

International Students' Experiences in a Liberal Arts College Environment: A Study of
Migration Motives, Academic and Social Integration, and Career Aspirations

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2023

Acknowledgments

I am infinitely thankful to my family and loved ones for all the encouragement they gave me throughout the completion of my senior thesis. It is them that inspired me to persevere and overcome the hardest obstacles.

I would like to thank the eighteen participants who took part in this study. Thank you so much for being so open and descriptive about your experiences. I hope all of you enjoyed our in-depth interviews as much as I did.

Finally, I would like to thank my advisor, Yuval Elmelech, for giving me the kindest support over the course of the entire year. You helped me grow exponentially as a student, thinker, and as a sociologist. Thank you for making the process of writing this thesis so enjoyable and for all your patience and support.

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Abstract

Global student flows are increasing at an unprecedented rate (Bound et al. 2021). Given the rapid diversification of the US higher education system, this study examines international students' motivations for selecting an American liberal arts college, their integration experiences in this context, and their future goals upon graduation. It highlights the uniqueness of liberal education as a pull factor, as well as the specific challenges international students face while adapting to a new social and academic structure. Conducting eighteen in-depth interviews with international juniors and seniors enrolled in a liberal arts college on the US East Coast, I discuss the adjustment experiences of this specific population. This group provides a comprehensive perspective to this study because they have transited their institution for longer and have a more pressing date mark regarding their forthcoming lives after college. Significant findings include international students' evident interest in the multidisciplinary approach of the liberal arts model, divergent strategies in creating social ties, particular academic obstacles of discussion-based classes, and English proficiency as a determinant factor of both academic and social integration. Finally, recommendations for further international student support and future research are provided.

Introduction

How much do we know about international students' experiences in US liberal arts colleges? Although the broader literature on international students has discussed the experiences of foreign-born students, more recent data on their experiences in liberal arts colleges remains to be explored. Given the increasing enrollment of international students in US colleges, this study aims to illuminate this population's migration motives, adjustment experiences, and future career aspirations. While previous research reports that approximately 32 percent of international students attend public research universities (Bound et al. 2021), the total number of international students (including those enrolled in a program and those working after school in OPT) represents about 4.6% of the nearly 20 million college students in the U.S. in 2020-21 (Stewart-Rozema and Pratts 2023). However, according to the US News and World Report (2021), the highest international student percentages in US liberal arts colleges varied from 49% to %10 in the fall of 2021. Therefore, international undergraduates represent a significant number in the student body of liberal arts colleges.

Earlier studies show that several pull forces shape international students' reasons to seek higher education in the U.S., despite the cultural differences they may encounter (Altbach 2004). Once in an American college, this group undergoes adjustment processes that may significantly differ from their perception of a "college experience" in their homelands. Emphasizing general instruction over the course of four years, liberal arts colleges are substantially different from universities in other nations (Astin 1999). Moreover, explanations for the migration motives of this young population involve the high quality of American education, the international prestige of most U.S. colleges and universities, the flexibility and uniqueness of their curricula, opportunities for internships, networking and research, and cutting-edge facilities (Altbach

2004). Although the United States currently hosts the highest number of international students globally, other countries such as Australia, Canada, and England are attempting to recruit and retain international students to develop and diversify their social and economic capital (Hegarty 2014). Since the liberal arts model is a distinct form of American education, findings in this investigation show that liberal art colleges act as a prominent pull factor to attract international learners to the US.

In light of the rapid international enrollment in US colleges and universities, it becomes necessary to have a more profound understanding of international students' adjustment processes in order to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of US higher education institutions. Even though studying abroad may grant access to better, unavailable opportunities in these students' countries of origin, it also represents a challenging adjustment process. For those from non-Anglo-Saxon countries, the language barrier is one of the primary hindrances to cultural and academic adjustment, but certainly not the only one. Previous literature has identified that the main hindrances to successful adjustment include little English fluency, absence of social connectedness, cultural shocks, isolation, and discrimination (Yeh and Inose 2003) (Arthur 2004). As an international scholar, I noticed another considerable disadvantage of being an international student was the assumptions of domestic students and teachers about the extent to which these learners are familiar with culturally accepted behaviors. Although some international students may have more precise notions about how they will navigate their college experience in the U.S., other students in this group may have a more difficult path to understanding this new context. In addition, international students can be considered a bridge between two cultures¹ and, therefore, must balance their identity to fit in both countries at the necessary times. As a result,

¹ In this study, "culture" refers to the environment where the subjects learn appropriate behaviors to interact with their immediate community.

this group faces a series of cultural differences that liberal arts colleges' environment may enhance because of their smaller size and student body.

This project aims to investigate the nuances of international students' experiences. Using migration motives as a starting point, this project examines international students' social and academic integration at a small liberal arts college on the US East Coast, as well as this population's future educational paths. Findings will be divided into four sections, which will further explain these subjects. The research question is: What are the main migration motives of international students in liberal arts colleges, their social and academic integration experiences in this context, and their career aspirations upon graduation? In this qualitative analysis, I address this question by conducting in-depth interviews with 18 international juniors and seniors to understand their views on this type of education. Because of my international background, I felt compelled to observe and improve foreign students' paths in American liberal arts colleges by highlighting what seemed to be common difficulties that these students face regardless of their countries of origin. Nonetheless, findings show that the liberal education model has a strong positive impact on international students' outcomes as well. Ultimately, this project provides a comprehensive perspective and a louder voice to the otherness of international students in this environment.

Literature Review: What do we know about international students?

The following review integrates streams of literature that include immigration as a broader phenomenon and international student flows at the global level. At the micro level, it depicts liberal art colleges as a pull factor, social and academic integration processes of international students, and transitions to adulthood. Not only is the literature on immigration a helpful starting point for this theoretical framework, but it also sheds light on the context all current migrants face when coming to America. As an increasingly diversified society, the United States has become a more appealing place for both immigrants and international students. I will then connect this macro-level lens to the population I observe. Lastly, I will utilize the literature on transitions to adulthood to explain my participants' visions of career aspirations.

International Students

An increasing number of students wish to pursue higher education abroad (Bound et al. 2021). This population sees migrating to the host country as an opportunity to learn new skills, speak foreign languages, and enroll in high-quality universities to attain an undergraduate degree (Bound et al. 2021). However, their transitional condition is a significant characteristic that distinguishes international students from other groups. That is, they do not intend to stay permanently in the US, nor do they visit the country for a short period of time. Instead, international students are deeply immersed in the context of US colleges and universities, generally for four years, to pursue an academic major while living full-time on campus. This condition leaves international students in an intermediate category: their circumstances do not last enough to be comparable to a whole immigrant experience, but last too little to refer to them as tourists. Another important aspect is that they leave their homeland at a relatively young age

(i.e., 18, 19 years old) to start a new stage of their lives, often without any relatives present in their journey. Hence, their paths and experiences coming to America are significantly different from other types of migrants since they have not only one but multiple attachments to places (Hari, Nardon, and Zhang 2021).

Bjork et al. (2020) argued that international students often experience some sort of cultural dissonance when entering an unfamiliar American college campus. By the time international students start their careers in an American institution, they have already developed an identity that aligns with the cultural heritage of their homeland. Due to the smaller size of liberal arts colleges and its emphasis on critical conversations, this already constructed identity is forced to adjust arguably at a faster rate to this new, exposed environment. Past research has pointed out that liberal arts colleges' complete immersion in academic work in smaller settings where students are closer to faculty positively influences academic student outcomes (Astin 1999). Furthermore, some international students connect their knowledge from both countries and therefore emphasize their transnational condition (Hari, Nardon, and Zhang 2021). However, the contemporary context that all migrants encounter when entering the US reflects characteristics that international students may perceive as well.

Immigration as a Broader Phenomenon

Immigration flows have been fluctuating in several ways over the past century, continuously reshaping American society. Although Europeans constituted a large portion of the immigrant population, contemporary immigrants are mainly from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean. The evolution of immigration flows from the past century to the present highlights both parallels and divergences. For instance, newcomers tend to get close to communities of their

ethnic background in order to build personal networks that help them navigate their new environment. Another similarity between past and present new arrivals is the maintenance of strong ties with the home country, also referred to as transnationalism. It is common that the immigrant community prioritize close communication with their relatives left behind, and send money to help their family's economic restraints. Furthermore, technology's rapid rate of development has allowed immigrants to maintain immediate, live contact through apps such as Zoom or FaceTime, which contributes to sustaining solid ties with family and friends back home (Foner 2013). All these behavioral patterns are found not only among immigrants but among international students as well.

Further, differences in the immigration context that took place over the past century include an unprecedented increasing number of highly skilled arrivals, as 27 percent have a bachelor's degree at the point of entry. Additionally, the landscape that newcomers encounter in America has evolved into a more formally committed society to cultural pluralism, where hyphenated identities and diversity are embraced, which may appeal to international students. Finally, the second generation is generally proud of their parents' cultural origin and language (Foner 2013). It wishes for the next generation to carry on such heritage, enhancing pluralism and creating a more welcoming environment for international students.

The Globalization of Higher Education

Global foreign student flows, however, are increasing at an unprecedented rate. The number of students seeking higher education abroad has doubled since 2000, reaching 5.3 million in 2018, UNESCO reports. As the most prominent host of immigrant students with various prestigious institutions, the United States has tripled the number of international students

to over a million individuals since 1980, which has generated \$44 billion in export revenue in 2019 (Bureau of Economic Analysis 2020). This high number of students has affected the global production of skills and the allocation of workers in labor markets in America and other nations. For American universities and colleges, attracting international students is beneficial because successful recruitment is positively correlated to the revenue generated. However, this phenomenon also happens contrariwise since developing countries with economies in transition generally contribute to the growth of US student enrollment (Bound, Turner, and Walsh 2009). In addition, because the financial aid offered by American educational institutions may appeal to foreign pupils, the exchange of international students is increasingly directed toward the opportunities that America offers.

Nonetheless, the number of international students that enter American colleges is interdependent on the number of accepted students who are able to afford the college's tuition. For instance, Chinese students largely represent this trend as they have been expanding American undergraduate enrollment for more than two decades (Bound et al. 2021). Moreover, India, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia follow China in this pattern of student flows. Although the United States is the more common destination for international students, "countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom have also recently experienced a rapid increase in the enrollment of students from China and India since 2000" (Bound et al. 2021:166). Presently, students from China, India, and South Korea are the largest groups of international students in American colleges (Duffin 2023).

At the undergraduate level, American research-intensive public universities hold a significant share of international students— approximately 32 percent of pupils (Bound et al. 2021). Offering sizable science, technology, engineering, and math programs is one significant

feature of public universities that attracts foreign-born students. International students, in fact, represent a higher share of students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics programs than in any other fields at the bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D. levels. Another major pull factor for undergraduate students to come to the U.S. is the financial support that colleges offer. However, it is often granted only after a relatively large number of students can afford in-full tuition (Bound et al. 2021). In addition, the inflow and demand rate of international students coming to America is affected by other independent variables as well. One is the development rate in the countries of origin since the expansion of developing countries tends to contribute to the quality and diversification of higher education. As a result, student outflows from that country will either increase or decline depending on the homeland's capacity. Another factor is the possibility of improving diplomatic relations and international trade conditions through student exchange. China, for example, has refined its relations with the US since 1979, partly due to prominent educational exchange, particularly at the doctorate level. Lastly, foreign enrollment in the US is also affected by specific American educational programs that have no counterparts in other countries, such as liberal arts colleges and other broad-based programs of study (Bound et al. 2021).

International Students as Trans-Migrants

International students can be considered “trans-migrants” because of the multiple, temporary attachment to different places after they emigrate from their nation of origin. To better explain this phenomenon, Hari et al. (2021) proposed the term “International Student Migration” (IMS) in order to capture a set of multinational migrations. This concept understands international students as people who “have a sense of unlimited global mobility with career

aspirations that are borderless and open” (Findlay, Prazeres, McCollum, and Packwood 2017:2). Although exposure to different cultures and countries can add to their identity, international students may also conserve their cultural heritage through constant communication with all elements of their countries, such as listening to music in their first language, having conversations about their nation’s news, wearing clothes that are culturally appropriate in their communities, along with others. In addition, international students’ trans-migrant condition is informed by the changing political contexts, determining their ability to stay and work after earning a college degree. Finally, due to the lack of stability of transmigrant circumstances, international students tend to use transnational ties to find resources and overcome the restraints of the “uneven, dynamic and heavily reliant on the changing economic, socio-cultural and political conditions of home and host countries” (Hari et al. 2021:2). All these factors are relevant to understanding international students’ behavior and motivations to come to study in the United States.

Why Are International Students Important in the US?

Not only do international students culturally enrich and diversify American colleges by providing new global perspectives, they also largely contribute to many sectors of the US economy. According to the Student Visa Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), more than a million non-immigrants applied to study in the United States in 2013. This group provided the US economy with more than \$22 billion, the Institute of International Education (IIE) reports. In fact, this monetary contribution is more significant than the revenues generated by the gaming industry (\$18 billion), the weight loss industry (\$20 billion), and the domestic music and movie industries combined (\$20 billion) (Hegarty 2014). Since a significant share of foreign-

born pupils pay full tuition and most of them can only begin their studies with proof of sufficient financial support, their presence in American academic life is becoming increasingly crucial. According to the IIE, more than 60 percent of American colleges and universities focus on maintaining a stable international enrollment. Thirty-one percent of these institutions focus on attracting students from China, which sent 233,992 students to America in 2013, followed by India, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia with 96, 91, and 61 thousand students, respectively (Hegarty 2014). Additionally, international undergraduates significantly improve academic trends in American universities since a study found that a 10% increase in international graduate students correlates to a 4.5% increase in patent applications (Chellaraj et al. 2008). Lastly, states with a robust number of colleges, such as California, New York, Massachusetts, and Texas enjoy \$3.2, \$2.5, \$1.4, and \$1.3 million yearly, due to hosting international students (Hegarty 2014).

Although the United States is undeniably a top destination for many international undergraduates, other countries are growing to attract these students. Countries like Australia, Canada, England, and Taiwan have firmly entered the educational market for international students. With one-fifth of international students in the population of the country, Australia competes to allure foreign-born students by offering a fast track to citizenship after college completion (Hegarty 2014). Moreover, another one-fifth of these pupils are Chinese students. Compared to American immigration law, the path to Australian citizenship seems significantly less cumbersome for those who wish to stay in the host country after graduating.

Similarly, Canada also participates in the global contest to appeal to international students. According to Foreign Affairs and International Trade, foreign-born students had contributed \$8 billion to the Canadian economy in 2012. In order to better accommodate international students, recent work laws currently allow international undergraduates to work in

Canada up to 3 years after graduation (Hegarty 2014). England as well has increased the lawful residence after college as well to two years so that pupils have more room to pay for student loans, as international students are worth \$14 billion to the U.K. economy, the British Council (2012) reports. Lastly, Taiwan's efforts in attracting international students resulted in the accreditation of the National Chengchi University by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, which sets it apart from other business schools across the globe (Hille 2008).

Migration Motives: Push and Pull Factors

What Motivates International Students to Apply to American Colleges?

Students may be drawn to international education because of various push and pull factors. For young adults who seek an undergraduate degree in their home country, a significant impediment can be the high competition for too few vacancies in local universities. Lack of training in certain specializations in the homeland, such as astronomy or zoology, can also push students to seek education abroad. Beyond the academic realm, students also decide to leave their nations because of political disruptions, faculty strikes, or closure by governmental authorities. Furthermore, reasons why students are "pulled" to study specifically in the United States include the prestige of America's higher education system. Some students may feel that a US degree is more significant than an undergraduate degree achieved at home. It is also the case that an increasing number of students are applying to US lower-prestige four-year schools and some of the best community colleges, sometimes finding it more accessible to gain admission to an unselective U.S. institution than to a university at home (Altbach 2004). Students may also be attracted to America itself because of its large and diverse economy, the opportunities to build a

career, the high salaries available in many fields, and the willingness of employers to hire well-qualified foreigners (Altbach 2004).

The option of going to a US liberal arts college may also be appealing to international students. Liberal education, as opposed to the specialized training of large universities, offers several attractive traits for international students. For instance, it provides flexible curricula involving interdisciplinary knowledge, small class sizes that generate an intimate atmosphere with students and professors, and a great focus on critical-thinking development. In addition, liberal art colleges are “distinctively American and usually have no counterparts in other countries” (Sampey 1961:507). That being said, liberal art colleges in contemporary America follow roughly the same criteria: non-specialized general education and an emphasis on disciplines such as literature, history, writing, philosophy, sociology, psychology, creative arts, and so forth. For international students who have not yet decided which academic path they want to pursue, the broad education of liberal arts colleges represents a desirable option that allows them to explore more than one central area of study.

Academic and Social Integration

Investigating the challenges of social and academic adjustment processes is the following step in understanding this specific population. Prior research shows that language and cultural barriers, academic and financial difficulties, interpersonal problems, racial discrimination, loss of social support, and alienation represent some of the hindrances in successfully adjusting to the new academic environment (Yeh and Inose 2003). Further, it has also been reported that international students experience more psychological problems that derive from these causes than American students (Leong and Chou 1996). While adjusting to a new context, other

problems that may arise include experiencing anxiety about returning home, academic differences, and dealing with emotional and cross-cultural challenges (Hsu 2003). English language proficiency is one major factor that facilitates both academic and social integration, as the lack thereof can be the most important barrier to properly adjusting to a new community (Yeh and Inose 2003). International students with little English fluency are thus in a disadvantaged position in the classrooms of liberal art colleges, where discussion-based learning is a prominent feature. Students whose training may have emphasized reading skills and lectures may find this type of learning particularly challenging (Sawir 2005).

In addition, cumulative stress can be an issue for international students who may need help expressing their English academic abilities well. The fact that their knowledge may not translate to their new environment fast enough (figuratively and literally) because of high academic achievement in their home country can affect their overall satisfaction in the American college (Pedersen 1991). Furthermore, language barriers often prevent foreign-born students from socially interacting with their American counterparts (Hayes and Ling 1994). Cross-cultural differences may hinder international students from creating close interpersonal relationships with American students (Mallinckrodt and Leong 1992). According to Cross (1995), students who come from collectivistic backgrounds may place much importance on close relationships and may find it difficult to understand American students who often display aspects of individualism such as independence, assertiveness, and self-reliance. Because of this, many international students perceive social dynamics in US culture to be rather superficial (Bulthuis 1986) (Cross 1995).

International Students' Future Goals

As previously mentioned, it is common for international students to leave their homeland to study in the United States when they are between the ages of 18-20. Subsequently, they are typically around 20-21 years old once they enter the upper class. Although 21 years is considered the legal age in American society, the events that signify a transition to adulthood are culturally specific and may vary from one individual to another. During early adulthood (18-26), people often undergo physical, cognitive, social/emotional, and interpersonal changes. Young adults become more independent and less influenced by their parents and family.

Similarly, they are also increasingly influenced by external factors; i.e., educational environment, social media, and socioeconomic context (Spano 2004). The more prominent marks discussed in the literature on transitions to adulthood are residential independence, sexual initiation, marriage, parenthood, academic completion, and job obtention. For adolescents in the global south, a significant mark in becoming an adult is the migration experience, whether it means moving to another city in the home country or migrating internationally (Juárez et al. 2013). After finishing college, students may pursue adulthood marks through different paths. How they attain those marks may shed light on the opportunities they encounter depending on the chosen major, the activities they were involved in during college, and their personal interest in reaching those marks. For instance, a study shows that women in business and men who pursue STEM careers achieve early transitions to adulthood, such as full-time labor, marriage, and parenthood (Han, Tumin, and Qian 2016). However, not all international students major in those areas and may not find those pathways necessarily desirable. Studying different processes whereby adulthood may be reached is thus essential in understanding international students' future goals.

Methodology

Eighteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with international juniors and seniors who are at least 18 years of age and enrolled in a liberal arts college. The interviews addressed detailed information on the experience of international study. Although these students may or may not be bilingual, the interviews were exclusively conducted in English. When/if participants decided to express themselves in their first language, I asked them for clarification to express the same idea in English. Furthermore, the areas explored in the interviews were derived from the broader sociological literature on international students, push and pull forces, social and academic adjustment and integration, transnationalism, and transitions to adulthood. In-person interviews were primarily conducted on campus and through Zoom video calls. All interviews were conducted after participants signed a written consent form.

Each in-person or Zoom/phone interview lasted approximately one hour, and participants had the option to skip questions if they preferred to do so. It was also the case that participants added additional information to their responses. Even though I had a prepared questionnaire, I refrained from asking every single question to keep the interview within the timeframe margins. That being said, I procured to ask roughly the same questions to all participants. Depending on the students' backgrounds and experiences, I asked follow-up questions in the sections they seemed more passionate about to gain a deeper understanding of the subject. Ultimately, the questionnaire allowed me to have a similar structure in all the interviews, even though students emphasized different parts of it.

I chose to explore a liberal arts college because its different structure and pedagogical approach from larger research universities illuminates different integration trajectories for international students. Focusing on the humanities and general education, liberal arts colleges

prepare students in a broad range of subjects. Its residential nature and small class sizes provide advantages such as closeness to faculty and their areas of expertise, as well as a total immersion in academic work. Moreover, the notion of “liberal arts” can be mistakenly correlated with a politically liberal context; however, it rather refers to the freedom of men and knowledge (Lind 2006). According to Lind (2006), the concept of liberal arts referred to the “skills of the citizen elite” in the Renaissance recovery of Greco-Roman culture until the late 19th century. The ruling classes and leaders were expected to be proficient in a broad range of subjects, including learning Greek and Latin, debates of public policy, the arts, and the humanities. The emphasis was not on mastering one subject but on being competent in all the realms of general knowledge.

Since the main characteristics of liberal art colleges are small, discussion-based classes, multidisciplinary requirements, and emphasis on the use of rhetoric and clarity of thought in both written and spoken form, these institutions create a particularly different environment for students in both social and academic contexts. In addition, findings show that the liberal education model also acts as a pull force, as international students are increasingly attracted to holistic education as opposed to department-based instruction. Given that the liberal arts are a distinctive form of American instruction and the apparent interest of international students in this type of education (Sampey 1961), present and future scholars must include this variable when addressing global student flows.

Furthermore, “Freedom College” is the pseudonym I assigned to the institution observed in this study. Freedom College is located in a rural, isolated region of the US East Coast with no big metropolitan areas in close proximity. Given its geographical position, student life is primarily limited to interactions with other students and on-campus activities. Even though some international students enjoyed Freedom College’s green surroundings, other students described

this as a “big adjustment” because they came from more urban areas with more effective transportation services. Moreover, there are approximately 2,000 undergraduates at Freedom College’s campus, and over 12 percent of the student body is international, representing more than 40 countries.

This investigation employed a qualitative research methodology in order to capture a closer insight into the successes, obstacles, trials, and overall experiences of international students. It aimed to investigate data from the research participants in their own words, as well as highlight unusual or extraordinary patterns. Further, this generally small sample was contacted through snowball sampling and via email. All participants are upper college students and come from a wide variety of countries— see Table 1 for information about the demographics of the sample. Moreover, approximately 50 percent of these students are double majoring in music performance at Freedom College’s Conservatory, and field of study in the college outside the arts.

This study was granted ethical clearance from Freedom College’s Institutional Review Board. In order to protect the confidentiality of research participants, responses were saved on my password-protected phone and computer. Email exchanges did not include research information, interview recordings, or any sensitive information. When referring to the collected data, I used pseudonyms for all the participants’ names and concealed any other information that might jeopardize their confidentiality. After submitting this project on May 3th, 2023, I destroyed all interview materials and records. In addition, the questionnaire used in this study was structured as follows:

Demographics

1. How old are you, and which country were you born/raised in?
2. When did you come? Which academic year are you in?
3. Which race/ethnicity do you identify with?
4. Which gender do you identify with?
5. Do you live on campus?

Migration Motives

6. Why did you choose to pursue an undergraduate degree in the U.S.?
7. What is your major, and why did you choose it?
8. Why Bard?
9. What are the views about U.S. higher education in your home country? Why did you choose to attend a liberal arts college? Are you the first person in your family to pursue higher education in the U.S.?

Social Experiences

10. About your social experiences in your institution, can you tell me about your first couple of weeks at your college? When did things start to get better or more comfortable for you in this social context?
11. Do you have a sense of belonging to your college community? If so, in what ways (or what makes you feel) do you feel that you belong?
12. How did you hear about your institution? Did you have friends in your institution before you came?
13. Do you have close friends in your institution? How did you meet them?
14. What do you think about American students? Have you experienced any cultural shocks?
15. How would you describe social dynamics in your institution? On a scale from very easy to very difficult, how was the integration/adjustment process for you?

Academic Experiences

16. Are you satisfied with your academic experience at your institution? What are the main academic challenges? Benefits?
17. Did you know English before coming? If not, how was your experience as an ESL student?
18. Do you think there are any other cultural barriers besides language differences? Is this schooling structure different from the one in your home country?

Transnationalism

19. What makes you feel connected to home when you are studying abroad? How do you maintain your connection to your culture and your home?

20. Have you visited your country since you left? How was the experience for you when you came back for the first time?
21. How does your family feel about you being abroad? Did they support your choice to come to the U.S.? Did they have any expectations?

Career Aspirations

22. What are your plans after college? Do you want to stay in the US to study, or where would you like to go after finishing college?
23. Would you like to pursue a master's degree after you finish college, or would you rather work first through the OPT program?
24. After completing your undergraduate experience, would you consider yourself an adult? What do you think are the main markers for a young person to become an adult?
25. What does the transition to adulthood look like in your home country? What are the common markers of adulthood?
26. Are you satisfied with your overall experience in a U.S. liberal art college?

Based on this survey, I will address the research question by identifying patterns in the participants' responses. Although interviewees from the same country sometimes expressed similar answers, other variables, such as different socioeconomic statuses and academic fields, also shaped their experiences. Because respondents come from 12 different countries, I aim to conceptualize the patterns generated by Freedom College's dynamics rather than comparing the different nations. The following sections will both expand and relate this data to the broader literature on international students, as well as highlight gaps that require further research.

Table 1 Participants' demographic information

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Nationality	Major	Year in program
Emilia	23	F	Latina	Venezuelan	Human Rights and Violin Performance	Fifth
David	21	M	Caucasian/White	Macedonian	Political Studies, Trumpet performance	Third
Isabela	20	F	Middle Eastern/White	Israeli	Psychology, Viola Performance	Third
Lily	21	F	Asian	Chinese	French Studies, Piano Performance	Fourth
Lucas	23	M	Latino	Brazilian	Computer Science, Percussion Performance	Third
Sophia	24	F	Eastern European/White	Hungarian	Multidisciplinary Studies/ Flute Performance	Fifth
Naomi	23	F	Asian	Chinese	Global and International Studies, Chinese Music Performance	Fifth
Amber	20	F	European/Middle Eastern	British/Pakistani	Studio Arts	Third
Amanda	23	F	Southeast Asian	Afghan	Environmental and Urban Studies	Fourth
Christina	21	F	Caucasian White	Georgian	Global and International Studies	Fourth
Rebecca	24	Non-Binary	Asian	Singaporean	Film Studies	Fourth
Jacob	24	M	Southeast Indian	Singaporean	Computer Science, Percussion Performance	Fourth
Mia	20	F	Asian	Chinese	Photography	Third
Camila	22	F	Latina, Hispanic	Mexican	Physics, Philosophy	Third
Thomas	22	M	Latino, Hispanic	Ecuadorian	Political Studies	Fourth
Liam	21	M	Latino, Hispanic	Venezuelan	Computer Science, Percussion Performance	Third
James	24	M	White	Hungarian	Film Studies, Trumpet Performance	Fourth
Henry	24	M	Latino	Venezuelan	Political Studies, Trumpet Performance	Fourth

* Participants pursuing an instrument performance degree are part of the double degree program of their institution. These students generally gain admission through the conservatory, and the institution requires them to pursue a second major outside of music.

Findings and Discussions

Chapter 1: Migration Motives

Previous studies have shown that several push and pull factors shape international students' migration decisions. This spectrum varies from the home country's shortcomings in educational and job opportunities to the host country's offerings that can potentially fulfill those needs. According to Altbach (2004), push factors include limited opportunities in domestic higher education institutions, unstable sociopolitical conditions, economic scarcity, and disruptions in academic timelines due to student unrest and faculty strikes. Further research discusses students' personal motivations for studying abroad, including the practice of foreign language skills, desire to promote awareness and significance of other cultures, and establishment of international social connections (Harrell et al. 2017). Moreover, pull factors that make America appealing to foreign students encompass the internationally recognized prestige of many US universities, particularly American models of education such as liberal arts colleges, and a large economy that offers better social mobility paths as well as professional opportunities (Altbach 2004).

Student mobilization between countries certainly affects and enriches globalization trends and interconnectedness. At the macro level, nations may acquire stronger ties and communications through the increasing number of students seeking international education. Similarly, American universities and colleges also benefit from the international research/knowledge capacity that international students offer through their social ties in their home countries (Pandit 2007). In contrast, the micro level points to the need for undergraduates' skills to navigate a diverse, multicultural society. Scholars Harrell and Luo agree that training students to succeed in an increasingly globalized world is vital to nurturing interculturally

competent citizens (Harrell et al. 2017) (Luo and Jamieson-Drake 2015). In addition, students may perceive acquiring specific skills as a significant benefit that influences their decision to study abroad, such as improving their cognitive and communication skills, working on tolerance and acceptance of others, increasing their interest in international economic, political, and cross-cultural issues, enhancing personal development and sense of global citizenship, having greater academic engagement as well as a more secure opportunity for undergraduate completion (Luo and Jamieson-Drake 2015).

However, international students may decide to migrate based on a combination of push and pull factors. While some students find the flexibility of American higher education appealing, another factor, such as outdated, rigid education in the home country, may also push them to seek undergraduate instruction abroad. Moreover, America enjoys a great range of programs covering most international students' areas of interest, including double degree programs, multidisciplinary studies, and minors in adjacent subjects. Likewise, the socioeconomic contexts outside education may also affect these students' migration incentives. For instance, lack of economic stability in the homeland, in conjunction with possible internships granted by the social networks of US colleges, also urge many students to pursue higher education in the US. Another combination of push and pull factors are rough paths to gain admission in elite national universities and better odds at entering non-selective US colleges that may offer better support for foreign learners (Altbach 2004).

Although results regarding the participant's migration motives were consistent with the existing literature on migration and push and pull factors, there were two divergent motivations for participants to pursue post-secondary education in the U.S.: appeal to America itself and opportunities for social mobility, and desire to pursue liberal education specifically. Compared to

the more “rigid” models of undergraduate education in other countries, liberal instruction emphasizes interdisciplinary learning through rhetoric and logic. Furthermore, liberal art colleges represent a distinctive form of American education as they have no counterparts in other nations (Sampey n.d., 1961:507). Thus, nearly half of the respondents in this study chose to pursue their undergraduate degree in a US liberal arts college to enjoy the kind of flexibility and well-rounded education that was not previously available to them. The remaining portion of participants was motivated by precarious economic conditions and decreasing educational opportunities in their home country. In the following section, we are able to see the nuanced rationales of these students for coming to America to study.

Responses About Push and Pull Factors

Even though these were the two prominent paths observed in the participants’ decision-making process, the degree to which respondents were pushed or pulled varied among cases. Responses included a combination of both factors, and participants who were more dominantly pushed outside their nations had different reasons to do so. While some students had the opportunity to migrate to the US and enjoyed pleasant living conditions, the urgency of other participants to leave their country and find security overseas appeared to be more imminent. The following are the responses of participants who were mostly pushed out of their countries due to micro and macro level factors such as the absence of valuable social connections and human capital or weakened economic and political landscapes. The interviews showed four tendencies: interest in multicultural exchanges, exiting unreliable socioeconomic circumstances, desire to study with recognized music professors, and a prominent appeal to the liberal arts model.

Multicultural exchange

As a country that holds one of the most diverse societies in the world and a prestigious educational system, the United States is a top option for many international students. Moreover, exposure to different cultures and languages is a powerful by-product of deciding to study abroad in America. Lucas, a third-year international student from Brazil, agreed with this point. Double majoring in percussion performance and computer science, Lucas explained how pursuing a degree in the US is not only an excellent opportunity to leave the home country but can also expand one's knowledge of other cultures. This coincides with the existing literature on students' personal desires to study abroad. As reported by Harrell (2017), intercultural sensitivity and proficiency in a second language are relevant personal interests in students that play a role in their decision to study abroad. This research also points out that "although intercultural sensitivity is not a direct reason to study abroad, this idea and other global trends and theories suggest large-scale influences for why students study abroad" (Harrell et al. 2017:58). Lucas' decision to migrate from Brazil to America was shaped by his personal interest in multicultural exposure in the US and the shortfall of recognized percussion teachers in at home, a mixture of both push and pull factors:

"I very much saw the opportunity to come here as a great opportunity. I had never been to the US, and I didn't know any English back then. I thought of this journey as something that could change my life forever for the better. For example, learning another language and a different culture while studying abroad is a great way to acquire knowledge for anyone. I was also very excited about receiving lessons with one of the best percussion professors in the world, which I probably could not have done if I had stayed at home."

Since the educational opportunities in music and percussion were of less prestige in his homeland, Lucas considered that pursuing a degree in the US would inherently open more opportunities for his career. Furthermore, Lucas' educational background only involved classes

in Portuguese with domestic students; hence his desire for multicultural encounters with other international and American students at Freedom College.

National Socioeconomic Instability

Emilia, another international student from Venezuela, was also in a similar situation. She thought that educational and labor options would be significantly narrow if she pursued an undergraduate degree at national universities. Moreover, Venezuela has been in economic recession for the past eight years and suffers from the highest level of hyperinflation in the world, which Venezuelan citizens usually refer to as “the crisis.” Previous studies suggest that student flows and push factors are “dependent on the level of economic wealth, the degree of involvement of the developing country in the world economy, the priority placed on education by the government of the developing country, and the availability of educational opportunities in the home country” (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). Emilia’s response was consistent with this research. A super-senior² double majoring in human rights and violin performance, Emilia described the national economic instability as a major push factor:

“Since I was a kid, I wanted to study abroad. In 2019, I received an email from my college stating that they wanted to give me a full scholarship because they had seen one of my auditions online, so I didn’t have to pay for tuition. But something that really brought me here without any hesitation was the economic crisis in my country that my family and I suffered. I was basically just running away from that. The lack of opportunities back home to study or to be able to sustain yourself played an important role in my decision. So I just decided to come here. Even with a student job, I am able to survive (economically) in a way that I wasn’t when I was at home.”

However, the lack of economic and political stability is not a phenomenon that is unique to students in Latin American countries. Some international students from European countries

² How students at Freedom College refer to 5th year conservatory seniors.

share this trend as well. They decide to migrate to “run away” from detrimental socio-political conditions and find international higher education to do so. Sophia, who is a senior pursuing a double major in multidisciplinary studies and flute performance, talks about how she left her country in search of better educational and labor opportunities. Born in Hungary, Sophia felt that the political situation in her country was going to be a constant hindrance to following the economic and academic paths she wished for, and ultimately decided to leave:

“One of my main reasons to come here was because I wanted to get out of my country. I wanted to go somewhere else because of the political and social situation. As a musician, it is hard not to be political there. If you voice your political opinions against the government, then you're quickly out of jobs and I happen to be one of those people who disagree with our government. I know that just by being associated with people who are in opposition parties or going to protests, I was already on the wrong side of things there. So everything was pretty much pointing towards leaving the country.”

Emilia's and Sophia's cases underscore the influence of macro-level factors in international students' decision to pursue higher education in more stable countries. While seeking an undergraduate degree was an important goal for them, their conditions pushed them more dramatically out of their countries than other international students' cases.

Economic Scarcity at the Micro Level

While some international students may come from affluent backgrounds and pursue international degrees to expand their knowledge, others come from lower-class backgrounds and see education abroad as an opportunity for social mobility. In this case, the primary factor is not necessarily the country's failure to offer economic security. In the micro level, this rather points to the family's limited resources to provide a comfortable lifestyle and better educational chances. As past investigations show, education can open the path to a better life and unlock

important social connections that help individuals escalate the social ladder (Husén 1976).

David, a junior from Macedonia, is building his future through the American education he is receiving at his institution. Double majoring in political science and trumpet performance, David shared that it was music that opened his international educational opportunities:

“I came here because of the opportunities that are available in the United States. In my country, opportunities were minimal for a person with a background like mine since I come from a poor, working-class family. My parents didn't have a lot of finances, so there was not much of a future for me in Macedonia. It's tough to be successful or to even be able to provide a decent living situation for yourself unless your parents have wealth, political connections, or social status, which my parents don't. However, I've been playing the trumpet for nearly 15 years now, and that's how I got my full scholarship here in the U.S.”

Professional Music Education Abroad

For other international students, a prominent pull factor was the high-level music teachers available in the United States. This, together with reduced opportunities for social mobility and a notable shortage of Western music mentors, resulted in the migration of students from other nations to America. In order to succeed in the academic music industry, it is crucial that pupils receive lessons from experienced mentors. These professors are usually found either in Europe or in the United States. For students in nations that are foreign to these places, it becomes relevant to travel and seek education in Western countries. For example, Isabela, who comes from Israel and is majoring in psychology and viola performance, shared that she needed to come to the United States to study with a specific viola teacher. Since viola professors are not very abundant in her homeland, it was easier for Isabela to make the decision to study abroad in America:

“I wanted to study with a particular (viola) teacher. I had heard about this teacher when I was back home and really wanted to have lessons with her because there aren't many great viola teachers back in Israel. Then, time passed, and I heard that she was going to become a teacher at the college I currently attend, so I decided to apply. I was very lucky because I was actually able to do a live audition. Gladly, I did get in, and I'm studying with her now.”

Similarly, other countries also experience this absence of teachers with professional academic music training. For instance, in Asian countries such as China, training in Eastern instruments is more emphasized than Western orchestral instruction. Thus, the shortage of music professors is also apparent. Even though the reasons for this are based on different cultural and structural factors in Israel and China, this limited option for music study equally pushes students to travel in search of better prospects. Lily, a student from China who majors in French studies and piano performance, discusses how important it was for her to study abroad if she wanted to have superior learning experiences with her instrument:

“Some of my friends and I had been studying with this particular piano teacher for years, but eventually, he decided to migrate to the US. My teacher gave me all the information I needed to apply to a US college. Also, my parents really wanted me to learn a Western instrument and possibly succeed with it. It is a common belief that the top professors teach in the US or in Europe, so it was important for my family that I moved out to study. I applied for a college in the UK as well, but I finally decided to come to the US because my institution gave me a better scholarship.”

Here we can see how Lily’s social capital influenced her decision to apply to Western universities, specifically in the United States. Lily’s peers and professors warned her that the most effective way to succeed as a piano player implicated traveling to either European countries or to the United States. Further, since the Chinese culture emphasize Eastern musical learning, her interest in developing her knowledge in Western academic music was going to be inherently limited had she stayed in her country of origin. Finally, the economic support that Freedom College offered was the ultimate pull factor in her decision to study abroad.

Entering Liberal Arts Education

The second trend includes participants who were “pulled” to American and liberal arts colleges to a greater extent than “pushed” out of their countries. These respondents shared that it was essential for them to migrate specifically to America because it offered the qualities and opportunities they were looking for in higher education. Liberal education is part of those attributes. This educational model emphasizes the study of arts and social sciences through rhetoric and logic. According to Lind (2006:52), liberal schooling generally focuses on “non-specialized general education courses, with an emphasis on a particular set of scholarly disciplines, the humanities, and acquaintance with a canon of classics.” Liberal art colleges generally offer 4 years of broad instruction where students have the freedom to choose their academic paths. They create their own curriculum while exploring all adjacent interests to their declared majors. Students also take classes in the order they deem more convenient for them, unlike more traditional institutions that require pupils to complete specific courses before taking more advanced subjects.

Liberal arts colleges’ degree of adjustability appears to be attractive to international students with more conservative educational backgrounds since respondents often pointed out that this type of holistic education was unavailable in their home countries. Foreign universities frequently admit students through a specific program or department— as a result, students’ academic requirements are only related to a single discipline. Thus, career-focused education seems to be more dominant outside the United States. Although other continents such as Europe or Asia have prestigious higher education institutions, the American model of liberal education is still a prominent pull factor for international students. Thomas, a political studies undergrad from

Ecuador, underscored this point. After considering different nations to study in, he finally decided to come to America specifically to study under the liberal education system:

“I came because I felt a bit claustrophobic back in Ecuador. I was also really interested in the liberal arts model of education. I wanted to apply to the US even though I was also thinking about going to Europe, but from what I’ve heard, in those countries you have to apply through a specific department and through that you can only take classes that the department allows, so it’s significantly narrower. Although you graduate within a certain field in liberal arts colleges, you are allowed to take a wider variety of classes in other disciplines. In Ecuador universities are also very much department-focused, so I was more interested in the broader scope of education here.”

Double Degree Programs

In addition, some participants manifested interest not only in broad higher education, but in Freedom College’s double degree programs. Since students are already taking a rich variety of classes, they are also encouraged to major in one career and minor in another, as well as double majoring in two different disciplines. For students who have two strong academic interests or cannot decide which route to take for the rest of their undergrad, these programs are extremely convenient. Whether it is to take two divergent courses of study or to complement the knowledge of two similar majors, some undergrads value the option of pursuing a double degree. For example, Camila, an international student from Mexico, applied to her institution because it was one of the few that would allow her to pursue two of her main interests. Double majoring in physics and philosophy, Camila shared how this was not a possibility had she stayed in Mexico:

“When I was in high school, I had two main interests and I was a bit torn between the humanities and the sciences because the way higher education works in Mexico is very old school. When you go to university, you only study one career and maybe within that career you see other things but it’s mainly the subject you choose to pursue. There’s nothing like liberal arts curriculum over there. There’s no freedom to actually mix disciplines so I started to think to apply to the US because I knew that liberal arts education is unique to America. I wanted to have the freedom to properly study physics and philosophy while studying other subjects.”

Moreover, students have two ways of pursuing a double major degree at Freedom College. One is that students can choose the disciplines they want to major in, and then the college dictates the requirements they ought to complete in both. Another way is double majoring through the conservatory. In contrast with the former option, all students admitted by the conservatory are required to have a second major. This institution's mission is to amplify young musicians' scope of knowledge by encouraging them to study in a field outside the arts division. Having a second degree is inherently beneficial for young music students because it gives them a more comprehensive range of labor opportunities upon graduation. For instance, Jacob comes from Singapore and majors in computer science and percussion performance. He wanted to develop his abilities in both and possibly find jobs in either career. His position was similar to Camila's: he did not have the chance to major in both subjects in his country and came to America in search of an opportunity to do so:

“I wanted to do music (professionally) in school but I also wanted to do something math or science related, For a long time I was trying to decide which route to take, and then my percussion teacher advised me to pursue a double degree program. In Singapore, they don't have double degree programs, but in the US they do so I immediately started to look for that. First, I searched up opportunities in Singapore because it's a lot cheaper but there's no double degree programs. I then searched up in the US and of course if you search up double degree programs with music, this college is the first place that comes up.”

In Search of Flexible Education

As the study progressed, the pattern of students looking for a more flexible education model became increasingly apparent. Because liberal arts education is not standard— and perhaps inexistent— in other nations, international students may feel particularly compelled by the American holistic undergraduate structure. Additionally, career-based instruction is the predominant type of education outside of the United States. Although the existing literature has

paid little to the effects of US liberal arts colleges on undergraduate recruitment rates, this is a relevant pattern that affects international student flows. Furthermore, a European respondent confirmed the absence of educational liberal arts curriculums in her country. Born in Georgia, Christina shared that she was very keen to study in a liberal arts college to have a different experience and diversified knowledge. Like other participants, Christina shared the pattern of not wanting to study in the rigid, department-based Georgian educational system. Majoring in global and international, Christina emphasized that it was important for her to be able to study subjects in different fields:

“My whole life I've been interested in many fields and I knew that if went to a liberal arts college, I would have to take classes outside of my major or faculty. That was one of the things that attracted me the most to my college, the liberal arts. In Georgia, you must choose your major, and then there's classes of your major that everybody has to take. There are some electives but I don't think they are required. For example, if you want to become a lawyer or an economist, I'm sure in Georgia you don't have to take science or literature like we have to do here. I think in Europe students mostly have to pick a major and follow a specific structure. I like that in this college we have options and I don't think it's like that in Georgia or in Europe.”

Further, respondents also explained that they heard about liberal arts colleges through social ties. Even though this model is distinctive to the United States, the increasing number of international students and global connections have allowed more people to know about American liberal education. Additionally, the residential nature of liberal arts colleges has provided international students with the necessary logistics to migrate and have a place to live on campus. While liberal education has historically faced numerous challenges, this type of education has also produced “a pattern of consistently positive student outcomes not found in any other type of American higher-education institution” (Astin 1999:77). Achieving a good balance between scholarly research and effective undergraduate teaching, liberal arts colleges may generate a beneficial experience that transcends generations. This relates to Amber's case. Having spent

most of her academic life in London, Amber shared that her experiences in school had been rather inflexible. According to this student, London also has a more restrictive higher education system, which is consistent with the responses of the students from Ecuador, Mexico, and

Georgia:

“I ended up here because my mom studied in a liberal arts college for both undergrad and post-grad, and she had a really good experience. She wanted us to come to a liberal arts college because in England the education system is very study-based. At university, you only go for three years and you are pretty much restricted to one subject those entire three years. There's a kind of one module that you can take outside of your course of study, but it's not as flexible as it is in the US. I wanted to come here for a liberal arts education because I really value the idea of having an all-around, diverse education. Instead of going too deeply into one subject, I wanted to study multiple fields and that's really not a thing in England.”

Lastly, students from China can also confirm the career-based versus the flexible educational pattern. In some countries, students are not only confined to a single major, they are required to apply through a specific department and approve examinations before they gain admission into that particular field. Mia, a Chinese student majoring in photography, described how Chinese universities require students to take standardized tests before they start pursuing their majors. In addition to being certain about the subject they want to pursue, they need to be proficient at it before they start at age 18. For Mia, liberal arts education in the US was a better fit for her interest in photography:

“I came because I wanted to be part of my initiation's photography program because I had heard they had really good professors. I also wanted to learn under the liberal education model because I liked this well-rounded structure that encourages us to explore all our interests. This is different from my country because in China we must pick a major after we graduate from high school and go through the college examination systems. I just liked the idea of pursuing photography in a US liberal arts college better than staying at home.”

Summary: Chapter 1

Participants' responses about migration motives reflected a combination of push and pull factors. Two contrasting patterns emerged from the interviews: students who migrated because of living under precarious conditions and students specifically interested in liberal arts education. Rather than dividing these trajectories into push and pull forces, it is more precise to understand them as a mixture of both, where one factor is more prominent than the other. This allows incorporating the nuances that exist within those patterns as well. For example, while some respondents are mostly "pushed" out of their homelands due to major circumstances, they had different motivations at the individual level, such as pursuing advanced foreign language skills and multicultural knowledge, connecting with more helpful social ties or teachers, or fleeing from national socioeconomic unreliability. Similarly, participants who were primarily "pulled" to American liberal arts colleges highlighted the contrast with their countries' more department-based educational systems. Overall, most participants had both experiences: lack of national educational opportunities, economic stability and appealing models of education, and the coverage of those needs in the United States. Continuing the chronological line of the participants' experiences, the following section will explore their integration process in social and academic settings.

Chapter 2: Social Integration

In the past, many scholars have focused on international students' adjustment process, as well as their academic and social satisfaction. As students who embody different identities and customs from other nations, foreign learners certainly face a different set of challenges when integrating into US college life. According to Yeh and Inose (2003), the main hindrances to successful adjustment and predictors of cumulative stress for international students are English fluency, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness. Other researchers have also argued that some factors distinctively affect international students to a greater degree, such as cultural shocks, isolation, discrimination, and homesickness (Arthur 2004). Further, slower rates of social acculturation may also be related to financial difficulties, cultural misunderstandings, dietary restrictions, and lack of support from domestic students (Heggins and Jackson 2003). In addition, while foreign students' successful social adjustment is not always positively correlated with academic performance, evidence suggests that students who are less fluent in English have more trouble integrating into peer groups and experience lower levels of academic tenacity and persistence (Mamiseishvili 2012).

More important than written English abilities, spoken English performance is a significant obstacle for both students who have already studied the language before their arrival and those who did not. Further, English competence directly affects the social and academic spheres of international students' experiences, particularly in the context of liberal arts colleges. Since academic knowledge is predominantly imparted through small discussion-based classes in these institutions, conversational abilities become paramount. As Sawir (2005) reported, pedagogical strategies that emphasize "conversational English and classroom participation may especially disadvantage those international students whose experiences in the classroom have

been more passive and whose training may have emphasized reading skills at the expense of conversational skills.” Other studies have also found that lack of comfort in spoken English is a major theme among international students. For example, international students in Sherry, Thomas, and Chui’s (2010) study highlighted that it would be helpful for them if the college had a “more formalized process of social interaction with American students which would enable them to acquire English language skills, including knowledge of slang, in a more relaxed environment.” Further, interviewees indicated that it was fairly tiring for them to suddenly speak English at all times upon arrival. Thus, the international undergrads’ integration process at Freedom College was heavily influenced by this factor.

Another essential component that shaped these students’ experiences was the COVID pandemic. Not only did the pandemic completely transform academic settings around the globe, but it also modified social interactions in this institution after in-person instruction was once again allowed. Restrictions at Freedom College included mandatory use of masks, social distancing, and the prohibition of social gatherings in enclosed spaces. Moreover, some participants pointed out that socializing under these circumstances was very challenging. According to Hari (et al. 2021), the pandemic brought unprecedented changes and limitations in the mobility and strategies of international undergraduates. While these scholars argue that “changing conditions in IS’ home and host countries due to the pandemic require international students to adjust, adapt and revisit their career and citizenship strategies,” the pandemic also deeply affected their socialization process (Hari, Nardon, and Zhang 2021). Understanding this context is vital to the purpose of the study because participants are currently attending their junior or senior year, meaning that they entered the institution during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although some students found in-person social settings difficult to navigate, participants who

took a semester in their homeland due to the pandemic shared that they “eased” into the new environment more gradually, allowing them to integrate at a faster rate socially.

Furthermore, institutional forms of support also affected the initial social experience of international students. Upon arrival, support services are most needed for foreign students who do not possess enough English expertise. These accommodations may include translation assistance and guidance for maneuvering through the initial settling process. According to previous studies, college administrators deem academic support and college acculturation activities important for international students. For instance, workshops about campus employment, early warning systems for academic and visa issues, and traditional academic support such as tutoring and writing programs are vital parts of these students’ adjustment process (Martirosyan, Bustamante, and Saxon 2019). However, such forms of support are not always efficient at Freedom College. In this study, some participants indicated that their initial socialization process was somewhat challenging because they did not get enough help to utilize all the needed services or did not know how to ask for help. Ultimately, the combination of all the mentioned factors significantly influenced the participants’ social experience.

Social Integration: Initial Challenges

Consistent with past literature, findings in this study suggest that international students who lack English abilities find it more demanding to integrate and perform both socially and academically. For students who needed to be more fluent, their social integration process was notably slower. For instance, some respondents felt more comfortable interacting with American students only in their second or third year, and even after achieving English fluency, other students still struggled to integrate successfully. According to Sherry et al. (2010), international

students' social interactions tend to be limited to other international students, which is consistent with this study's results. Ultimately, all the previously mentioned factors shaped the participants' socialization trajectory, among which English capability was the most prominent. Therefore, the following section will discuss the participants' responses to their social adjustment timeline.

English Proficiency

In the sample used for this project, international students experienced a social integration process differently at Freedom College. Students who initially had a more challenging time adjusting underscored the following patterns: absence of English fluency, difficulties in reaching out for help from the institution, and hindered social interactions due to COVID restrictions. Although their earliest experiences at this institution were significantly troublesome, almost all participants shared that they felt reasonably comfortable in social settings by the time they became upperclassmen. Moreover, as previous research pointed out, problems at the beginning of the college experience were due to some respondents' deficits in spoken English. However, findings suggest that English proficiency is not directly correlated with an easier adjustment trajectory, as the language factor was not the only element that influenced the participants' integration process. Although more than half of the participants were not fully fluent, the following are the students who expressed more discomfort about the language obstacle. For example, Naomi, a student double majoring in global and international studies and Chinese music performance, shared this trend. Born in China, she pointed out that it was hard for her to adapt at the beginning of the experience because of her lack of English expertise:

“My first two weeks were super hard because I barely spoke English when I came to the United States. It was tough for me to communicate with people, so I usually only talked to

Chinese students. After I took the ESL³ class, the experience started to get a little better for me. I improved my English, especially during the pandemic, because all my Chinese friends returned home and I decided to stay here. I got a job in the library and had to speak English more often. My conversation skills improved a lot because I only knew how to use the language in academics before that time.”

Considering the complexities that the language barrier generated, many of these students were pushed to only interact with those who also spoke their native tongue, a trend largely emphasized in earlier studies (Sherry et al 2010). Although this behavior may delay international students’ integration, it also contributes to the strengthening of their transnational ties. Moreover, speaking a first language with people in both host and sending societies allows students to maintain their cultural identities and helps alleviate some of the initial challenges—homesickness, for example— of adjustment processes, as we shall see in the following section.

Transnationalism As a Way to Adjust

A predominant behavior among international students is the strong ties they maintain with the friends and family who stayed in their homeland. This profound connectivity between people and places is defined in the social sciences as “transnationalism.” The term alludes to the processes by which people, ideas, and goods transcend politically defined borders. The hyper-connectivity derived from developed means of communication in the 21st century, along with the use of Zoom as a bridge to preserve interrelations during the Covid pandemic, has enhanced the bonds between international students and their loved ones. For example, Afghan student Amanda shared how she maintains a strong connection to her culture while she studies at Freedom

College:

³ International students in the conservatory are required to take the English as a Second Language (ESL) class for a year if they do not meet the minimum score in standardized English proficiency tests, such as the TOEFL test.

“Something that really connected me to my country is wearing my traditional clothes and scarf, or eating and sharing our traditional dishes or talking to my parents regularly in my own language. We also have a large group of Afghan students in this college, so makes me feel deeply connected to my culture and that I am not alone here.”

However, this concept reaches beyond F1 visa holders since it is a pattern that can be observed in all trans-migrants as they are constantly resettling from one place to another. Furthermore, promoting ties that transcend immediate communities and entire countries allows room for international networks that can be utilized for filial, affective, economic, and organizational purposes, as well as for creating a sense of belonging amid this student's transnational condition (Duong 2015). Holding onto the first language is thus positive for maintaining transnational ties but is less beneficial for social integration with domestic students.

The language barrier can affect the stress levels of international students in great proportions as the inability to communicate emphasizes their sense of otherness and obstructs the integration process in the college community. For instance, Yeh and Inose (2003) use the term *acculturative stress* to refer to “the distinctive type of stress associated with individuals’ cross-cultural encounters which can manifest in physical, social, and psychological problems.” This concept fits some respondents’ experiences, as shortcomings in spoken English performance can primarily affect their acculturation process. For example, James, a Hungarian student majoring in Film and Trumpet performance, specified how his initial experience was a rather demanding one:

“I was not able to speak English during my first weeks at this college. I only knew two sentences or something. I didn't really realize how much stress that was going to cause me, so I just jumped into it because pursuing this career was something I really wanted to do. I remember having people not understanding me and even being physically stressed about it. However, after the first year, I started to get more comfortable with this environment.”

Regardless of their level of English skills, some participants also pointed out that speaking the language during the earlier college experience was no more complicated than it was tiring. Navigating an American college campus in the first weeks can be overwhelming for many students, especially if it is their first encounter with Anglo-Saxon culture. Thus, colleges and universities must provide support or accommodations for students who enter college in conditions that differ from the average domestic student. For students with little English expertise, like Sophia, welcoming and receiving activities can become notably fatiguing. Speaking Hungarian as her first language, Sophia expressed how busy her first couple of weeks were at Freedom College:

“I did not speak very much English during my initial experience here, but I still attended these mandatory academic events where each department was showcasing itself. At some point, I got so tired because I had been listening to English for about five hours straight. I wanted to attend the literature Q&A, so I went and sat there for about 25 minutes only to realize that I was on the chemistry one because I just did not understand what they were saying. The beginning was a little difficult, but I think it took me about a year to fully adapt to this college.”

It is interesting, nonetheless, how another participant who enjoyed full English proficiency underlined the same point. Even though Emilia studied English when she was in Venezuela, Freedom College was the first place she spoke the language consistently. While her writing skills were excellent at the moment of her arrival, her speaking abilities needed yet to develop. Once again, the importance of spoken English competence is stressed in Emilia's response:

“When I first came here, I remember being really happy and grateful about this opportunity, but when I started speaking English everyday 24/7, it was very exhausting for me. I studied English when I was back home, but I still needed to get used to always speaking English. You need to get used to it to the point that you stop translating in your head before everything you are going to say. It was so taxing for me that I would fall asleep immediately after the first couple of days.”

COVID-19 Pandemic

Another important factor that shaped these international students' path toward social integration was the COVID pandemic. Since sanitary restrictions prevented participants from socially interacting in the ways they normally would, successful social adjustment for them was delayed until the second year. Moreover, past literature shows that international students had to reorganize their strategies during the pandemic to navigate the higher education system and achieve their goals in an efficient manner (Hari, Nardon, and Zhang 2021). However, COVID restrictions affected both domestic and international students equally. For instance, every student that came from outside New York State needed to complete a 2-week quarantine which affected both American and non-American students. Undergrads were also having Zoom classes or socially distanced seats in their classrooms, as well as constant reminders of the social gatherings' disallowing. Therefore, social and academic settings were equally disrupted; however, students reacted differently to this context. According to Mexican student Camila, the most challenging part about social integration was navigating the COVID restrictions:

“I had a really different freshman experience than the other classes that didn't have their first year in the middle of the pandemic. Socializing was very hard because you never really knew where people stood in terms of socializing and following the rules. Some people would be more serious about the restrictions than others, but it was always hard to tell. There were also no events where you could attend so you could meet more people. I thought college should not have been that hard socially.”

In addition, Camila spoke outstanding English before arriving at Freedom College. Yet, her social adjustment trajectory was still hindered by the context of the pandemic. Unlike Camila, Israeli student Isabela spoke little English and also faced the less welcoming environment that COVID-19 brought upon Freedom College. Isabela's arrival was delayed due to unforeseen circumstances, which provoked a more challenging integration process for her. In

the interview, she talked about how she saw how everyone was already “integrated” by the time she set foot at her institution:

“My arrival at Freedom College was very chaotic because I was quarantined for two weeks in a hotel before I got to campus. I could not fly from Israel on the days I was supposed to, so I started my studies here very late. By the time I actually got here, it seemed like people already knew each other because they were in the bubble for longer. It was pretty challenging because I didn’t have anyone to hang out with and couldn’t make good social connections because of the covid restrictions. It wasn’t until the second year that I started to feel more at ease.”

Institutional Support

Rather than English proficiency or the pandemic restrictions, other respondents underscored how their social adjustment trajectory would have been easier had they had more support from the institution. Even though the international student office at Freedom College provides these undergrads with solid support in navigating the campus, further assistance beyond the students’ first weeks at the institution is often needed, especially among students who are still developing English skills. Existing literature has reported many practices that led international students to success and integration, such as guidance in campus transitions, legal status, updating academic integrity initiatives, developing customized career resources, and recalibrating mental health outreach (Martirosyan, Bustamante, and Saxon 2019). However, some participants indicated that institutional support was somewhat less present after their initial experience at the college. Mia, for example, focused more on the logistics of moving to another country to study than on her social integration, which inherently delayed this process. Although the international student office helped her in the early stages with all the needed services, she needed more guidance on how to continue managing those services:

“My first experiences here were very frustrating because it wasn’t easy for me to set everything up. For example, the office helped me get a phone, but it wouldn’t work because I still had my Chinese phone number. I needed to call again, but the company did not understand me, and I didn’t know how to ask for help. I didn’t have any means of communication until my roommate lent me her phone and helped me order the things I needed online. Months later, when everything was settled down, I started to feel less anxious and a lot better.”

It is worth noting that many international students simply do not know how to ask for support, even when resources may be available. Mia felt more comfortable asking her roommate for help considering she was one of the few people on campus she trusted the most during her first year. Further, another respondent agreed with this reasoning. For Emilia, adjusting to the college environment could have been more straightforward had she had more institutional support. Not only does the international student office ease the path for foreign pupils into this new context, but it is also responsible for guiding them throughout their journey in an American college. One particularly challenging aspect for international undergraduates is understanding how their legal status and documentation procedures work. This includes knowing the importance of a social security number, enrolling in health insurance, or filing taxes correctly. As Emilia points out, this is where the support should be more prominent:

“I think the way the international student office helps us could be a bit more efficient. There are many processes that almost all of us must undertake, such as getting a social security number, completing taxes, and OPT applications. As students from other countries, we don’t really know how all that works, and I think they could make their instructions a bit clearer because you just don’t want to make a major mistake in such delicate matters. Their guidance could be more consistent and present throughout our years here.”

Institutional support is thus essential in the initial integration process of international students since it helps them understand both the social and structural environment of the college, especially during their lower-class experience.

Faster Integration Experiences

Even though these participants had a more challenging time during their initial experiences at Freedom College, this did not necessarily prevent them from successfully adjusting in later years. As discussed in the next sections, factors such as the creation of a sense of belonging and social networks, as well as experiencing cultural shocks also played an essential role in the social integration process of all the participants. Additionally, the remaining half of the sample had a rather easier socialization process at the early college stages. Due to acquired English fluency and social ties, these students had an easier path toward social integration. Seven respondents mentioned that, in comparison with their less fluent counterparts, it was quite simple for them to integrate socially into the new environment. For instance, Liam shared that although English was not his first language, he “studied and spoke English back in Ecuador, which made it very easy when it came to making friends in different settings in this college.” Similarly, Singaporean student Rebecca highlighted that she knew she had a substantial advantage that other international students did not enjoy: “Interacting with Americans was a lot easier for me because I already spoke English well. I know for other Asian students who learned English as a second language, the experience must be so much harder.”

Other participants pointed out that building social connections before arriving on campus was tremendously useful for their social integration. In order to ensure multiple sources of support, these respondents contacted students and professors at Freedom College before traveling. This allowed them to ask them questions about the college and become, to some extent, familiar with the institution’s dynamics. Past research shows that sufficient social ties with domestic and international students and engaging in the college’s social activities can influence social integration and ultimately increase academic performance (Rienties, Héliot, and

Jindal-Snape 2013). Further, other investigations reported that many international students make deliberate choices in building strong multi-national networks (making friends with students from other countries) that provide them with a supportive environment (Montgomery and McDowell 2009). Brazilian student Lucas applied this logic. Before his trip to the United States, he mentioned how relevant it was for him to generate new social connections:

“Whenever I go to a new place, I try to make friends with the people who are already there. I contact them through social media before I get there so I know that at least I would have people that can support me. I texted some people in the percussion studio and first-year students from different countries. By the time I got here, I had already created a network, so they basically helped me in my first weeks. They showed me how everything worked, and I’m really grateful for that.”

Using this rationale in a less intentional way, Henry also generated social ties before coming to Freedom College. Henry is a Venezuelan junior double majoring in computer science and percussion who sought to have a social network that could potentially help him. Instead of contacting people as a personal tactic for easier adjustment, he naturally generated contacts in the institution due to having taken a semester online. While he was in Venezuela, he attended Zoom classes due to the Covid pandemic to then travel to the US in his second semester. However, he referred to this as a positive element as it allowed him to gradually enter the new experience:

“I knew a couple of people already and wanted to make connections so I could find jobs on campus and navigate the college. The socialization process felt a little easier because it was more gradual rather than a punch in the face. I wasn't pushed into any weird situations. Instead, I could adjust to talking English with people at my own pace.”

These divergent trends of “easy” and “hard” initial integration processes highlight the factors that shaped the respondents’ experiences. First, students who were fluent in the English language found it easier to integrate into the college’s social environment almost immediately.

On the contrary, for the other half of students who needed more practice in their spoken English abilities, social integration was significantly delayed for about one year. The second trend points to the disrupted logistics due to the Covid pandemic. Five participants indicated that social distancing, quarantine periods, and other restrictions made social adjustment more demanding. Conversely, two respondents expressed that Zoom classes helped them gradually adapt and make useful social connections before migrating to the US. Finally, the third pattern observed in initial social adaptation experiences alluded to the support from the international student office. About four respondents noted that more present, structured institutional support could be very beneficial for future foreign learners at Freedom College.

Sense of Belonging and Social Networks

Even though the interviewees' early college stages marked different impressions on them, other factors also shaped their social integration trajectories. During their years at Freedom College, these students navigated the experience differently as they fostered a sense of belonging and created social networks in a contrasting manner. Respondents also underscored various cultural shocks, which generated a sense of rejection of the hosting institution's culture. Past researchers have reported that students' sense of belonging tends to be associated with more adaptive motivational skills and may thus be important for their academic motivation and success (Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen 2007). Similarly, evidence suggests that failure to form satisfactory interpersonal relationships in college is associated with outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and college freshmen attrition (Tinto 1987). Therefore, understanding these undergrads' strategies toward social adaptation becomes relevant.

Participants developed a sense of belonging to Freedom College through extracurricular activities, meeting with other students with similar backgrounds, and to a lesser extent, through academics. These were the main mechanisms through which they forged their social ties. Representing and sharing the culture of the college, having close friends, feeling understood by certain groups, and being involved in civic engagement were among the main themes in the respondents' definition of belongingness.

The Conservatory

Furthermore, most conservatory students in the sample indicated that this institution helped them feel like they belonged. Since they had to spend a significant amount of time in conservatory classes such as chamber music, music history, and mainly orchestra rehearsals, it was easier for them to make friends through these activities. For example, Venezuelan student Liam shared that “the conservatory people, studio classes, and the orchestra were among the things that sparked a sense of belonging and facilitated meeting new people.” Agreeing with this point, Emilia said that “it is almost inevitable that you get close to people in the conservatory because you need to rehearse with them a lot, take classes together, and spend 6 hours a week with them in the orchestra.” However, this was only true for Western academic musicians. Naomi, a conservatory student from China, noted that the conservatory experience was rather isolating. “I didn’t think I belonged to this college for the longest time. I didn’t even think I fit into the conservatory because I play a Chinese instrument, and most people play Western instruments. I started feeling that sense of belonging only in my fourth year after the college accepted more students who also played Chinese instruments,” Naomi explained.

Critical Thinking

Other respondents defined belongingness as sharing the academic culture at Freedom College. Embodying an important characteristic of liberal arts education, this institution heavily promotes rhetoric and critical thinking. Further, participants pointed out that this way of analysis was not limited to the classroom since it also shaped students' conversations in social settings. Moreover, Lind's (2006) research highlights that critical thinking has been historically associated with the upper, ruling classes as it was expected of them to have excellent debate skills and clarity of thought, mainly to discuss matters of public policy. In the more present context of Freedom College, students often carry conversations in a critical fashion. According to Christina, "you can feel a sense of belonging at this college because you will learn a lot of new approaches to most subjects and how to look at everything through a critical lens. I think most students here think like that, which makes me feel an educational sense of belonging." In addition, Thomas' perspective concurred with this point:

"I feel part of the college community because we all think in similar ways. This college puts a lot of emphasis on learning many things and questioning them, and there is definitely a pattern in the way people talk. If you hold a conversation long enough, chances are it's going to eventually open up a dialogue about some sort of critical thinking about a subject, and that's a particular aspect of this community."

The STEM Community

An interesting trend in the participants' ability to construct social ties and a sense of community was that it varied among disciplines. STEM majors would develop stronger ties with the students in their discipline than humanities majors because students in the science fields would often need the support of their peers in order to pass classes, approve exams, and successfully complete assignments. On the other hand, since classes in the humanities

department seldom require students to find support from each other and assignments tend to be more focused on individual research, students' sense of belonging to their discipline is weaker than those pursuing STEM careers. For instance, Camila explained that "there is always the opportunity to be involved with like physics department Fridays in case you are struggling and need help. Many of us go there and struggle together, you know? That definitely creates a sense of community when you feel your peer's support." Jacob, who is studying computer science, also shared a similar view. "More often than not, I became close to people who shared the same interests. For example, I meet computer science people a lot because we connect on that subject but also because we help each other with classes and assignments." Therefore, students' social tie construction and belongingness are significantly affected by their majors.

Extracurricular Activities and Similar Backgrounds

Activities outside of the academic curriculum certainly helped students make sense of their social lives on campus. Being part of student clubs or sports teams and regularly attending on-campus events was a great way for these international undergrads to meet new people, which ultimately had a positive impact on their social and academic integration. As Rienties et al. (2013:689) report, "having a sufficient number of friends from the same culture as well as the host culture, sharing accommodations with other students, or joining a sports club can influence social integration and finally increase academic performance." Freedom College's lacrosse and cross-country team was very socially beneficial for Afghan student Amanda, and Mexican student Camila since "joining a sports team radically changes the community you build over time, and it also gives you support to deal with academic stress," Camila explained. In addition, interviewees also underscored that they felt a stronger sense of belonging because of being in

positions of leadership and civic engagement. For instance, Emilia described that she felt a “moderate sense of belonging during the 5th year because time allows you to get out of your comfort zone and try to make new friends. I’m now head of the conservatory wellness club, and I like that I can effectively help students. I feel like I’m representing something now.”

Further, as previous studies suggest, many international students tend to spend more time with other international students, or with students from the same country. Having a similar cultural background is a powerful factor that undoubtedly unites foreign undergraduates in the United States. Besides, speaking the same language and having comparable cultural norms greatly facilitates social interactions. Many investigations have focused on international students’ co-national friendship networks. However, Kim (2001) and Rienties et al. (2013) argue that “although co-national friendships provide short-term support through social interactions with students who are feeling similar emotions, it will hinder adaptation processes in the long run.” This relates to Lucas’ case. This Brazilian student emphasized that he felt closer to the peers with whom he shared a similar cultural background and a weaker sense of belonging with conservatory students in general:

“I feel a sense of belonging mainly to the international student community, especially to people who come from South America. I feel that we share a common experience. Our backgrounds are very similar even though we come from different countries. The warm energy from Latin American students is just different, and I can just feel it the second I start talking to them.”

According to Kim (2001), this lack of closeness to students from other backgrounds can potentially limit full social integration. Furthermore, to different degrees, this trend was present among 12 participants. This pattern was most prominent among Chinese students. Respondents from China indicated that their friendships and social networks were mainly constituted by other Chinese or international students. Furthermore, students from Afghanistan and Israel expressed

how their close friendships were also co-national but had multinational acquaintances. Hungarian students underlined that they enjoy speaking their language with other undergraduates from Hungary, yet they formed other friendships mainly through the conservatory. Latin American students' perspectives were similar to Lucas': they enjoyed interactions with Spanish speakers and felt naturally closer with people who shared the Latin culture but were also establishing other meaningful friendships with domestic students and people from other backgrounds. This development of friendship networks happened regardless of these pupils' English proficiency before and during their college experience. The remaining part of the sample felt significantly more comfortable with American students as some of them spoke English as their first language.

Cultural Shocks

The previous patterns stressed the mechanisms through which these students felt more socially integrated, accepted the new culture, and attempted to fully adapt to Freedom College's environment. However, the following segment will explore the participants' experience with cultural shocks and rejective reactions toward assimilating new cultural norms. Acculturative stress and cultural misunderstandings, as Yeh and Inose (2003) report, can negatively affect both social and academic student performance. While evidence suggests that creating meaningful relationships with American students is correlated with successful integration processes, cross-cultural barriers remain to be a significant obstacle for international students, and the reason why they limit their social interactions to other international students. One important example of cross-cultural differences is that some international students come from more welcoming, collectivistic backgrounds, while American students often display individualistic, and independent attitudes. According to Yeh and Inose (2003), "many international students perceive

social relationships to be rather superficial and feel disappointed and discouraged with interpersonal connections.”

Findings were consistent with this literature. Participants from different geographic regions highlighted a perceived sense of detachment from American students. From their perspective, domestic students were initially more “closed off” than international students and less emotionally invested in their interpersonal relationships. In addition, the lack of physicality to show affection was pointed out by several participants. Students from South America particularly emphasized how they needed to physically “hold back” in social interactions. In Latin American culture, physical displays of affection such as hugs and kiss greetings are more normalized. In contrast, these participants felt that in American culture, this might be perceived as intrusive or outside of the social norm. For example, Ecuadorian student Thomas explained that he had “experienced a great lack of physicality. Here affection is shown less in physical terms and more through conversations.” Emilia also touched on this point. “I enjoy physical touch a lot, but I realized I had to control myself here because people are not very touchy and show affection differently. I miss having that, but I also respect that this is a different culture.” Furthermore, Hungarian student Sophia explained how it was unfamiliar for her the way American students relate to each other. She perceived domestic students to be less “open” in conversations, which inherently lead to more superficial interactions:

“I didn’t quite understand at first how people become close friends. When people ask you “how are you doing?” you are not really supposed to say how you are. You are supposed to say that you are doing good, which doesn’t really let you see anything genuine about them. When people in Hungary ask you how you are, you are supposed to complain together about something. I will say that strangers here are nicer, but then it’s more difficult to get close to them. It feels like there’s always a wall.”

Respondents from conservative backgrounds also expressed discomfort towards liberal, progressive ideologies. These include ways of addressing authority figures and clothing choices. Since Freedom College provides a safe space for students to explore their identities and academic paths, this may represent a shock for students who have not yet experienced such flexibility in an academic setting. For instance, Hungarian student James mentioned some practices that he respected but did not necessarily agree with:

“A big cultural shock for me was the way people dress over here. Students tend to dress comfortably but in a weird manner, like a little messy. I was taught that you should dress appropriately for school, for example. I also found that students were very casual with their professors, and to me that was weird because I tend to be extremely polite when I address my teachers.”

Finally, participants from low-income backgrounds expressed that it was challenging for them to connect with American students because they could not relate to each other in various ways. Since many international students possess a more global perspective on living conditions and economic and political landscapes, it may be more difficult for them to socially engage with domestic students who have American-centered views. In addition, interviewees also stressed how, as international students, they feel less financially protected and “can’t afford to chill and not make everything out of the college experience the way some Americans do,” as Lilly explained. To this point, Emilia highlighted how American students assumed that she had the same resources they enjoyed, and how she constantly explained that they were in different social positions:

“I think sometimes the media portrays the culture of the United States as something that is universal. American students often think that you had similar experiences, like having their economic stability or being able to buy a flight and visit your family. When I talk about the struggles I face because my country is in shambles, they don’t really understand. I’m not saying that everybody is rich, but a lot of them can get the money and documents to go home for Christmas and that’s something some of us can’t do.”

Macedonian student David also underscored this point as a major cultural shock. Unlike the experiences of previous participants, this aspect did not necessarily create a sense of rejection against American culture, but rather a sense of otherness. However, he acknowledged that categorizing American students into one group is not representative of the US diverse population:

“I don't think we should put them in one basket because they are also different among them and this college also holds a particular type of American students. However, I think they've been living for a long time in a bubble where they are protected and don't really experience any hardships in their lives. Of course there are exceptions, but most of them can't relate to having experienced real poverty.”

While these responses could potentially fall under the category of “cultural misunderstanding” according to earlier studies (McKenzie and Baldassar 2017), the disconnection between Lilly and David and American students seems to come from a sense of lack of security and protection, as well as class difference. Because these students have no relatives in the US who could support them, it is easier for them to see the privileged condition of other students to have their families' physical, immediate support.

Summary: Chapter 2

Overall, the majority of students in the sample achieved social integration. However, they achieved this at different paces. Students who were fluent English speakers before coming to Freedom College achieved full social integration more quickly. Following them were participants who established effective social networks before and during their college experience. These social connections were often built through social media, the conservatory, the STEM department, and sports clubs. Further, respondents who developed more multinational friendships were more successfully integrated than those who limited their friendships only to

international students. In addition, eleven participants felt comfortable and accepted Freedom College's culture and student dynamics due to the mentioned factors or because of their high English proficiency and similarities in cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, the other seven participants pointed out some type of major cultural shock or practice they were unwilling to incorporate into their personalities. Ultimately, all respondents indicated that they were fully socially integrated into the college environment by the time they became upperclassmen.

Chapter 3: Academic Integration

Similar to social integration processes, international students' academic adjustment trajectories are mainly affected by their English proficiency. One way to define academic integration is the ability of students to persist in their careers in order to graduate (Tinto 1998). However, international students' persistence and academic satisfaction can be easily hindered by insufficient English skills. Further, previous studies suggest that forms of social support, such as connectedness with fellow students and teachers, taking part in extracurricular activities, and having friends and family support can positively affect academic performance (Rienties et al 2012). While international students' academic and social integration are often correlated with each other, other elements such as Freedom College's academic structure and curriculum also remarkably affect pupils' academic performance. Moreover, Rienties et al. (2012:687) define academic adjustment as "the degree of a student's success in coping with various educational demands such as motivation, application, performance and satisfaction with the academic environment." Thus, this section will focus on the participants' experiences in dealing with academic challenges at Freedom College.

Since discussions, argument skills, critical thinking, and seminar-based classes are the primary educational strategies in liberal arts colleges, mastering conversational English skills becomes one of the first goals for international students in order to succeed academically. Prior literature extensively highlights how the language barrier can be a great obstacle for international students. Nevertheless, switching between lecture-based instruction into rhetoric and argumentation as a pedagogical strategy represents another layer of difficulty for English learners. According to Sherry et al. (2010), this emphasis on conversational pedagogies and classroom participation is not only less familiar but particularly challenging for students whose

educational experience has been focused on the more passive environment of lecture-centered classes. Participants often underscored this point. Spoken English abilities are thus most needed in this academic context, as acquiring argumentative skills during the English learning process is a notably demanding task for international students in liberal arts colleges.

In-class English Skills

Some respondents specified that both discussions and lectures at Freedom College were particularly challenging for them due to the language barrier. The main difficulties were related to understanding class content or participating in discussions at a fast enough pace. Even though liberal arts college class sizes are significantly smaller than classes at research universities, class participation in discussions led primarily by native English speakers is yet a struggle for some international students who are still developing English skills. Naomi, while reflecting on the help she received at Freedom College to improve her English, mentioned how discussions in “big classes” at the global and international studies department were especially difficult for her:

“I am very satisfied with my academic experience here because although I wasn’t very good at English before, many professors were willing to help me. However, the most challenging part was the discussion sessions in classes with more than 15 people because students who already spoke English always wanted to share their opinions, even though what they talked about was not always related to the class. It’s just too hard to say something before someone else does, so I just stay quiet.”

Lucas also pointed out that the language barrier was a significant obstacle for him. As a computer science major, he struggled to understand key concepts in class when professors taught the content on a fast rhythm. Another challenge for him was keeping up with all the courses he took every semester as conservatory double-major students have more requirements to complete than their single-major counterparts. In addition, because of having taken the mandatory ESL

class for a year, he was balancing the rest of the classes he had to postpone to his upcoming semesters:

“Academic life here is very demanding. I basically don’t have a life because I feel like I have to study incessantly every day unless I drop the ball and do something in mediocre ways in exchange for a break in my weeks. The biggest challenge for me was the language barrier because some professors speak really fast in class, and I just don’t get what they say so I have to catch up with that after class. And this is not just me, usually a lot of international students go through the same thing.”

Other participants highlighted that this academic overload was not the only difficulty they faced. Rather, getting familiar with rhetoric and critical thinking in written and spoken English was a whole different process for them. For example, Emilia, Mia, and Lily specified that their previous educational institutions did not prioritize fostering argumentative skills.

“Here they could do a better job training you for this academic environment because many of us do not have that critical thinking background where you challenge everything you learn. In my country, you don’t have the right to “critique” other scholars work because you are seen as a mere high schooler. I was only used to lectures, tests, and taking dictations in class, so I had a lot of anxiety every time I had to participate in discussions,” Emilia explained.

Furthermore, Lily, whose second major is French studies, elaborated on how this new pedagogical approach was not only new for her but also not her favorite part about academics at Freedom College:

“It is a struggle sometimes when you have to analyze an article critically because I wasn’t very used to that, and I’m also not a huge fan of it. I just need time to practice, but it’s hard because we conservatory students are always busy with classwork,” Lily described.

It is therefore notable that both the classwork overload and the use of rhetoric were significant challenges for these students. In addition, Mia also mentioned how “it would have been a lot different if I had studied photography in China because the focus of the undergrad

experience would have been less on the theoretical side of things and more on its practical aspect.” Thus, academic English, class overload, and critical thinking abilities were the principal challenges for these international students in their academic integration experiences. Yet, almost all participants recognized that this multidisciplinary academic exposure allowed them to “learn a great deal” from subjects they otherwise would have never studied.

Academic Satisfaction and the ESL Class

Although all participants indicated they were satisfied with their academic experience at Freedom College, students who took the English as a Second Language class articulated different opinions about the course. For example, respondents with lower English proficiency expressed higher satisfaction levels than their more experienced counterparts. However, all the participants stayed motivated through their academic years and said they would persist until graduation. Furthermore, previous investigations have provided useful theoretical frameworks to explain international students’ academic motivation. According to Zhou (2015:720), “Intrinsic value refers to the student’s motivation to engage in activities for no obvious reward, while extrinsic motivation points to how well a task relates to current and future goals. Cost is the negative aspect of engaging in a task, such as stress or the lost opportunities resulting from choosing one action over another.” Participants with limited English skills placed intrinsic value on the ESL class because they were excited about mastering a new language and adequately integrating into the college. In contrast, respondents with moderate English levels deemed the course more directed to beginners and therefore placed extrinsic values on the class.

Students’ intrinsic motivation to learn English may be related to the universality of the language, as it is an important tool to have when crossing international borders. Given that

English proficiency is valued among many Latin American countries, Henry saw the ESL class as an opportunity to fulfill his personal interest in becoming an English speaker. This student had little English abilities upon his arrival and recognized that he could use the language to create multicultural social networks. Moreover, six participants concurred with this point. Referencing the utility of learning English in the long run, Henry explained:

“I took the ESL class seriously because I was very interested in learning English even before I came to this college. I tried to pay as much attention as I could because English is universal and you can connect with so many people from different countries through it. Both the professor and the class helped me a lot to achieve this level of fluency. I was also very grateful for the scholarship I received and tried to make the most of it with this class.”

Although this is a necessary class for admitted international students who need to work on their English skills, other participants arrived at Freedom College with sufficient fluency and grammar knowledge. All international students must take a standardized English test, such as the Duolingo or TOEFL tests. To be able to test out of the ESL class, students must score a specified minimum grade, showing that they have already acquired a high English level and thus assuring an easier path to academic success. However, existing literature shows that TOEFL scores are not effective predictors of academic attainment, partly due to the grand spectrum of necessary English language skills for academic success (Light, Xu, and Mossop 1987). Even though the difference between a student who almost approved the TOEFL test and another who scored a lower grade is vast, they all end up in the same ESL class at Freedom College. Some participants placed extrinsic value on the ESL class mainly because of this reason. As a student who had some English knowledge in her first year, Sophia expressed some discomfort about this course:

“There were very different levels of English speakers in my class. I spoke some English, but there were people who spoke none, so I often times felt like it was limiting me. I understand that we should help each other, but I also needed help, and in the class, I was more so uplifting

other people's skills. I can't be the one helping everybody so that everybody speaks the same level at the end of the year as opposed to, you know, me speaking even better. So the class wasn't particularly helpful for me.”

Sophia also explained how she was not the only student who felt that way about the class. Here we can observe how using the same pedagogical strategies with every student regardless of their English proficiency level is detrimental for the most advanced English speakers. Thus, future strategies to teach English at Freedom College should address each level of student fluency and separate them depending on their performance in the class so that they can work on their specific shortcomings.

Summary: Chapter 3

Ultimately, all the respondents indicated that they were satisfied with their academic experience at Freedom College. Major challenges to these students' successful academic integration included mastering spoken academic skills, adjusting to critical thinking as an academic strategy, discussion-based classes, managing classwork overloads, and navigating classes after the ESL course. Learning English was vital for these students to integrate academically as it was necessary for completing assignments, participating in class discussions, and fully understanding course content. In addition, several participants pointed out that they felt “behind” or that they needed to “catch up” because their English skills, both written and spoken, were not as good as their native-speaker counterparts. Because most participants came of age in academic environments where lectures-centered classes were more prominent than in-class discussions, their academic integration was delayed for about a year, which students utilized to adjust to new learning dynamics.

Students who were pursuing a double major, which is the majority in this sample, felt that managing classwork on top of improving their English skills was an important challenge. For instance, participants who enjoyed moderate levels of English proficiency placed extrinsic value in the ESL class because they considered it to be more beginner-focused. On the other hand, students with little English skills already had an intrinsic interest in learning a new language and therefore found the ESL class to be very helpful. Thus, international students' academic integration at Freedom College can be significantly delayed depending on their English proficiency and argumentative skills, an issue that should be considered by both professors and administrators.

Chapter 4: Career Aspirations

International undergraduates in the US may pursue several different paths after graduation, i.e., enrolling into another US university for further education, traveling to another country, or returning to their homelands. However, students who wish to stay in the US to study after college completion must acquire a new legal status after their F-1 expires. Available options for lawful stay include applying for the Optional Training Program (OPT) or an H-1B visa. The OPT allows only F1 holders to work in the United States for a maximum of two years in positions related to their academic major. On the other hand, an H-1B work visa allows more flexibility because it gives any foreign worker with a degree equivalent to a U.S. bachelor's degree up to six years to reside in the US if they work in positions where they can apply theoretical and practical knowledge of their degree. Furthermore, OPT programs are especially beneficial for students who pursue a STEM career, as the two-year stay period was extended to three years in 2016 (Bound et al. 2022). Thus, foreign students who intend to stay in the US to study after graduation must choose the major that better suits their academic and labor interests since this decision has legal implications.

Earlier investigations have revealed that 1.5 million foreign graduates of U.S. colleges obtained federal authorization to remain and work in the U.S. through the OPT program between 2004 and 2016 (Ruiz and Budiman 2018). According to a Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), 53% of international students who gained approval through this program graduated from STEM fields. Ruiz and Budiman (2018) also report that since the first employment extension of 2008, the number of STEM graduates applying for the OPT program has significantly increased by 400%. The majority of these

students hold Asian citizenship, as Students from India, China, and South Korea made up 57% of all OPT participants between 2004 and 2016 (Ruiz and Budiman 2018).

Further, most participants in this study felt inclined to stay in the US to further their academic goals. However, after integrating into Freedom College's social and academic spheres, international students' expectations about their future goals were shaped by the connections and opportunities they accessed at this institution. While some respondents were primarily interested in having better educational chances and studying with specific professors, students with low-income backgrounds sought to improve their opportunities for social mobility through US higher education. These students considered getting a master's degree a way to both further their education and occupational aspirations. Nevertheless, this attitude was shaped by many respondents' musical potential. Because most of them gained admission to Freedom College through the conservatory, they planned on applying to music graduate schools. Double-major students can pursue either of their specialties to perform in graduate institutions, ultimately giving them broader labor opportunities. Therefore, these students' attempts to navigate their legal status, job, and educational opportunities are crucial in understanding their goals upon graduation, as their decision encompasses both internal and external factors.

In addition, participants often correlated socioeconomic stability with reaching full adulthood. Consistent with past literature, most of these students prioritized economic independence over marriage or childbearing (Arnett 2000). According to Arnett (2000), transitions to adulthood are being increasingly postponed as the ages of 18-24 have become a period of emerging maturity. Moreover, full-time employment, marriage, parenthood, completion of school, and independent living are among the most remarkable milestones in achieving adulthood (Han, Tumin, and Qian 2016). Paths to reaching these markings may vary

depending on students' majors. For example, STEM students are more likely to get specific occupations and thus achieve earlier transitions to adulthood. In contrast, graduates with liberal arts, social sciences, or humanities degrees tend to experience slower entries to the labor market (Davies and Guppy 1997).

In addition, other scholars have argued that adulthood in the contemporary era is better defined as a process rather than a single event because individuals make explicit psychological, physical, and social transitions that other members of society validate and associate with these individuals' age (Hogan and Astone 1986). Transitions to adulthood are thus complex pathways through which emerging adults embody different societal roles, whether by attaining higher school levels, getting married, or achieving other marks. Since the timing and sequence with which people make these transitions define unique life-course pathways, it becomes relevant to examine the nuances of future international graduates' goals in achieving these social roles. One path to continue their educational trajectories is applying for another higher education, which is the option many respondents were planning to pursue.

Graduate School: Music, Humanities, or STEM?

Even though most participants indicated they would like to attend graduate school in the US, they followed different paths depending on their majors. For example, students whose second major was within the humanities fields mainly planned on furthering their music education. In contrast, students pursuing a STEM degree as a second major expressed more interest in attending graduate school or entering the workforce within those fields rather than music. International students' appeal to STEM fields is partly due to these majors' benefits, such as a more straightforward path to enter the labor market and higher income prospects. Jacob, for

instance, mentioned that he was going to apply to the OPT program to get a computer science position:

“Even though going to Berlin for graduate school or to work is still appealing to me, I would certainly like to work in computer science in the US because computer science jobs pay better and tax less here. The best thing about doing computer science is that I get three years to work after I graduate, so I don't need to get an H1-B until 2027. That gives me some time to stabilize myself.”

Lucas, another computer science major, expressed that he was also leaning toward pursuing this career more prominently than his music degree after he finished college. Although his original plan was to go to graduate school for music, his experience at Freedom College changed his perspective and expanded his options. Now, he is considering his computer science major more seriously:

“When I was back home, I had already made up my mind to go to grad school for music. Then as I went through the college requirements and my second major, I started to expand my thoughts and began to see a different path for my life. I want to get a computer science job here in America or go to grad school for music in Europe. I just need to get a job to sustain myself, and that is just more likely to happen if I do computer science.”

Reaching Adulthood

The remaining portion of double-major students who pursued fields in the social sciences stayed motivated to continue their education through graduate music programs. Students who only pursued one major also expressed that going to graduate school was their first option, except for one participant who wished to enter the OPT program to obtain a one-year job position in the political domain. Among these respondents, one visible pattern was that students from low-income backgrounds or whose countries were economically unstable indicated that they considered themselves full adults even before entering Freedom College. Conversely, respondents who enjoyed better living conditions in their homelands underscored that they would

only regard themselves as adults once they entered the labor force and started providing for themselves. Sophia, for example, spoke about how she considered herself a full adult, even before college, because she had already been providing for herself during past years:

“I consider myself an adult before coming here. I started considering myself an adult after having gone through years of experience where I was providing for myself. I worked hard to avoid depending on other people's houses or other people's money. I'm responsible for my actions and make my own decisions. Although it's important to have a good relationship with your parents, I think I can face life without their support.”

Similarly, Emilia pointed out that the difficulties of traveling outside Venezuela made her transition to adulthood somewhat faster. Emilia's adulthood path was also catalyzed by the precarious economic situation in this Latin American country. In order to provide not only for herself but for her family, Emilia got an on-campus job as soon as she could:

“I am definitely an adult. I've been taking care of myself and my family for a long time. I think migration makes you an adult in certain ways because you need to survive by yourself. You cannot call mommy and daddy to pay for your rent, for example. I think for people that are in our position, we are the ones who bring our family forward, rather than the family pushing us. I really feel that I'm pushing for everyone, and that makes you more mature at a younger age.”

As earlier literature shows, Emilia and Sophia prioritized job obtention and economic stability in their early adulthood (Arnett 2000). This was the result of experiencing economic scarcity from a young age. Even though they are still college students, their living conditions back home granted them the problem-solving skills necessary to survive on their own and therefore a greater sense of maturity.

Returning Home

Unlike other participants' migration goals, two interviewees were certain about returning to their countries after completing their academic preparation. For these students, international study represented a shorter stage in their lives that would serve as a tool for future stability back home. Unlike other participants, these interviewees were more likely to return to their homelands as soon as they felt prepared enough. In contrast with the common assumption about migrants wanting to prolong their stay in the US, these students' ultimate goal was establishing themselves in their homelands after obtaining their desired credentials. For example, Camila explained that although she would like to go to graduate school to study physics, she would like to go back to Mexico after she obtains her master's degree:

“I would like to get a master's degree either in the US or in the UK because I very much resonate with the physics and philosophy programs work in both countries. I would also like to work for a little bit, but then I want to go back to Mexico after having learned and having used my full opportunities here. I love my country so much, I really do. That's why I want to go back and help people after I finish my studies here.”

In her response, Camila enhances her transnational condition by describing her strong ties to multiple countries (Hari, Nardon, and Zhang 2021). Although she had a clear goal of graduating and furthering their education outside of Mexico, she is actively aware that all the resources she is likely to get abroad she will use to settle in her home country near her family and loved ones. While other participants had a less clear lens about their futures and the opportunities they have ahead, Camila's desire to return home continuously shape her decisions during her stay in the US. Similarly, Thomas shared that he hopes for a similar trajectory. After obtaining his degree in the political sciences, he would like to get postgraduate education in a European country. Thomas also considered applying for the Optional Training Program to get a

job in his field of study after he graduated. Ultimately, after he is satisfied with his experiences abroad, Thomas wants to build his life back in Ecuador:

“My plan is to work here for a little while. I would like to apply to the OPT program because there are a lot of interesting places to work around here where I could gain a lot of workplace experience. Then maybe I’ll go to Europe to get a graduate degree but eventually, I do wanna move back to Ecuador and work there. I want to settle down back in my country around my family and friends.”

Thomas’ hopes reflect the same transnational ties as Camila’s. In their case, the connections to different places are strengthened by the social networks and resources they acquire over the course of their time abroad. The variable of familial proximity is a prominent element in their migrant mobility as their abroad stay will likely be shortened by their wishes to return home.

Summary: Chapter 4

These international students' future goals were shaped by their personal and academic development at Freedom College. Because they were exposed to interdisciplinary knowledge, they had a broader scope of options and professional paths. Furthermore, respondents' plans for the future varied depending on their majors. Participants who sought to graduate with a STEM degree were more likely to enter the labor force before continuing their higher education. On the contrary, interviewees majoring in humanities and music were more eager to enroll in a graduate program. In the midst of delayed transitions to adulthood, current students seem to prioritize economic stability and further education over marriage and parenthood. Perspectives on self-adulthood fluctuated depending on students' socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants from low-income families experienced a faster maturity rate than their more affluent counterparts. Due to entering the labor force at an early age, these respondents achieved economic independence

sooner and therefore identified as responsible, self-reliant adults. Finally, only the minority of the sample explicitly stated that they would travel back to their countries to settle as soon as they complete their higher education.

Conclusion

The presence of international students in the US is beneficial at both cultural and economic levels (Hegarty 2014). In light of the increasing foreign student flows and prominent globalization, it is imperative that higher education seekers and host societies are equipped to achieve successful integration processes. In this study, I investigated how international students adjust particularly to a liberal arts college, which is a process that may differ from larger research universities in the United States. In order to further our understanding of this matter, I collected data and described the journey my participants took in coming to America to study, and the chronological transitions that shaped their experiences. I divided their trajectories into four sections; firstly, I delineated these students' motivations and circumstances for deciding to study abroad. Secondly, I discussed the participants' social integration process and the strategies they used to foster a sense of belonging. The third section addresses the respondents' academic adjustment and level with the institution. Finally, the last section collected the participants' academic aspirations and how their experiences at Freedom College affected these goals. This project provides a unique insight into the nuanced experiences of international students in a US liberal arts college as research on these educational institutions awaits expansion. Significant findings include the particular challenges that liberal arts education poses for international students, such as mastering English as a second language to be proficient in critical, discussion-based classes, students' delayed integration process, divergent respondents' strategies to adjust to the college's social context, and modifications in their future goals.

The participants' journey in this study started back in their home countries, when traveling to Freedom College was still only a possibility. While their circumstances and decision-making processes varied across their culture, it seems that higher education attainment was

remarkably important for all of them. This motivation fueled strong perseverance to overcome obstacles presented even during the application process. I remember that, as a student with little English skills, completing application forms and fees, as well as gathering the necessary documentation was challenging, as it was for most of my respondents. It is through social connections in the hosting institution that many international students get a clearer sense of the procedures they need to follow to get sufficient support to be able to attend a US liberal arts college. Accommodations may vary from one country to another, and it is only enrolled students who can guide the institution in how to help them. For example, Lucas described how helpful it was for him to be in contact with enrolled students prior to traveling:

“You want to create connections with people that could support you before I go to a new place. You don’t know what to expect, and I needed all the resources I could get from the College, so I just asked other people that went through similar situations to show me how to do things here.”

Further, Henry also alluded to this point:

“Thanks to other Venezuelan students at Freedom College, I was able to better understand the application process and how to get resources at the institution. Since our situation is different from other international students, it’s important that we ask for help and let the college know the challenges we face because of our country’s situation.”

This speaks of the sort of accessibility that is available for international students at Freedom College. While the institution seeks to support international students to the best of its abilities, one aspect that can be taken into consideration is the vast differences among the different these students come from, which therefore entails different necessities. A significant improvement could be that the institution and its actors become more knowledgeable about the circumstances international students come from. This can take the form of Zoom meetings with translators before the students come, and providing short courses or instruction for professors in relation to how to address the language barrier and the possible academic obstacles that result

from the students' different backgrounds. Furthermore, an important limitation of this study was the sample size. Future research should address responses from a larger, more diverse sample of students to identify patterns based on country of origin or other significant variables. Another improvement Freedom College could potentially implement is restructuring the ELS class in a way that allows students with different English levels to work on their particular weaknesses as opposed to the beginner-focused strategy. Ultimately, this study aims to highlight the links between each chronological transition, starting with the respondents' migration motives.

Although conceptually it is easier to separate push and pull factors, empirically it poses a challenging concept: when respondents spoke about their motivations for coming to study in America, they often highlighted a mixture of both forces. Rather than having one specific reason for migrating, they described situations that fed one another, i.e., the absence of elite music teachers in their homelands and teachers at Freedom College with prestigious careers. It is also worth noting that some interviewees were more attracted to America itself and subsequently to liberal arts colleges, while others talked about liberal education as the main pull factor that brought them to the US. Consistent with past literature, respondents also pointed out that they were attracted to the multicultural environment many US colleges offer because it represented an opportunity to practice their second language skills and intercultural sensitivity (Harrell 2017). Because other countries do not enjoy the rich demographic diversity of the United States, this environment becomes desirable for many international students. Another central theme was the socioeconomic insecurity some of these students experienced in their homelands. Although receiving higher education was an important goal for them, leaving environments with scarce opportunities for social mobility was more urgent.

While scholars in the past have drawn attention to push factors that include lack of opportunities for social mobility, absence of stable academic timelines, and little diversity of major areas of study (Altbach 2004), or pull factors that include the wealthier, more culturally diverse social systems of the United States (Harrell et al. 2017), findings show that another major pull factor for international students is their desire to pursue an undergraduate degree in liberal arts colleges. As noted by Sampey (1961), the liberal arts education model is distinctly American as it lacks equivalent counterparts in other nations. Many respondents were in search of a more flexible education where they could explore more than one discipline because department-based education was all they knew. Since the emphasis on integrative, broad education is unique to liberal arts colleges throughout all four years, this option especially appealed to many international students from lecture-based educational backgrounds. For participants who were unaware of liberal arts education, their expectations about college life were disrupted. At Freedom College, students are encouraged to engage with many courses and activities outside of their main academic interests, which reshaped many participants' goals and strategies.

When participants spoke about their integration process, it seemed that the most stressful part for them was learning English and applying it to “fit” into the college’s social and academic spheres. In concordance with earlier investigations, the main hindrances to these foreign students' social and academic adjustment are levels of English proficiency and cultural mismatches (Yeh and Inose 2003) (Sawir 2005). However, the literature gap lies in international students' adjustment to discussions of critical thinking as opposed to lecture-based instruction. One surprising finding was that participants often underscored the challenge of using critical thinking in both social and academic settings. Because the culture of students at Freedom College encourages freedom of thought and expression, critical discussions were often displayed

in casual conversations between students in a somewhat similar manner as in seminar classrooms. Thus, this skill translates itself into both environments, making it even more critical for international students to build a good enough vocabulary and also be well-versed in several topics in order to engage in such conversations. Ultimately, having discussions through a critical lens and learning how to use the language in different disciplines required them to develop a set of skills that may not have been necessary had they stayed in their countries. Participants' adjustment to this new pedagogical approach was delayed for about a year, especially for participants who did not have sufficient English abilities upon arriving at Freedom College.

Responses about social experiences and adjustment were the most interesting and nuanced. Perhaps this is because of the rich diversity of students in this sample coming from Hungary, Ecuador, China, Venezuela, Afghanistan, Georgia, London, Macedonia, Israel, Singapore, and Mexico. Even though there was some resemblance between the country of origin and cultural behaviors, respondents navigated their social experience by following their personalities and by applying strategies they had used in other educational institutions. Furthermore, conversations about cultural shocks with American students were also intriguing. While participants had completely different cultural backgrounds, they all underscored some form of absence of interpersonal connectedness (Yeh and Inose 2003). At Freedom College, international students often find it difficult to create strong connections with American students, partly because of the lack of openness and superficial relationships they perceive. Most of them seemed to have an easier time creating strong social bonds with other international students because they shared community-oriented behaviors to a greater degree.

Participants' adjustment experience at this liberal arts college was unique because of the constant exposure to dialogues, both in social and academic environments, that led to a more

prominent use of their spoken English abilities. The discussion-based classes, anachronical curriculum, and multidisciplinary approach of Freedom College represented a remarkably different path for most of the participants considering that required classes in other majors are not a common pedagogical structure outside of the US (Lind 2006). The college size and location was also a factor. Due to the small student body and classes, students were constantly interacting with roughly the same people, which sometimes created a sense of belonging. However, other times it pushed respondents to interact only with the same group of students.

Additionally, rather than categorizing the interviewees' responses by country of origin, it is more accurate to look at how their trajectories unfolded over time to identify which factors influenced their experiences. Based on these responses, it seems that participants' motivations to come to study abroad had an impact on the meaning-making process of their experiences at Freedom College. Students who came from socioeconomic unstable backgrounds were more likely to put substantial effort into academic classes, and to be actively informed about getting resources and on-campus jobs. They approached the college experience from a more mature perspective that entailed the idea of "making it work no matter what," as Emilia described it. "We don't have a safety net or any family here as other students do. We can't afford to fail classes or to stop producing money to sustain ourselves and the ones we love." On the other hand, students who were mostly pulled to liberal arts colleges had an easier time with academic classes and were able to adjust faster socially to the American culture. These students were more involved in clubs, civic engagement activities, and had an overall more active social life. This is not to say that their academic performance was affected by the social context. Instead, they had a younger, burden-exempt view and attitude toward college (Astin 1999).

Connections with participants' future goals were more career-oriented. Most double-major students were interested in applying to US graduate schools to get a master's degree. Students who decided to pursue a STEM career as a second major were more likely to apply to the OPT program as they described the graduate school options to be "way too difficult and hardcore for the skill level you get to develop in college, especially when you do a double major," Jacob explained. Students with only one non-STEM major were interested in continuing higher education as well, whether in the US or abroad.

Overall, every student on this project reflected on their experience at Freedom College positively, as their journey prompted not only academic but notable personal growth. They all expressed how the college unlocked new, unimagined opportunities for their futures that would not have been possible had they not attended this institution. As an international scholar, I resonated with many of these responses and, perhaps, that was partly why it was easier for me to build rapport with participants. While the pathway toward international education is challenging, my respondents and I agree that it is incredibly rewarding. Future investigations must observe possible divergences in international students' integration stages that may arise from different conditions, i.e., liberal arts colleges in more prominent metropolitan areas, single-sex institutions, historically black colleges, and prestigious institutions with more extensive racial and citizenship multiplicity. Comparisons between international students' experiences and academic outcomes at larger research universities versus smaller liberal arts colleges would also enhance the existing literature. Such examinations may underscore the accomplishments and obstacles international students continue to overcome and the diverse ways in which they still make success possible.

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