitative researchers use the concept of confirmability which involves taking the necessary steps to ensure that the findings obtained are indeed the results of the experiences and ideas of the participants.

In this study, the researcher demonstrated confirmability by describing in advance his role as a researcher in order to expose own experiences and biases, and by allowing the reader or the observer to clearly follow the research process through an audit trail (Merriam, 2002). While making rapport and trust with participants are important for facilitating understanding in data collection, it is also important to avoid tampering the
data collection process so that participants’ descriptions truly reflect their actual experiences, transcription is accurate, and the research findings are accurate representations of the participants.

Merriam (2002) warned against possible biases that could arise from the research process when the researcher is also the interviewer such as selectivity in participants, attention, and interpretation to reflect preexisting perceptions and biases. In fact, according to Patton (2002), one of the barriers to credible finding is the suspicion that researcher’s predispositions and biases have influenced findings. In order to address this issue, the researcher was explicitly conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that he brings to this research study by monitoring and reflecting upon his own subjectivity in the research (Creswell, 2007, Glesne, 2006). One strategy of doing that involves discussion of predispositions in advance, making biases explicit and acknowledging one’s orientation. In other words, as noted earlier, it is important to be objective with the quality of data by being reflexive and by exercising integrity while at the same time being subjective with participants. As Glesne (2006) observed, rapport, subjectivity, and reflexivity involve the personal dimensions of qualitative research as researchers need to make close relationships with their participants.

Finally, in order to strengthen the quality of this study, the researcher demonstrated the trustworthiness of data by following proper professional guidelines so as to present a clear representation of the procedure, and by realizing the limitation of this study and discussing the details of its circumstances in order to help readers understand the outcome of the study (Patton, 2002)
Ethical Considerations

Because ethics is critical for conducting research, discussing ethical issues is important for this study. According to Creswell (2007), ethical considerations are necessary throughout the process of the research such as negotiating entry to the field site, involving participants in the study, gathering personal information, and asking participants to give considerable of their time to a project. According to the author, it involves such things as reflexivity, reciprocity, anonymity, confidentiality, building trust and rapport, and consent.

In this study, participants were treated in accordance to the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Ohio University Institutional Review Board (IRB) using following principles (Glesne, 2006, p.130):

1. Research subjects must have sufficient information to make informed decisions about participating in a study.
2. Research subjects must be able to withdraw, without penalty, from a study at any point.
3. All unnecessary risks to a research subject must be eliminated.
4. Benefits of the subject or society, preferably both, must outweigh all potential risks.
5. Experiments should be conducted only by qualified investigators.
Chapter 4: Analysis of Results

People by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.2)

Introduction

Using qualitative case study methodology, this study attempted to explore the experiences of Somali students at a major U.S. university. The rationale behind using qualitative methodology in this study was that experiences are unique and subjective in nature and that people ascribe subjective meaning to their experiences (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002).

Ten Somali undergraduate students at a major university in the U.S. were purposefully selected to participate in a one-hour semi-structured in-depth interviews in which they shared their personal experiences in college. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic coding, which as noted earlier involves familiarization with the data, identifying key themes and issues, indexing and interpretation. Since the interviews were guided by the research questions, interview questions and probes were designed and asked in such a way as to explore students’ experiences in college, while analysis was carried out in such a way as to find out an interpretation to the meanings ascribed to those experiences. In other words, analysis was done to identify the themes embedded within the stories in the interviews.

The thematic analysis of the interviews with participants produced a wealth of information in the form of emergent themes and issues. This chapter of the dissertation is an account of that information presented in terms of participants’ narratives regarding the
various challenges and the support they had in college. The results of the study are organized according to the themes that emerged from the coding of interview transcripts, which were examined for similarities and differences. Cross case analysis was also performed in order to identify discrepancies.

The chapter starts with a brief section on participants’ profile or demographic background followed by the research questions. It continues to present sections on the various challenges participants experienced in their undergraduate years in college and the support they received in order to cope with those obstacles. The chapter ends with a summary of the findings.

**Participants’ Demographic Background**

In order to protect the identity of participants and maintain confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms rather than real names were used throughout the dissertation when referring them in the text as required by IRB (Appendix A). Table 4.1 summarizes the demographic information of the study participants. Participants of this study were all ethnically Somali undergraduate students from a refugee background the majority of whom were also the first in their family to attend college. None of the student participants was born in the U.S. or attended post-secondary education outside the country. There were three female and seven male participants who were between 18 to 25 years of age. All of the participants, except two who reported they had scholarships, received financial aid in the form of grants and/or loans, with the majority receiving both. In addition, all participants lived outside the campus and almost all of them held jobs outside the university.
Table 4.1

Participants’ Demographic Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>First one in family to go to college (Y/N)</th>
<th>Work (Y/N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Omar</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sagal</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raage</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Pre-med</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurre</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geedi</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hersi</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>International Relations</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bile</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milgo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jama</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study was guided by the following central question: How do Somali students from a refugee background experience a major U.S. university? In particular, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges that Somali students encounter at a major U.S. university (academic, socio-cultural, financial, etc.)?
2. How do Somali students cope with these challenges?
3. What kind of support (institutional, socio-cultural, etc.) do Somali students receive in order to tackle these challenges?
Findings for Research Question #1

In order to explore Somali students’ experiences regarding their challenges at the university, participants were asked questions (Interview protocol, appendix B) designed to elicit responses that would provide insights into the research question. Participants in the study expressed their experiences in college in terms of the challenges they face, and the themes that emerged in responses to the research question are presented in four categories: academic, socio-cultural, and financial, which in turn have their own subthemes.

Academic Challenges

Table 4.2 summarizes the academic challenges participants reported in their interviews. The overarching theme that emerged from the interviews with the participants was the one that encompasses students’ academic challenges. Academic challenges mentioned by informants were varied but all of them reported that they had some kind of educational challenges sometime or the other during their time at the university. Those challenges were related to issues such as inadequate academic preparedness, linguistic barriers, academic study skills and time management, goal commitment, interaction with faculty and staff, and awareness or use of institutional resources available to students.

**Academic preparedness.** Academic preparedness of students for college is an important issue in higher education. It involves how well students are academically prepared for college. In this study, many of the participants felt that their pre-college academic preparation was not adequate and as a result had some difficulties in college. Others acknowledged that they were academically well prepared when they started
college but needed to improve academic related behaviors such as their study skills and time management. They attributed their success to their preparation in high school where they reported to have participated in rigorous courses such as advanced placement and other college courses. They also mentioned that having good teachers in high school also contributed to their preparedness.

For those who admitted they had struggled to adjust, lack of academic preparedness was repeatedly mentioned as an important factor. For example, Omar who is a sophomore majoring in psychology stated that he first thought he was college ready but came for a surprise when he started his first year during which he encountered difficulties in understanding the course materials:

I thought I was prepared [for college] because I had good grades in high school. But when I started to take courses at the university I started to have difficulties in my classes. I needed to work harder to catch up with the [demand] of the university.

Another participant acknowledged that his high school preparation was not adequate, which made him struggle in his first year. He particularly wished he had taken AP courses or participated in college preparation programs while in high school.

I think my high school [education] was not good enough to prepare me for university. I did not take post-secondary or college courses when I was in high school. I also did not take any AP course (Jama).

Some participants noted that they particularly struggled in math and science courses. They attributed that to their academic foundation in those subjects, which they
thought was not that strong. For example, talking about her experiences, Sagal, a senior in health, described her first encounter with those subjects as hectic “I really had some hard time with my math and science courses in my first years. It took me some time to adapt and understand what was going”.

**Linguistic barriers.** In addition to lack of academic preparedness, some of the participants also reported linguistic barriers they thought inhibited their progress. Since English is the medium of instruction, students in college are expected to perform well in English in order to achieve competency in reading and understanding textual material, writing reports and papers, and to express well in speaking. While some did well in this regard, others struggled because of deficiency in their language skills. One aspect of their language problem involves writing skills, which is crucial for writing essays and term papers. Some participants indicated that they needed tutoring help with writing papers and consistently used university writing centers for help. For example, Geedi who is a senior in business expressed his struggle with writing his papers saying that:

> When I started the university, I struggled to write [my papers] because my English wasn’t that good. I did not know that there was a place to find help. Then I learned about the writing center. Since then I always go there when I need help.

Challenges that involve writing were not limited only to students who said they were not academically well prepared. Those who reported they were well prepared when they had arrived to the university also acknowledged that they found academic writing challenging and had to improve their writing skills in order to produce good term papers. For example, Raage who said his academic preparation was adequate as he took college
classes in high school admitted he had some challenges in college writing by stating “In order to write good reports, I had to improve my writing skills”. For others like Hersi understanding the textbook posed a challenge. He recalled:

When I started the university, for some time reading and understanding was an obstacle. I have to spend more time in understanding the text. This is because my language skills were not good and as a result I got bad grades in the beginning of my college education.

**Study skills and time management.** Study skills and time management is another subtheme that emerged from the participants’ conversation, which involves whether or not students are skilled in managing their time and tasks in order to finish their assignments. While almost all of the participants acknowledged that study skills and time management were essential for their success in college, they provided mixed messages when it comes to how well they had done in this regard. Bile, who is a junior in biology, stated that when he started college he did not manage his time well, saying: “I did not study much and did not manage my time. So, I got bad grades in my courses”. Other informants added that they sometimes procrastinated or waited to finish assignments. For example, Hurre mentioned that he did not manage his time properly, which affected his grades. He said that he “used to procrastinate a lot”. Still others like Raage and Sagal indicated that they used their time wisely. “I know that time is important for my success, so I try to use it for my studies” Sagal.

**Goal commitment.** As far as goal commitment is concerned, most of the participants reported they were committed to the goal of attaining a university degree.
They clearly understood the value of education and expressed their desire to reach their goal as Omar commented “I came to this country with my family as a refugee and [I] believe that education will change my life”. However, some of them also mentioned that they were not sure about the choice of their major and had to change, which cost them time. Geedi and Milgo both reported that they changed their majors during the time they were at the university. “When I started college, I was not sure about my goals so I [had to] change my major from health to education”. Milgo

**Interaction with faculty and other staff.** Interaction with faculty and other staff is also an important academic skill that can improve students’ achievement. However, students for some reason or the other do not interact with their professors as often as they should, which put them at a disadvantage. In this study, participants were again mixed in their responses. One of the challenges they consistently mentioned was that classes are big and it is difficult to interact with instructors as Hersi noted “classes are big and most of the time it is difficult to talk to the teacher”. Raage also acknowledged that he “rarely interacts with faculty in class” saying that he is normally a shy person. Participants also mentioned that because they live outside the campus they do not have the time to meet faculty outside the classroom. Others blamed the fact that they work outside the university campus, which limited their time. Only few of the respondents agreed that they normally interact with their faculty and staff inside and outside the classroom.

**Familiarity and use of university resources.** Participants’ responses were also mixed when it comes to familiarity with university resources and their use. While the majority of participants mentioned that they were pretty familiar with the university
resources available to them such as the tutoring and help centers, some of them indicated that they did not often use them. For example, Asha expressed her view by saying that she is aware of the university help centers but unfortunately does not always go because she works and does not have time, as she stated “I am aware of the help centers but I don’t go because I work”. Participants also mentioned that they normally study at home or some other convenient location rather than at the library.
Table 4.2

**Challenges: Academic**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sample quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Academic preparedness</td>
<td>I thought I was prepared [for college] because I had good grades in high school. But when I started to take courses at the university I started to have difficulties in my classes”. – Omar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>challenges Somali students encounter at a major U.S. university?</td>
<td>Linguistic barriers</td>
<td>“In order to write good reports, I had to improve my writing skills”. – Raage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study skills &amp; time management</td>
<td>“I did not study much and did not manage my time. So, I got bad grades in my courses”. Bile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goal commitment</td>
<td>“When I started college, I was not sure about my goals so I [had to] change my major from health to education”. – Milgo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interaction with faculty and other staff</td>
<td>“Because classes are big, it is difficult to talk to the teacher”. – Hersi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Familiarity &amp; use of university resources</td>
<td>“I am aware of the help centers but I don’t go because of time”. – Asha</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Socio-cultural Challenges

Another theme that emerged from the analysis of the interviews was the one that pertains to socio-cultural challenges participants had at the university. Two subthemes that emerged from this theme were cultural mismatch, which involves issues like prejudice and religious matters, and students’ obligation to their families and commity.

**Cultural mismatch.** This subtheme involves the cultural mismatch between participants’ native culture and that of the mainstream American culture, and the concerns participants raised in regard to the mismatch. Participants were asked if they experienced prejudice at the university. While almost all of them acknowledged the fact that American culture is different from their native culture, the majority of them also mentioned that they overall felt welcome and did not encounter incidences involving prejudice or alienation. However, one of the female participants mentioned that she experienced few instances of cultural misunderstanding at the university, which involved her dressing. “At the beginning there were few incidents when I first go to class, students sometimes stared at me and made comments about my head scarf. However, this soon changed when they got to know me” Said Sagal, adding that she did not consider that as prejudice but a matter of lack of familiarity.

Another cultural mismatch some participants mentioned was that food available in university food courts was not *halal*. Food is an important aspect of the culture and since Somalis are mainly Muslims, they avoid eating pork and prefer *halal or kosher* food. “I sometimes eat on campus. I wish the restaurants also served halal food” said Hersi. In addition, some of the participants raised concerns about the lack of availability of prayer
spaces on campus. Muslims are supposed to pray five times a day, which are performed in a timely fashion. Expressing that feeling, Hurre remarked that “it is difficult to find a private space to pray on campus”.

Other participants highlighted different sociocultural issues. They said they may not express themselves in public as American students do and may feel shy in class. This is particularly true in classroom discussions. “when I am in class, I do not express myself as much as I should” said Raage. Another participant added that he normally sits at the back of the class and seldom interacts unless in group discussion. In addition, most of the participants also reported that their participation in extra-curricular activities was limited. While, they attributed this to lack of time as they are mostly busy working in jobs outside the university campus, other socio-cultural issues such as lack of understanding of the importance of participation was also a factor students explained for their lack of involvement in extra-curricular activities described in the interviews.

**Family obligation.** Participants also expressed that they carried an obligation to help their families. All female participants reported that they had to help their mothers with daily chores of the home such as cooking, laundry and cleaning. They also have to help raise their younger siblings. “It is my responsibility to contribute to [my] family” said Milgo who added that, in addition to doing daily home tasks, she also contributes financially by paying some of the bills. In addition, almost all of them indicated that they participated in helping their families financially. According to participants family obligation was not limited to the immediate family but included extended family. Hurre
said that “helping family members in time of need is an obligation for Somali people”.

He, added that “it can sometimes be a financial burden”.

**Table 4.3**

*Challenges: Socio-cultural*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sample quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the challenges Somali students encounter at a major U.S. university?</td>
<td>Socio-cultural Challenges</td>
<td>Cultural Mismatch</td>
<td>“At the beginning there were few incidents when I first go to class, students sometimes stare at me and make comments about my head scarf. However, this soon changed when they got to know me.” –Sagal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Family Obligation</td>
<td>“It is my responsibility to contribute to my family.” –Milgo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Financial Challenges**

Financial challenges faced by the Somali students in college was another important theme that came out of the analysis of interviews with the participants of the.

Table 4.4 displays the subthemes that emerged from this theme (i.e., working and getting loans). Except for two who mentioned that they had scholarships to cover their tuition expenses, the rest of the participants reported difficulty in paying for their education.

They said that college expenses like tuition and other expenses such as books and parking
fee were expensive. Because of their low socio-economic status, the majority of participants indicated that they faced financial challenges and needed to work in order to cope with it. Some of the participants said they worked full time while other told that they worked at least part time. For example, talking about the college expenses, Jama noted:

Tuition at the university is pretty expensive and also you [have to] pay other expenses like books and parking. Even though I received financial aid [grants], it will not cover them. So, I have to work part time and sometimes full time to cover these expenses.

Others voiced their concern regarding university expenses and that grants were not enough to pay for them. They mentioned that they needed to apply for a loan in order to make ends meet. Bile who is a biology major talked about how he needed loans to help him pay for his college expenses by saying “I don’t work but because my grants are not enough to pay my tuition, I have to have loans”.

Table 4.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sample quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the challenges Somali students encounter at a major U.S. university?</td>
<td>Financial Challenges</td>
<td>Work outside the campus</td>
<td>“Tuition at the university is pretty expensive and also you [have to] pay other expenses like books and parking. Even… it will not cover them. So, I have to work… to cover these expenses.” – Jama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Loans</td>
<td>“I don’t work but because my grants are not enough to pay my tuition, I have to have loans.” – Bile</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings for Research Question #2

The preceding sections presented various challenges participants encountered as part of their experiences. This section presents findings for the second research question, which was posed in an attempt to find answers to how participants in the study coped with their perceived challenges (table 4.5). Major subthemes that emerged from the study show that, despite the challenges students participants had, participants somehow coped with their challenges through resilience, faith, social capital, academic readiness, employment, and/or financial aid.

In the case of resilience, students indicated that they had inner strength, which they had developed overtime because of their struggle in life before they arrived to the United States as a result of the civil war. Aware of the ordeal they and their families had gone through, participants expressed the way they dealt with their challenges in the university. For example, Asha recalled the difficulties she and her family had gone through “We went through very difficult times in our life which made me a stronger person. I deal with my [current] challenges with strength”.

In addition, participants also described how their Muslim faith helped them to deal with and overcome the challenges. They acknowledged that their faith provided them with inner strength to deal with the stresses related with the challenges they faced. Describing the role of his faith to deal with challenges, Omar noted that his “faith and belief in Allah make me strong to deal with difficulties”.

Moreover, participant students described that they coped with the challenges using the socio-cultural resources of their peers, family, and the community at large.
They mentioned that they drew great strength in the form of social capital through the support of their peers, families and the Somali community. Talking about how he copes with challenges, Raage said “I always get support from family, friends, and my community”. Participants underscored the importance of peer support for them. They talked about how as friends help each other socially, emotionally, and academically.

Illustrating that support, Geedi reflected:

As friends we help each other during the school by studying together. College education is sometimes difficult, so I seek the help of my friends when I need it. We also support each other emotionally by getting together when someone needs is in difficulty and needs help.

Others like Bile mentioned that they deal with the challenges by being prepared and being on task saying “I deal with my challenges by being prepared and on task”.

Participants also expressed that they also coped with their financial challenges by the financial support they receive from the government and/or by working. Asha said:

University expenses are too much, there is no way I can pay just by myself without the help of financial. Grants alone are not even enough, so I cope with financial difficulties by working full or part time jobs outside the university.
### Table 4.5

**Coping with challenges**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sample quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do Somali students cope with challenges?</td>
<td>Coping with challenges</td>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>“We went through very difficult times in our life which made me a stronger person. I deal with my [current] challenges with strength.” – Asha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Religious faith</td>
<td>“My faith and belief in God made me strong to deal with difficulties.” – Omar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>“I always get support from family, friends, and my community.” – Raage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Academic Readiness</td>
<td>“I deal with challenges by being prepared and on task.” – Bile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Employment Finacial aid</td>
<td>“University expenses are too much, there is no way I can pay just by myself without the help of financial. Grants are not even enough, so I cope with financial difficulties by working full or part time jobs outside the university” – Asha.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Findings for Research Question #3

Despite the numerous challenges highlighted by participants during the interviews, students also described the various supports they have such as the institutional and socio-cultural support. Participants were asked if they could identify supports that were available to them at home, community, and the university and to what extent do
they used them. Their responses were varied but they acknowledged the availability of such support with respect to their institution, peer, or family or community. Table 6 summarizes the results for research question 3.

In the case of institutional support, while participants mentioned that there were no resources specifically made for Somali students per se, they acknowledged that there are indeed university resources available for all students that can be used when they need help such as advising, libraries, computer labs, and tutoring centers as well as financial aid. However, while some students admitted they always use those resources, others mentioned that they do not take advantage of them. For example, Raage who admitted using these resources stated that he “always seeks the guidance of his advisers and instructors [who] give me advice with my education”. In addition, students also acknowledged the availability of tutoring and help centers. However, as noted, some of the respondents like Milgo admitted that they do not always use those resources. She said that she “always studies and finishes her work at home”. Moreover, participants appreciated they were helped financially through scholarships, grants, and or loans. For example, Raage who got scholarship is very appreciative for the support by saying “I am glad that I got [a] scholarship to pay for my school. I am really grateful for that”.

Participants also acknowledged that as students they help each other as peer support by sharing information, studying together, providing rides when needed, and emotional support. They also agreed that while they support each other socially and emotionally, in certain cases, they may as well inadvertently influence each other negatively by wasting needed time for studying in socializing or hanging out together as
remarked by Hersi “I like to be with my other Somali friends but we sometimes waste our time in talking and not studying”.

As far as family and community are concerned, almost all of the participants acknowledged the usefulness of families and the community. “I think I wouldn’t be able to do anything without the support of my family and community”. Said Sagal. Hersi added that he needs “his family and community for financial and emotional support”.

Table 4.6

Available Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sample quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What kind of support do Somali students have?</td>
<td>Institutional support</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>“I always seek the guidance of my advisors and instructors [who] give me advice with my education.” –Raage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tutoring/ help</td>
<td>“I always study and finish my work at home.” –Milgo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>“I am glad that I got scholarship to pay for my school. I am really grateful for that”. –Raage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socio-cultural Support</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>“I think I wouldn’t be able to do anything without the support of my family and community”. –Sagal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

In this study, the researcher sought to explore Somali students’ experiences in a major U.S university. The thematic analysis of the data highlighted findings for the three research questions of the study. Those for question 1 revealed that student participants had academic challenges, which relate to their academic and linguistic barriers, study
skills and time management, goal commitment, relationship with faculty and staff, and their familiarity and use of college resources. While some of the participants indicated that their pre-college characteristics were strong, others admitted that they lacked good academic preparation and other skills necessary to succeed, which suggest that these are important factors.

Cultural mismatch and family obligation were two major socio-cultural challenges cited by participants in the study. In the case of cultural mismatch, students acknowledged that the mainstream American culture is quite different from their native culture, but they agreed that this mismatch was not a cause for alarm and that they felt safe and comfortable on campus. However, they raised some concerns about the food in the university courts which they taught was not halal or kosher and the lack of availability of prayer spaces. As far as financial challenges are concerned, participants also expressed their concern about the financial challenges they had in terms of the difficulty in paying for college tuition and other expenses, which they felt were expensive and forced them to either work or apply for a loan.

Results of the study also showed that students coped with the stresses associated with the challenges of being a college student in various ways such as being resilient, drawing strengths from their faith and support from community, being prepared, as well as getting financial aid and/or working. As refugees, Somali participants endured hardship in their journey in which they developed resilience overtime in the face of adversity. They also acknowledged that they dealt their challenges with the support of their Muslim faith, which they believe is a source of emotional comfort as well as their
peers, family, and community from whom they drew enormous strengths. In the case of institutional support, participants recognized the availability of resources at the university, even though many of them did not use them adequately.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

The primary issue in college access is no longer building college aspirations, but building a clear path for students to achieve their goals. (Nagaoka, Roderick, & Coca, 2008, p.1)

Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore Somali students’ experiences at a major U.S. university particularly those in undergraduate years. Qualitative case study was utilized in order to understand the meanings students ascribe to their experiences. The study was guided by the following central question: How do Somali students from a refugee background experience major U.S. universities? In particular, the study sought to answer the following questions: What are the challenges that Somali students encounter at major U.S. universities (academic, socio-cultural, financial, etc.)? How do Somali students cope with these challenges? What kind of support (institutional, social, cultural, etc.) do Somali students receive in order to tackle these challenges?

The study took place in a major U.S. university, where the researcher used qualitative methods to gather and analyze data in order to capture the experiences of ten Somali students who were purposefully selected to participate in the study. The rationale for studying this group was that, despite their increasing number in U.S. higher education, research on Somali students’ experiences in college is lacking and there is a need for understanding their challenges in order to improve their circumstance in college.

This chapter presents the discussion of the findings of the study in terms of the interpretations of participants’ experiences within the context of the study research questions and in light of the theoretical framework of the study. In addition, the chapter
also discusses implications of the findings of the study for policy and practice as well as its limitations and directions for future research. The chapter finishes with a brief summary.

**Interpretation and Discussion of Findings**

As noted earlier, very little is known about Somali students’ experiences in the United States particularly those in higher education. What is known thus far about the experiences of this ethnic group is quite limited to school-age children and adolescents, which is mainly focused on the needs of pre-college students within the context of their refugee background experiences (Kruizenga, 2010; McBrien, 2005). These studies document the precarious journeys undertaken by the refugee children and their families during their escape from civil wars and the traumatic impact refugee experiences left on them particularly on children, which caused them to lose the opportunity to get education. In order to fill the gap in the literature, this study focused to understand the experiences of Somali students in U.S. postsecondary education, particularly undergraduate students in a major university.

Interviews with participants generated responses that shed light on their experiences as sought by the research questions. In general, themes that emerged from the analysis of the data highlighted the circumstances of the students who participated in the study regarding their academic, socio-cultural and financial challenges, and the support they received to tackle those obstacles. These challenges are of particular interest to the researcher because they can act as barriers to the success of Somali students in college.
**Academic Challenges**

This section of the discussion interprets the academic challenges reported by participants, which involve a wide range of issues such as the students’ academic preparedness or readiness and the skills and behaviors students bring with them to college in order to perform their academic tasks. Academic preparedness for college is essential for student success in college. In order to find out the academic challenges students had in college, questions that relate to their academic preparedness, whether or not they had linguistic difficulties, their study habits and time management skills, and the extent they interacted with faculty inside and outside the classroom were asked.

Results of the study suggest that participant students had academic challenges that were related to their college preparedness in terms of their pre-college status and the bolts and nuts of performing day to day college tasks. While some of the participants reported they were college ready when they had arrived in campus, others felt that they were not fully prepared academically for college and had stumbles when they started, wishing they had stronger academic foundation. Still others mentioned they had some kind of problems not only in handling the university courses but also in their study habits and time management skills as well as their interaction with faculty and use of available institutional resources. They thought these skills were important for their educational success.

Academic preparedness refers to the students’ precollege performance (Swail, 2003). This study found that many participants were not adequately prepared for college due to lack of precollege academic preparation. While students acknowledged the
importance of a good academic foundation for their success, many recognized that lack of it held them back and caused them difficulties. For those who reported they were prepared, this study found that participation in college level courses like advanced placement or AP was very helpful.

The fact that student participants in this study expressed their academic challenges in terms of their preparedness is not surprising because it is well documented in the literature that students in general and minority students in particular face tremendous challenges. Students’ demographic characteristics and the skills, behaviors and attitudes they bring to college have been consistently found to relate to and influence their academic performance and experiences in college (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Cole, Kennedy, & Ben-Avie, 2009). According to Tinto (1975), whether students succeed or not succeed is in part determined by what they bring to college.

Previous research studies (e.g. Tinto, 1993; Seidman, 2005; Swail, 2003) have shown that, in general, minority students in college lag behind in their academic preparedness, which severely affect their success in college. According to Tinto (1987), academic preparedness represents a major factor that accounts for the difference in persistence between minority and nonminority students. Hoffman and Lowitzki (2005) also found that success in college for students is strongly predicted by both high school grade point averages (GPAs) and scores on standardized tests such as the SAT or the ACT as strong predictors. In other words, students who are well prepared for postsecondary education are very likely to persist in 4-year institutions (Adelman, 1999; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001).
In addition, even though participants spoke English well, they indicated that they struggled when it comes to writing essays as part of their daily assignments or even understanding textbooks. Also, this is not unusual given the fact that acquisition of spoken languages and academic language skills are entirely different in nature, and that it takes students different periods to develop these types of skills. For example, Cummins (1981) identified two types of language skills: Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), which involves English language skills such as grammar, pronunciation, and basic vocabulary that are required in everyday communication situations; and Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which in contrast to BICS, involves acquisition of contextual processing of language. According to Cummins, because basic interpersonal communicative language is social and contextual, it demands less cognitive functions than academic language. As a result, it takes a much shorter time to acquire BICS than CALP, which demands up to seven years to acquire proficiency in cognitive academic language skills.

College readiness involves a set of factors such as the core academic knowledge, skills, and habits students ought to have in order to be successful in college without the need for remedial coursework (Lombardi, Seburn, & Conley, 2011). It is an important issue in higher education because it involves how well students are academically prepared to handle the rigor of college education before they come to college. According to Nagaoka, Roderick, & Coca (2008), students must have basic skills in math and reading as well as knowledge in core academic subjects in order to move from high school to college.
Findings of this study indicate that many participants lacked proper study skills and time management when they arrived to college, which caused them difficulties in adjusting to the rigor of college environment. This is also consistent with the findings of previous research, which indicate that study skills and time management are important factors related to academic preparedness and to overall success of students in college, acknowledging that college work is intellectually demanding and needs time and skills to accomplish. For example, in an attempt to find out the effects of time management practices on college grades, Britton & Tesser (1991) found that time management attitudes and skills were positively related to students’ grade point average. Moreover, refugee students, by virtue of their past experiences as well as current circumstances live in difficult situations, which compromise their readiness in terms of skills necessary for success in college. For example, Smalkoski’s (2005) study of Somali women in college highlighted the importance of mentoring and advising focused on study skills and time management.

Furthermore, because college environment has more freedom and flexibility than that of a high school, students find it difficult to balance between academic, personal, and work commitments when they arrive on campus, which can undermine those who haven’t mastered time-management skills if they do not receive guidance or intervention (Heibutzki, 2016). According to the author, procrastinating or avoiding tasks that need to accomplished is an indication of poor time management, which can be caused by factors such as lack of motivation, fear of failure, and unable to prioritize tasks.
Study skills and time management involve the skills and behaviors students possess that help them succeed in college, which entail a great deal of self-discipline and personal responsibility that are critical to the success of students in college. According to Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley, & Carlstrom, (2004), academic success depends on academic behaviors that are directly related to productive class performance such as good study habits and time management skills. Many students also find academic experience very stressful due to lack of time management (Macan, Shahani, Diboye, and Phillips, 1990). This is because they had trouble balancing their time to make sure that they put enough time and effort to finish their assignments on time. According to Heibutzki. (2016), about a quarter of students become chronic procrastinators.

Additionally, in order to succeed in college, students also need to commit to their goals. In this study, participants indicated that they were committed but some of them also mentioned they were not sure about their majors and made changes. Research on students’ goal commitment in college reveals that lack of commitment is challenging to college students. It shows that students bring with them a sense of purpose and a commitment to educational goals and the institution, which significantly influence college performance and persistence (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Tinto, 1993). As Tinto (1993) notes the higher the level of commitment, the greater the chances of completing the degree. According to Arbona and Nora (2007), students who were strongly committed to their goals were more likely to participate in academic and social activities that provide the support they need in college. Moreover, the level of congruence between student’s major and his/her goals is important as students whose academic majors
correspond closely to their career goals are more likely to persist (Astin, 1977; Swail, 2003).

Another construct that is important in helping students overcome academic challenges is their relation with faculty and other staff. As a matter of fact, interaction with faculty inside and particularly outside the classroom was considered in the literature as beneficial to improving students’ academic experiences in college. This study found that many participant students did not have adequate interaction with faculty as needed. Participants offered various reasons for their lack of interaction with faculty. Some expressed that classes were big, which made interaction difficult while others attributed their lack of interaction to time constraints.

Relationship with faculty and staff helps students integrate with the fabric of the university. Integration and involvement of students into their institutions is highlighted in the literature as important to their success. In fact, lack of integration, or isolation of the student within the institution, has been identified as an important factor in contributing to student departure (Watson, 2002). In addition, the effects of weak student-with-student and student-with-faculty contact have been repeatedly mentioned as causes of student withdrawal from college (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini,, 1991). According to Johnson (1997), faculty and staff student interaction is the most important characteristic that distinguish retained students from those who dropped out.

In addition to academic preparedness, study skills and time management, goal commitment, and interaction with faculty, the study showed that most participants did not use university resources and its programs adequately. According to the results of this
study, while the majority of the participants acknowledged the availability of university services, many did not take full advantage of their use. Many students offered lack of time as a reason, whereas others mentioned that the campus was huge and that going around to get something was not easy, particularly when the student does not live on campus and works outside.

Students’ awareness and use of the university resources is very important. Whatever reason participants mentioned, it is understandable that there are socio-cultural barriers involved. This could be fulfilling other obligations, or lack of awareness of the importance and advantages of using help and study centers for tutoring and studying. According to research, minority students face challenges that make difficult for them to take advantage of the resources of their colleges for learning and personal development (Kuh et al. 2006). Navigating through a large university campus is an overwhelming task for many students and more so for minority students particularly those from a refugee background (e.g. Swail, 2003). While involvement and satisfaction is strongly related with living on campus, it is found to be weakened by outside campus employment (Hoffman and Lowitzki, 2005).

Socio-cultural Challenges

Undoubtedly, socio-cultural factors such as attitudes and beliefs students have are important in influencing their interactions and learning. This study found that student participants had some challenges relating to their socio-culture. For example, students raised concerns about the lack of availability of prayer spaces and halal or kosher food at university food courts or restaurants. These were concerns related to students’ religious
belief, which obligates eating *halal* or *kosher* foods and praying five times a day.

However, unlike previous studies, which reported alienation, marginalization and Islamophobia (Biglow, 2007; McBrien, 2005), there was no indication that student participants encountered prejudice or islamophobia at the university. In fact, most of them acknowledged that both staff and students treated them nicely. But they did mention that there existed some kind of cultural mismatch between their culture and the dominant American culture.

To elaborate on this, it is important to know that almost all Somalis are Muslims and are particularly affiliated with the Sunni branch of the religion. Accordingly, fundamental principles of Islam are based on five major pillars: Shahada, involves the oneness of God, which is to testify that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammed is his messenger; *Salat* (prayer), which involves praying five times a day; *Saum* (fasting), which involves refraining from eating, drinking, and pleasures from sunrise and sunset during the fasting month of Ramadan; *Sakat*, which involves. The last one is Haj (pilgrimage), which required paying pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime if possible.

As an aspect of culture, religion in general influences eating habits and consumer behavior (Bonne & Verbeke, 2008). This is particularly true in Muslim societies in which religion plays a crucial role in the lives of both the individual and the society. By providing strict guidance in food choice. Among other things, Islam forbids the consumption of alcohol, pork, carcasses, blood, predatory animals, and meat of animals that were not slaughtered according to Islamic guidelines.
Another socio-cultural challenge cited by participants was family obligation. As mentioned earlier, Somali society like other indigenous societies in the world is structurally organized as tribes in which individuals are socially and financially obligated to support immediate as well as extended family members in difficult times. This aspect of the culture, which contributes to the social capital of the community and serves a noble social purpose may at the same time adversely affect college students when they really need to focus their effort and resources on university matters in order to succeed. In other words, it could be a financial and emotional burden on students who are already struggling.

This obligation became particularly more critical as the situation in Somalia deteriorated and the needs of relatives inside and outside the country increased dramatically. Since the collapse of Somali state in the late 1980s and the subsequent civil war, more than a million Somalis fled to neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia and many others were internally displaced. Those who were lucky arrived in the developed world such as United States, Canada, and Europe but left their immediate and extended family members in extremely difficult situations. According to Abdi (2012), Somali culture and the Islamic faith promote strong family ties and a commitment to support and provide for those who are in need including many of the family members left behind in Somalia and those who live in various refugee camps in Africa. As a result, in order to fulfil that obligation, participants expressed that they had a role to contribute to their families by supporting not only their immediate family members but also those with whom they share kinship.
Financial Challenges

As noted, most of the participants reported difficulties in paying for their college expenses, which made them either work or get loans or combine the two. This is not surprising given the socio-economic status of participants and the rising cost of tuition and related college expenses. According to Swail (2003), low-income students and minority students experience a greater need for financial assistance in order to attend college than are middle- and upper-income students and as a result tend to be more sensitive to tuition increases. Swail (2003) argues that due to the rising costs of attending college, it is difficult for low-income students to receive bachelor’s degrees without any loan aid. Because financial considerations are common among most low income and minority groups, for many students, availability of financial aid drives enrollment and persistence (Carter, 2006; Seidman, 2005; Swail, 2003).

In this study, those who worked reported that time they spend working affected their grades because it interfered with the time for study. Due to the enormous financial barriers faced by urban students, the negative impact of cost of college education on enrollment and completion is daunting (Nagaoka et al. 2008). According to Macan et al. (1991), when students hold full or part time work while attending college it affects their studies as they may need to engage more in time management behaviors in order to handle their busy schedule and perform well, which adds more stress. In addition, because current financial aid pays less in grants, minority and low-income students are forced to borrow (Huelsman, 2015), which adversely affect their persistence in college (e.g Swail, 2003).
Support to Cope with Challenges

How did student participants cope with the challenges? Well, despite the challenges, participants reported that they had as well some kind of support in the form of institutional, peer, family, and/or community in order to cope with the challenges. While the university does not have resources specifically for Somali or refugee students other than the student organization, students acknowledged that, they indeed have support available. However, as discussed earlier, when it comes to utilizing the university resources, some of them indicated that they had not really taken advantage of the perceived support like the libraries, computer labs, and tutoring centers.

Peer, family, and/or community are definitely among the social supports that are crucial for the success of students as they involve the social capital of students. As a society, Somalis live traditionally in social tribal networks, which are important in their culture and from which they draw strength and support. According to a report by the Department of Health and Human Service, traditionally Somalis live in large, multi-generational and rather extended families in which members live closer to provide support, security, and social identity (BRYCS).

Studying the role of social and cultural capital in schooling, Bigelow (2007) explored the story of a Somali teenage girl, and found the richness of her participant’s family and community as a source of social and cultural capital for students in school. The author highlighted the importance of social and cultural capital for students in schools, arguing that in public education, immigrant and refugee adolescents are often characterized by their deficiencies rather than their strengths. According to the Bigelow,
refugees like Somalis draw a great deal of strength from being part of family and co-ethnic networks.

In her study of Somali students, Hardt (2005) also observed such social and cultural resources. The author argued that, despite the existing language and cultural barriers that Somali children face in elementary and secondary schools, there exists a great deal of social and cultural capital within their communities in terms of their religious beliefs and close ties to their extended families as well as their strong sense of community, which they can call upon throughout the educational process. As the author observed, religious beliefs are an important aspect of the culture from which students draw strengths in the form of social capital.

Participants agreed that they had resilience in the face of the challenges they faced. This is understandable given the fact that these students had gone through bigger life challenges with their families as they endured years of hardships in refugee camps before they arrived to the United States. According to Windle (2011), resilience refers “to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (P. 5). In other words, it involves the positive adjustment of individuals to difficult conditions. Many refugee children and adolescents show remarkable resilience and recover from difficult circumstances despite deprivation, extreme hardship, and trauma.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

The demographic increase in minority populations in the United States in recent decades has resulted in rich ethnic and cultural diversity context (Lum, 2010; Porter,
As an ethnic group, Somalis form a relatively small segment of the overall U.S. minority population, yet they constitute a significant portion given the fact that their number has been growing for the past decades. The exact number of Somalis in Ohio is not known but, according to a report by the Department of Homeland Security, their number increased steadily from approximately 14,000 in the 1990s to a current estimates that vary from 30,000 to 50,000, making Columbus home of the second largest Somali population in the U.S. after Minnesota. The increase of Somalis in this country is reflected in U.S. post-secondary institutions. According to the Office of Enrollment Services – Analysis and Reporting at The Ohio State University (OESAR, 2015), there are 723 Somali students enrolled at that university, with 594 being undergraduates while 129 students are pursuing graduate and professional degrees.

This demographic change and the increase of Somali students and other students from refugee background in colleges can have implications for diversity in post-secondary institutions in America because challenges faced by minority students also pose challenges to higher education institutions (e.g. Jones et al., 2002). As a result, findings of this study can offer practical solutions for the academia and inform policy. They can also set new directions for future research.

As discussed earlier, the results of this study revealed that participants encountered academic, socio-cultural, and financial challenges in college. These experiences are crucial for students’ success in college and understanding their meanings can be helpful for institutions in addressing the needs of this ethnic group of students and other students from similar backgrounds. As a result, the results of this study can be of
value to the academic staff and counselors of institutions that have large populations of Somali students. Because university counselors and faculty are in a position to guide students, their understanding of the needs of those students is critical in helping them integrate academically. Because as a group they carry several disadvantages such as being low income ethnic minority as well as first in their families to go to college, Somali students could be vulnerable to drop out.

The importance of cross-cultural competence for practice and policy cannot be overstated. As U.S. higher education becomes more culturally diverse, the concept that “one size fits all” will not work. It is necessary to understand the cultural underpinnings of diversity and accommodate different cultural perspectives. Literature on cultural competence in higher education is limited but indicates its critical role in understanding and serving a diverse population. According to Diller and Moule (2005), cultural competence involves developing certain personal and interpersonal awareness and sensitivities in order to accommodate and successfully teach students who come from a wide range of cultures. As a result, our post-secondary institutions have to have some level of competence in the culture of minority students in order to understand their cultural needs. In addition, college and university leaders should also understand that while access is important for diversity in terms of racial and ethnic representation or composition, it is equally critical to pay close attention to the cultural needs of students from refugee background like Somalis who due to their socio-economic limitations can be vulnerable to drop out of college.
Finally, this study may have implication for the Somali community and other communities from refugee background. Understanding the experiences of Somali students may usher the way of removing the obstacles that hinder their success in college which in turn will help students persist, succeed and attain degrees that will help them climb the economic ladder (Baum, Ma, Payea, 2013). Obviously, educational attainment and economic success have beneficial ramification in terms of its potentiality in creating opportunities for the individual, community and the nation. While economic vitality reduces disparities and closes gaps by empowering Somali individuals and community, it will also make them less dependent on governmental services and as a result, saves taxpayers money. This is a win-win situation for both the Somali community and the nation.

**Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

In light of the findings of this study, it is important to realize the struggle of Somali and other students from refugee backgrounds by recognizing the unique challenges facing them in college. Practically, there are many ways students can be helped to integrate them academically and socially into their institutions in order to succeed.

Transition from high school to college is a crucial step for the success of all students in college but it is particularly important for minority students. Research acknowledges the importance of first year for all students particularly for minority students, According to Ernest et al. (2010), helping students engage with their studies and campus life early is linked to improved retention rates, better educational outcomes, and
greater satisfaction. In order for students to function well in the academically rigorous environment of 4-year universities, it is also important to understand the difference between high school and college when it comes to structure. Unlike high school, classes and assignments in college are structured differently, and expectations of college professors are beyond those of high school teachers. Self-discipline is extremely important.

As indicated by the findings, lack of academic readiness can be a challenge for students. Therefore, it is important to provide extra help for students to understand and finish their assignments. It is also necessary to make sure that students are knowledgeable about the whereabouts of the university resources and to encourage them to use the resources. Increasing interaction with faculty and counselors as well as participation in university-wide organizations will also facilitate more social and academic integration and involvement. In addition, it is really critical to develop student skills regarding study habits and time management so that they understand the meaning of using time and resources wisely in favor of accomplishing needed university tasks.

Furthermore, since Somali students are more likely to be first in their families to go to college, they may lack the academic and inspirational support necessary to succeed in college. This is particularly important because they may not have member families who already had experienced college and can guide them through the process of college. Therefore, providing emotional and motivational support in order to help students overcome their obstacles and achieve their goals are definitely indispensable. This
involves appreciating and paying attention to their culture in order to facilitate their involvement and integration.

Moreover, as college practices are normally shaped by policies, the two are inextricably intertwined. Therefore, in order to address and meet the needs of vulnerable populations and realize the mentioned practices, it is necessary to be proactive at the policy level by designing and implementing strategic policies for better practices. This involves designing policies that would create and support practices that would help engage those students and integrate them academically and socially; policies that would remove barriers to their success.

Policy makers at the university and state level should also recognize the financial challenges, which could be detrimental to the persistence of this group of students. Providing more financial support for minority and other students of low socio-economic background will certainly make a difference.

**Limitations & Delimitations**

All research projects have limitations and no research design is considered perfect (Marshall, 2006; Patton, 2002); but as Patton argues there are always trade-offs. Not an exception, this study was limited or delimited by several factors that generally pertain to most research studies but are particularly inherent to this type of research paradigm including the setting, the size of its sample, the role of the investigator, access and participants’ willingness to participate.

First of all, the size of the sample used for the study was quite small and the participants were selected purposefully, which might not be typical of all Somali students
attending major U.S. universities. Secondly, researcher’s role in influencing the outcome of the study is also a concern in qualitative research. Finally, the study was limited by access and participation, which depended on the discretion, willingness and availability of participants. In addition, the theoretical framework used for the study has its own limitations. For example, aspects of Tinto’s theory of academic and social integration raised some concern in the literature. Researchers questioned the assumption of Tinto’s concept of integration that students must detach from their own culture when they attend college where a culture exists that does not align with their own, or inserts minority students into the dominant culture (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

To address the issue of the sample size, it is important to understand that findings from this study or those of any qualitative research study for that matter are not meant for generalization in a statistical sense. After all, this is a case study and participants were rather selected purposefully in a nonrandom fashion for the sake of in-depth understanding of their particularities. The outcome of the study, however, may be transferable to similar settings or cases (Merriam, 2002; Creswell, 2007). In order to facilitate case-to-case transferability of this study, good description of the context was provided so that readers will be able to transfer the findings of this study to their own situations (Creswell, 2007).

The issue of researcher’s role in influencing the outcome of the study is an important one and was discussed in chapter one. As far as researcher’s interactions with participants are concerned, establishing good rapport with participants while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the interview to elicit the information sought by the
questions was considered important. In addition, researcher’s participation in this project is definitely strength rather a weakness or a limitation, because sharing ethnicity and cultural background with participants of the study who were Somalis might help contribute to the results of the project.

Furthermore, using intellectual rigor throughout the process of conducting the research such as employing appropriate trustworthiness techniques (discussed in chapter three) was meant to minimize limitations and delimitations and enhanced the overall credibility and strength of the study. This involved using credibility techniques (chapter 3) and prudence throughout the process of this dissertation as well as showing an audit trail.

Findings of the study could have been strengthened by using mixed methodology, which involves combining qualitative and quantitative methods to collect and analyze data. Also, they could have been enhanced if observations were conducted. In either case, more triangulation would be established to increase the trustworthiness of the results.

**Directions for Future Research**

As noted, research on Somali students’ experiences in college is very limited. Understandably, this is not unexpected due to the fact that the arrival of Somalis as an ethnic group is relatively recent. However, it is also obvious that work is needed to be done because of their presence in metropolitan areas like Minneapolis and Columbus is substantial. While the findings of this study will help fill a gap in the literature, they also highlight the need to further understand the circumstances of this ethnic group from
different perspectives. As a result, the findings of this study can be expanded in various ways such as using new methods or perspectives to explore students’ experiences.

Employing quantitative rather than qualitative methodological approaches can be useful for conducting studies that involve large number of participants. This is particularly important for longitudinal studies in which many participants in various universities are used, and from which findings can be generalized. Experimental designs that investigate the effects of certain intervention programs on the success of students are some of the methodologically avenues that can be used to expand this line of research.

This study could also take the direction of investigating experiences of Somali students who did not persist and as a result dropped out of college. Knowing their experiences would be helpful in understanding factors that contributed to their lack of success and eventual dropout. For example, a different theoretical framework such as critical race theory can be employed as a lens in order to promote advocacy.

Future research should also examine comparing the success of Somali students with different backgrounds. For example, studies can compare the experiences of Somali students in community colleges to those in major universities or comparing undergraduate students to graduate students. In addition, research studies can explore comparing the success of Somali students in college who have parents with college degrees to those whose parents do not have college education.

**Summary**

This study explored Somali students’ experiences in a major U.S. university. Due to the increase in the presence of Somali students in U.S. post-secondary institutions and
the lack of empirical studies available regarding their circumstances in postsecondary institutions, the study sought to investigate the experiences of Somali students in terms of their challenges and support. Because it gives importance and value to the voice of participants, the study used qualitative methodology in order to find answers to the research questions and shed light on participants’ experiences in college.

The first chapter of this project set the stage for the dissertation in terms of its context, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, and the role of the researcher. In order to frame the literature within the ongoing research and identify gaps, relevant literature was reviewed and discussed in chapter two. This was needed in justifying the importance of conducting this research and writing the dissertation. Chapter three pertains to the methodology used for the study including the research design and the methods utilized to collect and analyze data, whereas chapter four presented the findings of the study. This chapter provided interpretation and discussion of the results of the study regarding the challenges and supports participants had in college.

Findings of the study were mixed but in general provided evidence that students had academic, socio-cultural and financial challenges. They also provided insights about the various socio-cultural ways Somali students cope with their challenges such as their personal endurance, faith, and the social capital they receive from their culture and community, which endow them with remarkable resilience. In general, the results were in line with the findings from previous research on minority students and those from refugee background, which document tremendous challenges minority students face in college. Findings of the study, however, did not show evidence of alienation or prejudice and
therefore did not support previous research, which document that minority students encounter alienation in predominantly White universities.

Implications of the findings of this study were discussed in terms of their potential usefulness for policy and practice, and for setting new directions for future research as well as limitations and delimitations of the study. Even though findings of the study uniquely represent the accounts of the personal narratives of Somali students who participated in the project, they are nonetheless a reflection of a broader voice for a relatively small but significantly growing segment of Somali students in U.S. colleges, and many others who are in similar situations and circumstances whose perspectives were not yet heard in the literature. Several recommendations were offered to university professionals dealing with Somali students in order to better serve them.

Overall, this study provided a peek at the lived experiences of Somali students in a major U.S. university. In doing so, it contributes to the field by extending existing literature and by setting the tone for future research, which will create more opportunities for further insights and understanding into the barriers that hinder the progress and success of this ethnic group in U.S. higher institutions. Identifying and addressing student challenges proactively will not only help them succeed but will as well help the institutions themselves. In the long run, students’ success in college will also benefit their families, community, and the nation.
References


Pascarella, E. (1985). College environmental influences on learning and cognitive


White students perceive campus climate for underrepresented groups. *Journal of College Student Development, 46*(1), 43-61.


Directions for Institutional Research, 2005(125), 7-24.


Appendix A: Participant Consent Form

Ohio University Adult Consent Form with Signature
Title of Research: Somali Students’ Lived Experiences in U.S. Higher Education: A qualitative Case Study
Researcher: Abdillahi Abokor

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study
This study is being done because I want to know how Somali students’ experience U.S. higher education particularly in 4-year colleges and universities. In particular, I want to understand the challenges they face while in their undergraduate years, the way they cope with those challenges and the support they receive.
If you agree to participate in this study, I will conduct an interview with you in which I will ask you questions about your experiences in college such as academic and economic obstacles you face and the support you get in order to deal with such difficulties. Your participation in the study will last to about nine months.
The interview will take about 1 hour and with your permission will be audio-tapped. You should not participate in this study if:
- You are less than 18 years old
- You did not come to this country as a refugee
- You are not an undergraduate
- You are not willing to participate in a tape-recorded interview
- Will not be available for follow-up

Risks and Discomforts
I do not anticipate any risks or harm to you while participating in this study other than the discomforts some people may normally experience during an interview which are minimal and may involve recalling or bringing back some memories, or issues related to confidentiality.
Since your participation in this study is completely voluntary, you can stop participating at any time without any consequence for doing so. For example, you can refuse to answer to any question during the interview if you feel it inappropriate.

Benefits
You may not personally benefit from participating in this study. However, telling your story will certainly allow your voice to be heard and represented in the literature which may eventually help others understand the needs of Somali students in college. When you
and other participants describe your experiences in college, university may learn more about the problems students have and do something to solve them. This may benefit future Somali students and the community.

Confidentiality and Records
Your study information will be kept confidential by keeping the records of this study private and in a locked file which can only be accessed by me, the researcher. Tape-records of the interview will be destroyed as soon as they are transcribed. In any sort of report we make public we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you.

Contact Information
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the investigator:
Abdillahi Abokor   E-mail: aa113209@ohio.edu  Tel: 614-725-1061
or the advisor: Dr. Emmanuel Jean Francois E-mail: jeanfran@ohio.edu  Tel: 740-593-4731

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Chris Hayhow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664 or hayhow@ohio.edu.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:
• you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered;
• you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction;
• you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study;
• you are 18 years of age or older;
• your participation in this research is completely voluntary;
• you may leave the study at any time; if you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature_________________________________________ Date_____________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Title of Research: Somali Students’ Lived Experiences in a Four-Year U.S. University: A Qualitative Case Study

Researcher: Abdillahi Abokor

16. Can you share with me about your education background before you started with college?

Probe for academic preparedness. Do you think you were prepared academically for college?

2. What are your expectations of being in college?
   • Probe for goal and institution commitment. What is your goal? Are you committed to achieve your goal? Do you think that you will reach your goal while in this university?

3. Describe an experience or incident in which you were faced with difficulty while at the university.

4. Describe the academic challenges you faced at this university. Probes for academic integration:
   • Do you think you had a good transition from high school to college?
   • Describe your relationship with the faculty.
   • Describe your relationship with the staff of the university.
   • How often do you meet your advisors and instructors outside the classroom?
   • Describe your study/time management skills.

5. To what factors do you attribute those challenges?

6. How do you cope with those challenges?

7. Do you think you are socially integrated with the university? Probes for social integration:
   • Describe your relationship with the students of the university.
   • Do you participate in extracurricular activities?
   • Are you a member of university organizations/clubs? If yes, what are they?
   • Do you participate in university events? If yes, what university events do you participate?

8. What do you think about campus climate at your university?
   • Are you comfortable being in campus?
   • Did you encounter any incidence/s of prejudice while in college?

9. Describe the financial challenges you have in college. Probes for economic challenges:
• How do you cope with the financial challenges?
• If you work, is it FT or PT? on campus or outside?
• Do you think your work affects your grades?

10. Probes for institutional support:
• Are you aware of any university resources available?
• If you are aware, tell me something about them.
• Do you use the supports available at the university? Explain! If you use them, how? If you don’t use them, why?

11. Describe the socio-cultural challenges you face while in this university? Probes for socio-cultural challenges:
• Are there any support from your family, friends, and the community?
• Are there any cultural mismatch?

12. How satisfied are you with the university and with your overall academic performance?
13. Do you have any suggestions or recommendations you like to tell the university in order to serve you better?
14. Finally, tell me if you want to add any other thing or have any other issue or concerns.
Thank you very much for participating in this interview!
Appendix C: Introduction Letter

Dear prospective participant,

My name is Abdillahi Abokor and I am a student at Ohio University. I am inviting you to participate in a study I am investigating Somali students’ experiences in U. S. higher education. I am particularly interested in understanding the obstacles undergraduate Somali students face in college and the support they get in order to cope with those challenges. To participate in this study, you must be a Somali from a refugee background, 18 years or older, and an undergraduate student at this university.

In order to understand your perspective, I will conduct an interview with you in which I will ask you questions regarding your experiences in college. The duration of the interview will be approximately one hour. Your participation in the study is absolutely voluntary which means you can stop participating in the study at any time or decline to answer any of the questions during the interview. In addition, your participation in the study and the information you provide in the interview will be kept confidential.

It is my intention that the findings from the study will help future Somali students by allowing universities understand their unique needs.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Abdillahi Abokor
Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire

Title of Research: Somali Students’ Lived Experiences in a Four-Year U.S. University: A Qualitative Case Study

Researcher: Abdillahi Abokor

1. Are you a Somali of refugee background?   Yes_____  No_____

2. What is your age group?
   a) 18-23 ___
   b) 24-29___
   c) 30 – 35___
   d) 36 and older___

16. What is your level of education?
   a) 1st year _____
   b) 2nd year _____
   c) 3rd year _____
   d) 4th year _____
   e) other_____ 

4. What do you consider as your gender?   Male____ Female____ Other____

16. How long have you been in the U.S.?

16. Did you attend postsecondary education before coming to the U.S.? Yes_____ No_____

16. Do you live on campus? Yes_____ No_____

8. Do you work? Yes_____ No_____
Appendix E: IRB PROTOCOL 16-E-10 APPROVED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Number</th>
<th>16-E-10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Committee:</td>
<td>Office of Research Compliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliance Contact:</td>
<td>Rebecca Cale (<a href="mailto:cale@ohio.edu">cale@ohio.edu</a>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Investigator:</td>
<td>Abdillahi Abokor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Title:</td>
<td>Somali Students Lived Experiences in a Major U.S. University: A Qualitative Case Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Review:</td>
<td>EXEMPT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Ohio University Office of Research Compliance reviewed and approved by exempt review the above referenced research. The Office of Research Compliance was able to provide exempt approval under 45 CFR 46.101(b) because the research meets the applicability criteria and one or more categories of research eligible for exempt review, as indicated below.

IRB Approval: 01/19/2016 08:46:27 AM

Review Category: 2

Waivers: None

If applicable, informed consent (and HIPAA research authorization) must be obtained from subjects or their legally authorized representatives and documented prior to research involvement. In addition, FERPA, PPRA, and other authorizations must be obtained, if needed. The IRB-approved consent form and process must be used. Any changes in the research (e.g., recruitment procedures, advertisements, enrollment numbers, etc.) or informed consent process must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented (except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects).

It is the responsibility of all investigators and research staff to promptly report to the Office of Research Compliance / IRB any serious, unexpected and related adverse and potential unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

This approval is issued under the Ohio University OHRP Federalwide Assurance #00000095. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Compliance staff contact listed above with any questions or concerns.
Appendix F: CITI Training Certificate

- Repo: 153
- Completion Date: 03/02/2015
- Expiration Date: 03/01/2018
- Minimum Passing: 8
- Reported Score*: 96

**REQUIRED AND ELECTIVE MODULES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belmont Report and CITI</td>
<td>02/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History and Ethical Principles - SBE (ID:490)</td>
<td>02/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Research with Human Subjects - SBE</td>
<td>02/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Federal Regulations - SBE (ID:502)</td>
<td>03/01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing Risk - SBE (ID:503)</td>
<td>03/02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed Consent - SBE (ID:504)</td>
<td>03/02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio - CITIP (ID:815)</td>
<td>03/05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For this Report to be valid, the learner identified above must have had a valid affiliation with the CITI Program subscribing institution.

CITI
Email: citisupport@miami.edu
Phone: 305-243-7970
Web: https://www.citiprogram.org