

From the Personal to the Professional: International Student Experiences of Seeking Employment in the United States

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Abstract

International students in U.S. higher education who pursue work must balance personal and professional pressures while seeking employment. While much attention has been given to their experiences of acculturation, stress, and psychological well-being, further work is needed to document their personal growth, navigation of economic pressures, and experiences of seeking employment. This phenomenological study utilized semi-structured interviews to explore international students' experiences of personal growth and change, economic pressures, and seeking employment in the US. The results indicate that international students share many experiences of personal change with their domestic counterparts. Yet they are simultaneously navigating a new cultural context, dealing with economic pressure, and navigating barriers to their employment search. These barriers are rooted in the lack of clear information, misaligned support resources, personal shortcomings, employer perceptions, and visa restrictions.

Keywords: employment, international students, rationales for study abroad, student development, student services, student visas

Introduction

To understand today's globalized world of higher education, one must examine the micro-level experiences of individuals who navigate its varied passages. While past work has examined experiences of acculturation and stress (Jackson et al., 2019; Rai et al., 2021), COVID-19 (Aucejo et al., 2020; Ghazarian et al., 2023), and psychological well-being (Browning et al., 2021; Li et al., 2019), work remains to better understand international student experiences of economic pressures and the search for work. This study explores the lived experiences of international students in the U.S. related to their personal growth, external pressures, and search for employment. In doing so, the study contrasts the humanizing experiences of studying abroad with the economic imperatives that international students must face.

The article will delve into the complexities faced by international students undergoing personal change, navigating economic pressures, and seeking work in the U.S. context. Past research that has been done on these experiences has examined motivations behind pursuing Curricular Practical Training (CPT) (Renz, 2023) or the human geography of where Optional Practical Training (OPT) has been pursued (Kaemmerer & Foulkes, 2022). This study will provide insight into the lived experiences around maintaining good status for visa regulations, undergoing CPT or OPT authorization processes, and the social barriers that international students describe from their professional lives. These social barriers can affect the confidence and engagement of international students both as they experience the humanizing aspects of studying abroad and while they act to gain footing in their professional lives.

This phenomenological study captures and presents the lived experiences of individuals who came to the US as international students. The study will focus on the following three research questions:

- (1) How do international students describe their experiences of personal growth and change as a result of studying abroad?
- (2) How do international students describe financial or economic pressures they experience?
- (3) How do international students describe their experience of seeking employment in the US?

The findings provide a better understanding of how current policies around international students play out for these individuals and inform recommendations for practitioners and policymakers.

Literature Review

The US remains the top destination for international students, in part due to the disproportionately large number of highly ranked colleges and universities located there (Bound et al., 2021). A variety of evidence demonstrates that this kind of experiential learning abroad contributes to cognitive development, behavioral change, skill development, and increased employability (DeLoach et al., 2021; Fakunle, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). In addition to these benefits, many international students pursue study in the US for their professional opportunities and advancement. Student visas, unlike work visas, are not capped, encouraging those interested in entering the U.S. labor market to do so through its higher education system (Rosenzweig, 2006; Bound et al., 2014). Employment regulations, such as OPT (Optional Practical Training) and CPT (Curricular Practical Training) in the US, have a profound impact on the experiences of international students (Chen & Li, 2023; Coffey et al., 2018; McFadden & Seedorff, 2017). These regulations play a fundamental role in shaping the employment experiences of international students who pursue an academic journey through systems of ‘edugration’ (Coustere et al., 2023), “the recruitment and retention of post-secondary international students as immigrants” (Brunner, 2021, p. 26), as part of a global competition for talent. This literature review explores findings related to international student employment, examining their challenges, benefits, plans, and outcomes.

Job Search

Throughout their years of studying, as well as post-graduation, international students navigate unfamiliar circumstances in an attempt to seek employment. These circumstances include acclimating to the American culture, society, and job market (Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). International students often arrive in the US with few professional contacts. Evidence supports the importance of networking with locals (or bridging social capital) for international students seeking work in their host country (Alho, 2020). These relationships can help international students become aware of more opportunities and improve their chances of success in pursuing them.

International students’ strengths over local students include multilingual abilities, intercultural competence, and their flexible perspectives (Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011), but they need opportunities to develop their employability within their host country (Fakunle, 2021). Some evidence suggests that benefits may vary based on the particular field and sex of an individual (Niu et al., 2022). Sangganjanavanich et al. (2011) outlined how international students differed from their domestic counterparts, altering their behaviors in an attempt to be viewed similarly to domestic applicants. Behaviors that international students adjust in coping with acculturation include their definition of appropriate dress and manner of speech such as adjustment of accents and use of different phrases (Spencer-Rogers, 2000; Zunz & Oil, 2009). Thus, as international students seek employment, they may experience personal changes as they adapt to their perceived expectations of the job market.

Resources for International Student Employment

The necessity of resources and support for international students seeking employment in the US is vital due to various external factors such as employment regulations, and restrictions, as well as public policies that identify the rights of international student workers (Tay, 2022). As international students often face challenges in identifying resources unique to their career goals, tailored support in the form of career counseling centers is essential in higher education institutions (Chen & Li, 2023; McFadden & Seedorff, 2017; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). International students may need additional support beyond career services, as some evidence suggests that changing regulations and the subsequent uncertainty can be barriers to international students’ psychological adjustment and well-being while studying in the US (Park & Shimada, 2022). Addressing the multifaceted external factors, including cultural adjustments, and the plausible need for career counseling assistance in navigating the U.S. job market is essential for fostering the professional success of international students (Chen & Li, 2023).

Plan versus Reality

International students have to contend with a variety of pressures as they pursue professional goals. These pressures can come from acculturation, work authorization regulations, and economic pressures with which they are confronted during their time as a student and alum. International students with longer durations of study (as determined by program length) tend to formulate plans to remain in the US for longer periods of time post-graduation (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007) and seek out more information related to immigration regulations, visa requirements, and career guidance.

In seeking to control external factors affecting their employability, international students often experience inevitable divides between their professional plans and reality (Schlesinger & Daley, 2014). For example, U.S. work authorization programs of Optional Practical Training (OPT) and H-1B visa acquirement present systemic barriers for international students seeking post-graduate employment. Despite being utilized by many international students, OPT serves as a temporary work authorization for only one year, or three years for STEM students. The limited timeframe to search for a job position, become acquainted with a given workplace, and work with an employer for a potential H-1B application significantly impacts international student success finding a permanent position in the U.S. job market (Monahan, 2018; Ruiz & Budiman, 2018).

The limited time for employers to decide about OPT participants can itself be a significant barrier. Tay (2022) described an instance of an international student who applied for post-graduation employment and was denied merely for holding an international student status, explaining that from a legal standpoint, international students are not protected from citizenship discrimination under 8 U.S.C. § 1324b7 (Office of Special Counsel for Immigration-Related Unfair Employment Practices, 2014). Formidable challenges arise for international students seeking employment in the US as they experience misalignment between their preplanned professional goals and the realities of available professional opportunities. Further work is needed to document the experiences of these students, the economic pressures placed upon them, and the impact of visa regulations on their lives.

Conceptual Framework

This study applies Fakunle's (2021) model of international students' rationales for studying abroad as the framework to explore and understand the competing personal motivations and professional pressures that international students must navigate. Fakunle (2021) organizes international student rationales for studying abroad into four categories: educational, aspirational, experiential, and economic rationales. Educational rationales include academic outcomes and experiences. Experiential rationales consist of intercultural exposure and novelty seeking. Aspirational rationales are comprised of perceived opportunities for personal, professional, or moral development, distinctly emphasizing the pursuit of self-actualization and professional fulfillment beyond mere economic gains or status. Economic rationales include anticipated costs and the expected returns for pursuing a degree abroad. Fakunle's (2021) framework provides a model for interpreting international students' rationales for studying and seeking employment abroad.

Methods

This phenomenological study presents the lived experience of international students in U.S. higher education. The study examines how international students' experiences relate to their personal and professional rationales for pursuing higher education abroad.

Positionality

The researchers approach this study with a critical realist ontology (Bhaskar, 2010) and constructivist epistemology (Piaget, 1967). Both researchers have extensive experiences working with international students providing student services; one in the US and the other both in the US and other contexts abroad. One of the researchers also has studied abroad as a U.S. student overseas. While it can be difficult to discretely define researchers as an insider or outsider (Acker, 2000), the researchers in this study approach this topic predominantly as outsiders. The researchers may have struggled, as a result, to gain quick and rapid acceptance by participants during the data collection, participants may have been less willing to share the whole of their experiences, and the researchers may have missed inferences due to a lack of insider, contextual knowledge (Dwyer & Buckler, 2009). On the other hand, as outsiders the researchers avoid the risks of insider assumptions and the possible distorting effects of similar personal experiences on data analysis.

Participants

This study made use of criterion sampling as a purposeful sampling technique to select participants who were current or former international students at higher education institutions in the Central New York region. The researchers contacted International Education Offices and Offices of Institutional Research at higher education institutions in Central New York state explaining the focus of the research and requesting FERPA directory information of international students at their institution. Potential participants were also identified through social media groups for international students and CPT/OPT professional opportunities. Potential participants were contacted by email, direct message, or in person with a brief message inviting them to take part in the study and a link to an informed consent and audio-visual recording consent form. Participants were selected who had experience seeking employment through CPT, OPT, or other means. Snowball sampling was also used. A total of ten participants were recruited for the study. Their personal characteristics are reported in Table 1.

Table 1.

Participant Characteristics

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>Nationality</u>
Aanya	M	Undergraduate	India
Ezra	M	UG Alumni	Malaysia
Jisha	F	Undergraduate	India
Kabir	M	Refused	Nepal
Mahajan	M	Undergraduate	India
Nathaniel	M	Undergraduate	Bahamas
Carla	F	Undergraduate	Nepal
Yerim	M	UG Alumni	Senegal
Heena	F	Undergraduate	India
Kaamma	F	Undergraduate	Nepal

Data Collection

Participants took part in an interview with one of the researchers and chose between an in-person or virtual interview. All but one of the participants chose to conduct their interview virtually. The semi-constructed qualitative interviews were based on an interview guide focusing on themes of personal introduction, growth and change, economic pressures, and employment seeking experiences. All interviews were recorded.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative content and deductive analyses (Patton, 2015) informed by Fakunle's (2021) model. In addition to method triangulation, researcher triangulation (Patton, 2015) was used. Each researcher conducted analysis independently before meeting and sharing their findings. After each meeting, the researchers would return to the transcripts and review their analyses before meeting again until consensus was reached in the patterns, codes, and themes identified. The results are presented thematically, drawing on themes that emerged from both the qualitative content and the deductive analysis.

Results

Seven themes emerged from the interviews. These included: (1) Aspirational and Educational Rationale, (2) Economic Rationale, (3) Experiential Rationale, (4) Personal Change, (5) Economic Pressure, (6) Barriers to Employment, (7) Resources and Suggestions.

Aspirational and Educational Rationale

Participants expressing an aspirational rationale also often held an educational rationale for their decision to study in U.S. higher education. Many noted that more diverse majors of study are available in the US, which directly contribute to potential career opportunities in niche fields and the ability to pursue one's professional dreams, driven by a desire for personal growth and fulfillment.

“Geology is not really a popular subject back in India. There are very few and limited schooling options that provide geology [as a major of study]. Usually, [schools in India] offer geo-engineering, or some kind of branch to the subject, but not the science [of geology]. This led me to look at different places where geology [majors] were offered” (Heena, India).

Heena's comments demonstrate how the lack of opportunities in particular educational programs in one's home country can drive students to seek opportunities abroad that align with aspirations of professional self-actualization. Others were attracted to the US because they believed the education there would better position them for success in their dream profession.

“I think a big thing is the practical hands-on approach of universities here. My undergraduate [studies] were very hands-on, even though I majored in Anthropology and Global International Studies which are more theoretical. I was able to participate in internships and on-campus employment related to my major, which I could not have done if I was back home in Nepal... [The decision to study in the US] also came from viewing the broader scope of professional opportunities available” (Kabir, Nepal).

Participants holding both an aspirational and educational rationale in the decision to study in the US outlined pathways that consisted of goals related to pursuing a specific field of study and learning in methods that would not be readily available in their home country. These rationales were not mutually exclusive but interconnected, with students seeking an education that offered an attractive education that would position them for success and potentially self-fulfillment in their future careers.

Economic Rationale

In outlining motivations for earning a degree in the US, international students discussed an economic rationale consisting of the investment and opportunities of studying abroad. Discussions of economic rationale pertained to the long-term financial considerations and strategies that justify their investment in their education. Students provided details regarding post-graduation life and work opportunities that become available as a result of earning a degree in U.S. higher education.

“A lot of international students think about the value of a degree earned from the US versus [a degree earned] in their home country” (Nathaniel, Bahamas).

The decision to pursue an education in the US is viewed as an investment opportunity by some participants. They invest money and time in hopes of achieving independence, stability, and even to provide financial support for family back in their home country.

“I wanted to come [to the US] because of the opportunities post-graduation, related to work” (Kabir, Nepal).

These participants shared plans to seek employment in the US after graduation. They plan to leverage the knowledge acquired through their study abroad experience and earn income beyond what they could expect in their home countries.

For others, the economic rationale consisted of dreams for a lifestyle in one's home country that would not have been possible without study abroad experience.

“I was mainly applying for oil and gas companies, because in Senegal, right now, we are getting ready to extract oil and gas. So, my plan was to join BP, British Petroleum. They are extracting oil and gas out of Senegal. My thought process was, if I can work at BP, and ask them to transfer me home, that is the best life I could have” (Yermin, Senegal).

Here, Yermin explained how studying abroad was an opportunity to pursue work at a multinational corporation to transfer his new skills back home. Such narratives underline the broader economic motivations underpinning study abroad among some participants, framing a U.S. degree as a means to an end.

Experiential Rationale

Some participants' decisions to pursue a study in the US was directly tied to an experiential rationale.

“Yes, studying in America and getting an American degree is a thing. But, like - most of my reason for coming here was to be independent” (Kaamma, Nepal).

Many participants described this same desire for independence and the opportunity to take responsibility for important aspects of their lives such as their finances and decision-making. The allure of a U.S. education was tied up in the pursuit of personal growth and self-reliance through experiencing new cultural settings and circumstances.

These participants expressed a desire to develop a nuanced understanding of the world, acquire life skills, and achieve a level of independence that they felt they could not in their home countries.

“One of the reasons why I wanted to move to a different country was that I wanted to learn [to do] things on my own, like handle my finances. I pay most of my [tuition] fees, or as much as I can on my own, and ask my parents for help on the rest. All of my other expenses, like buying groceries, and other stuff, I do that on my own. It's been a little harder [to do things on my own] as I have to work 20 hours a week and then also be a full-time student ” (Jisha, India)

The experiential rationale embeds itself into the fabric of these participants' everyday lives. The motivation to manage one's finances, make autonomous decisions, and undertake daily responsibilities such as grocery shopping represents a significant leap toward self-sufficiency and independence. They shared how the study abroad experience was viewed not just as an academic endeavor, but as a transformative journey that shapes students into versatile, independent, and culturally-aware adults. Reflecting on the impact of this independence, participants highlighted how the process contributed significantly to their growth and development. Many felt that navigating these new responsibilities and cultural landscapes enhanced their confidence, resilience, and adaptability. Personal growth was a recurrent theme, with many indicating that the independence experienced abroad had equipped them with critical life skills and a deeper sense of their own capabilities and potential.

Personal Change

Participants revealed that integration into the U.S. academic and social culture contributed to their personal change. The experiences reported by participants highlighted a spectrum of personal change, underscoring the varied ways in which individuals engage with and adapt to a new cultural environment. Some reported having preconceived strategies for cultural differences, while others navigated their new surroundings without a clear plan, leading to initial challenges.

“The difference in culture and how it affected me is one of the most memorable things. When I came [to the US], I was very hesitant and shy, and even the smallest things would make me anxious and I would be overthinking everything. But, I had some supervisors and professors who helped me let go of that” (Mahajan, India).

Increasing interactions with their U.S. academic and social environments, led participants towards a transition that incorporated U.S. cultural values and perspectives. With this, engagement with U.S. culture can act as a catalyst for personal change, suggesting that immersion in a new cultural environment can influence an individual's identity.

“You observe the thought process [of American peers] and eventually what happens... is you become part of their thinking and like you adopt some new things” (Aanya, India).

The transition towards incorporating U.S. cultural values is not merely superficial but involves a deep engagement with the new culture that reshaped participants' thought process and perspectives. These experiences highlight the transformative potential of cultural immersion, suggesting that exposure to and engagement with a new cultural environment can lead to significant personal change, shaping an individual's identity in meaningful ways.

Some of the personal changes described by the participants were quite similar to what some of their local peers might have shared.

“I also found the best version of myself in America and specifically in [institution name] because I was finally out of my comfort zone and – I got more involved and did the things that I truly wanted to do” (Ezra, Malaysia).

For many in U.S. higher education, the experience includes stepping out of one's comfort zone and engaging in new activities that not only broaden one's horizons but also foster a sense of independence and self-confidence away from home.

“I was working all late night shifts, and it was snowing. One day, it was like snowing really heavily, and my shift ended at like 11:40-ish PM. And I was walking home slowly. I was not rushing, and this reminded me - if I was home, I would be rushing right now in this snow. But, here I have the ability to decide that for myself. Now, I have the ability to be calm and choose what to do, and I actually cried [about this] on my way back home” (Kaamma, Nepal).

Moments of realization highlight the shifts in perspective and priorities that can occur both when living in a foreign culture and when having the traditional residential experience of higher education. The participants' comments revealed how these challenges provide new insights into one's self and the world.

Economic Pressure

Participants described how their status as international students contributed to economic pressures that they felt. Shared concerns arose related to tuition, the cost of living, and other economic pressures associated with studying in U.S. higher education. Students outlined immediate financial challenges and stressors that they faced and the pursuit of on-campus employment as a means to sustain their place in U.S. higher education.

“I was not really thinking about it when I was applying [to attend a U.S. college or university] in Nepal. But, when I came here, it definitely hit me that there is a financial part attached to studying abroad, and you know you have to pay your bills, you have to buy a SIM card, you have to get a bank account, and things like that.” (Kabir, Nepal)

For some participants, seeking on-campus employment and/or internships was more than merely gaining professional experience, rather, it was necessary to afford a U.S. education. “It was scary - I would always be checking my bank account like, do I have enough money to pay for the next semester? If I worked during the semester, I would be able to cover my cost. Although everything would entirely go to school, so I would basically have pennies for myself, but it was doable” (Carla, Nepal).

For others, there was a sense of guilt about the cost that they had incurred on their families for studying in the US. “Everything that I do, it’s almost always about how to find a job after I graduate because I spent a big chunk of money when I came here, and of course I am hopeful that I can return some of this to my family” (Ezra, Malaysia).

Still others revealed how finding a job in the US was much more than earning money to survive, but was imperative for them to remain in the US. These thoughts dramatically shifted the priorities of participants as they pursued their degrees.

“It’s like, instead of worrying about final exams or final papers, I have to also worry about finding a job, because I am graduating. I have 90 days to find a job, or I’ll have to legally leave the country and I think it is quite scary” (Aanya, India).

This constant worry about financial stability, coupled with the urgency to secure employment post-graduation within a limited timeframe, underscores the precarious situation in which some of the participants found themselves.

For many participants, graduation and/or semester breaks were a time for increased economic stress. For instance, most participants described how their host institution served as their main residence in the US. Upon completing a given academic term, many were faced with housing insecurity.

“The summer is so stressful, like even now, every time I am not doing something I am thinking about it. Because, I am trying to apply for internships, but I do not think I am going to get one - I do not have a lot of experience with that. If I get [an internship], that’s great, but if not, I do not know what I am going to do. That is constantly in my head, and I think that is the one thing stressing me out the most.” (Kaamma, Nepal).

Economic realities for international students can significantly diminish their overall educational experience. These economic pressures not only influence their academic performance and personal well-being but also shape their professional trajectories and legal status in the country.

Barriers to Employment

Participants reported various barriers to obtaining employment specifically related to their search for work utilizing the CPT and OPT employment authorizations. Barriers to employment included student ignorance, discrimination, employers, visa regulations, and institutional resources. Upon the determination to pursue employment requiring CPT and/or OPT work authorization, the participants mentioned ignorance on their part as well as a lack of support from their host institutions.

“I feel like a lot of international students are not aware of internships or positions that are offered outside [of the campus]. I would not have applied for a position that I recently learned had it not been for a senior who reached out to me telling me that there was a great opportunity that I should try for. A lot of international students begin looking for internships around their junior or senior year, and it is very hard because career fairs have internships that are intended for U.S. citizens, or that are very limited in the range of majors [that are eligible]” (Heena, India).

Heena’s comments illustrate how a lack of information and guidance, compounded by policies that restrict students can hinder ambitions, a sentiment shared by many participants.

In addition, the participants explained how some campus resources can actually act as a barrier in their employment searches.

“Five months before I graduated, I had already started to apply for [post-graduation] jobs, and I realized that my resume needed work, and then I was touching up my cover letter. I was going to the [Career Services Office], to build a better possibility to work in an H-1B sponsored company. And, it was actually extremely difficult because a lot of the guidance in the [Career Services Office] is not directly helpful for H-1B seeking students” (Ezra, Malaysia).

Other participants also shared how they felt most of the career services offered by their institution were geared towards domestic students and that there was very little consideration of international students.

Those participants nearing graduation or recently graduated expressed a desire to obtain employment with H-1B sponsorship. While participants acknowledged their ability to legally obtain employment with OPT, many expressed feeling viewed as an undesirable candidate when disclosing their limited work authorization time-frame.

“When I reach the part [of the interview] where they ask me ‘Are you now or in the future looking for an H-1B visa?,’ you can see the interviewer's eyes and body language change. You know in that split second, because they realize that I might not be the person that they are looking for, no matter how much they want me or not. Most companies do not hire [international students] because they are not familiar with our situation...[With OPT], there is a constrained cycle that international students are placed in, in terms of finding a job in a short period of time and making life-altering decisions” (Ezra, Malaysia).

A sense of discrimination and disadvantage due to their visa status limited participants’ opportunities and as they attempted a constrained job search cycle imposed by their OPT status.

“I have noticed that [employers] look for American citizens. This has been difficult as they don’t explicitly say that [in job descriptions], but they also ask you about U.S. citizenship on applications.” (Kaamma, Nepal)

Overall, participants’ experiences of seeking employment in the US under CPT and OPT authorization revealed significant barriers that affect their ability to secure employment. These barriers were multifaceted, encompassing insufficient information about professional opportunities, discrimination, employer practices, visa regulations, and misaligned institutional support.

Resources and Suggestions

Participants outlined resources and provided suggestions based on their experiences in seeking employment opportunities in the US. Suggestions were provided in response to both institutional and federal policies.

“I want schools to work with more companies - local companies, or any other organization because currently our school has a career services office, and if I am being honest, they are not effective... It is awful because they have always been home [base for career assistance], yet they are not sure about international students” (Aanya, India).

In regard to federal policies, many participants expressed hope for the alteration of the time frames offered for work authorization under the CPT and OPT programs.

“It would be wonderful if I could get a three year OPT instead of one year. It would certainly make things a lot easier coming out of OPT and asking for a visa sponsorship, because companies are more likely to sponsor a senior level or mid level position, not an entry level position.” (Carla, Nepal).

The experiences and suggestions of these participants emphasize the necessity for a more supportive and inclusive approach to international student employment in the US.

Discussion

The results from the study provide insight into experiences of personal growth, financial and economic pressures, and the employment seeking among international students in the US. The results are discussed below in relation to each of the research questions before considering their meaning in terms of Fakunle’s (2021) model of international students’ rationales for studying abroad.

Research Question 1: Personal Growth and Change

Many changes described by participants were in line with those changes commonly reported by traditional students who take part in higher education – developing competence, becoming autonomous, and establishing identity (Chickering, 1969). Specifically, participants described learning to become more assertive, becoming more comfortable with extroverted behavior, and building independence. One element that may feature more prominently among the participants as international students was a self-reported ability to better practice perspective taking. This outcome of perspective taking is one more commonly associated with study abroad (Çiftçi & Daloğlu, 2021; Holmes et al., 2015) and global learning (Barker, 2020; Kahn & Agnew, 2017) than general higher education. The experiences that international students face throughout

their transformative journey studying in the US are not merely about navigating new social norms or language skills, but also about the deep personal evolution that occurs when individuals engage with cultures different from their own. The results suggest that international students undergo many of the same experiences of personal growth and change that their traditional peers experience, while also practicing perspective taking and other elements of intercultural competence.

The personal change narratives shared by participants indicate that the engagement with U.S. culture significantly impacted the ability to adopt new perspectives. For instance, Mahajan from India highlighted how overcoming initial shyness and anxiety through interactions with supervisors and professors was a crucial part of his personal growth, demonstrating a shift in perspective from hesitance to openness. Similarly, Aanya's experience of observing and eventually integrating the thought processes of his American peers illustrates the dynamic nature of perspective taking, where the immersion in a new cultural environment facilitates the adoption of new viewpoints and ways of thinking. These accounts underline the importance of cultural immersion in fostering perspective taking among international students, thereby contributing to their overall personal development. Ezra's and Kaamma's experiences further exemplify the transformative impact of stepping out of one's comfort zone and the realizations that come with facing challenges independently in a foreign cultural context, showcasing the profound influence of cultural engagement on personal growth and change.

Research Question 2: Financial or Economic Pressures

The participants described feeling differing levels of financial or economic pressure, with some deeply stressed about housing insecurity, others concerned about credit card debt, and a few confident that their parents would be able to help them if they failed to meet their own financial needs. Notably, economic pressures seemed to play a part in shifting the original rationales of individuals for studying abroad. Some participants described how their views of the job market in the US and in their home country caused them to change their course of study. The results add further support to the notion that these pressures on international students can threaten their well-being (Park & Shimada, 2022) by providing an additional burden to this population beyond the stresses of student life. Further, the results demonstrate how restrictions around CPT and OPT create pressure for international students (Chen & Li, 2023; Coffey et al., 2018; McFadden & Seedorff, 2017) and can shape their experiences of studying abroad in the US. Interestingly, one participant described feeling a push towards 'edugration' (Coustere et al., 2023) as they reviewed starting salaries in the US and in their home country and began calculating how they could make their degree economically worthwhile to them in the long run. For some participants, the economic imperatives they would face as international students in the US were something they anticipated; for others, those economic imperatives came as an unhappy surprise, destabilizing their studies and other experiences.

Research Question 3: Employment Seeking

The results revealed a variety of barriers, supports, and suggestions for employment seeking among the participants. The participants most commonly described the employers themselves as a barrier to their employment seeking, particularly their ignorance about and attitudes around hiring individuals who might one day require visa sponsorship. This finding supports past work that also found employers can create problems for international students seeking jobs (Monahan, 2018; Ruiz & Budiman, 2018). Participants also mentioned personal shortcomings, visa restrictions and problems, and discrimination as other barriers to their seeking employment. These findings build on past results indicating that international students need opportunities to develop their employability (Fakunle, 2021), and that their sex can impact the success of their job seeking, with past work finding males benefited more for being in high-demand fields such as engineering than their female counterparts (Niu et al., 2022).

Participants described the need to find mentors both on campus and during mentorship to guide employment seeking activities, to draw on support from career services and advisors in the face of repeated rejections, and the need to keep open lines of communication with the institution and the resources that they provide to be successful in their employment seeking activities. These results further emphasize past work that demonstrated the need for support from the institution for international students who take part in an employment search (Chen & Li, 2023; McFadden & Seedorff, 2017; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). Participants described their frustration that many of the resources that are available on campus are targeted more toward traditional, local students and often did not apply to international students. Further, they found that many campus resources beyond (and sometimes even including) their international student support were ignorant of the regulations governing international students and that left them feeling hesitant to start an employment search for fear of violating the terms of their visa. Participants who reported a successful job search either as a part of their OPT or even finding H-1B visa sponsorship credited internship opportunities, mentors, and professional networks for their success, further demonstrating the importance of bridging social capital (Alho, 2020) for international student success in their employment search.

Implications And Conclusion

The results indicate that international students deal with many of the same experiences of personal growth shared with their domestic students, but with the added complication of going through those changes in a new cultural environment. The results indicate that many international students are able to adapt to their new circumstances and successfully grow in their new environment. Further, the results demonstrate international students in the US are confronted with a number of different economic pressures that can impact their personal well-being, academic performance, and search for employment. Some of the barriers that they confront, such as misaligned career services and a lack of information, are within the control of their host institutions to change. Ensuring clear and frequent communication about personal and professional opportunities and support could help to improve their experiences. As career service staff are often untrained regarding the visa regulations governing international students, they may struggle to effectively provide international students with assistance. Having international student service offices work with other student service offices on campus to ensure that foundational knowledge and understanding of international student regulations and challenges could help to better ensure alignment with the student's needs. This work could help to better raise awareness of the need for differentiating the support student services offices provide based on the status and backgrounds of the students they serve. Further, greater training in culturally responsive service across higher education institutions would help to provide more effective services to all students. Other barriers are beyond the ability of host institutions to control, such as employer practices and federal visa regulations. Institutions should be transparent about these barriers to international students and prepare them to make informed decisions about their employment search.

Further research work on international student employment in the US may benefit from focusing on students of particular nationalities or from specific fields of study. These lines of inquiry would help describe differences in the lived experiences of international students based on those factors. Additionally, this study focused on the lived experiences of international students located in the Central New York region. Future work in other regions of the US may also help to define how geographic location might influence the experiences of international students seeking employment.

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