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Understanding How Sub-Saharan Africans Experience Higher Education in the United States

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“Understanding How Sub-Saharan Africans Experience Higher Education in the United States”

By

Reuel N. Mebuin

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

Renel Mebuin, has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the doctoral dissertation for the Ph.D. during this Spring Semester 2017.

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Abstract

Sub-Saharan African immigrant students constitute an important cohort on United States college campuses. In order for U.S. colleges and universities to better accommodate the significant number of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students, it is critical to identify factors that influence these students’ cultural and academic processes and provide professionals with guidelines for creating culturally appropriate services and programs for them. The purpose of this research is to undertake a single case study to study and understand the experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students who are currently pursuing an undergraduate degree at an American 4-year public institution of higher education. Although Sub-Saharan African immigrants are said to have attained the highest level of education in the U.S., there has been limited research on their academic and cultural experiences and challenges in the U.S. and the pressure to succeed on American universities and colleges. This topic will be explored qualitatively while utilizing interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is an appropriate method of inquiry to understand the academic and cultural experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrants because it will allow the participants the opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences as they want it to be known.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to those members of my family that have fallen asleep or transitioned on to glory. I dedicate the study especially to my grand dad, Late Rev. Paul Mebuin Babi and my late Uncle Tabi Manasses M. Babi. Though they left this world too soon, they did not take with them the dream, ambition, love, principles and hope they had instilled in me. They gave me every reason to keep pushing forward despite the road-blocks. They were a great source of inspiration and motivation. While they are gone, their footprints and handprints implanted in my life will forever be a memorial.

I also dedicate this study to all the living members of the family. The family as a unit has been tested by every imaginable challenge the hot crucible of life can throw at people. But through it all, we were able to stay the course while loving, encouraging, supporting, inspiring and challenging each other the best way we could. My dear family, you were the push from behind preventing me from falling backward or down; you were the vigor in front pulling me forward when I was tired; you were the shoulders I leaned on when I was weak; you were the ears I could talk to when I felt like giving up or when I needed encouragement; you were the cane to hold on to as I staggered along and you were the light when I stumbled in darkness.

Furthermore, I dedicate this study to all the Youths of English-speaking regions of Cameroon who have been out of school since last year by no choice or fault of their own. While they are currently engaged in peaceful demonstrations calling on the authorities for better academic, social, and economic conditions, many of them have sacrificed their lives and freedom in the process.
Finally, I dedicate this work to all those who know they are nothing without Christ and are everything with Him. I dedicate it to those who have been written off by the world but yet are still pushing on to defy the world against all odds; to those who fall and rather than remain down, get up, brush off any dirt and continue on their way to achieving that which God has destined for them. It is dedicated to those who continue to push themselves against all odds to defy the world. This research project is dedicated to all those who have challenged or are challenging the status quo for the good of all, and to those who have placed the good of society above their personal and selfish gains.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to express my utmost, sincere and deep rooted appreciation to my Heavenly Father who not only gave up His only begotten son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for me but endowed me with His grace, wisdom, knowledge and understanding to pursue and complete this journey. I am so humbled to have been favored, called, chosen and changed by Him, to be His son and to be a joint heir with Christ Jesus. It remains my utmost prayer that I will honor Him through this gift, PhD (Praise Him Daily) and the many more blessings He has in store for me. I thank God for placing the right people in my life at the right time, who were willing and ready to see me through this journey.

I was so blessed to have a dedicated team of educators who made up my Dissertation Committee: Dr. Robert Kelchen, Dr. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj and Dr. Joseph Stetar (Mentor). Your patience with students and commitment to their success cannot be matched. I will forever be indebted to you. I pray that the lesson (putting students first) you have imparted on me will translate into my practical life as I navigate the world of academia. Dr. Eunyoung Kim, Dr. Martin Finkelstein, Dr. Elaine Walker and Dr. Rebecca “Becky” Cox thank you for all the encouragement and constructive feedback you provided me during the course of my academic journey. To the departmental staff, I cannot say thank you enough for all your support throughout this journey. To my classmates, your thoughtful and stimulating feedback did not go unnoticed. Your constructive and challenging feedback gave me a set of lenses that I could not have gotten otherwise. To my classmates in primary school, Government School Nwa, I will never forget you. You planted a seed in me when you all rallied behind me against the wishes of the status quo and elected me to give the first ever graduation speech by a pupil in the Sub-Division.
Next I will like to express my deepest appreciation to all my study participants. They went beyond and above to let me into their world, altering their schedules just to see the successful completion of this project. I do not care how much effort and time I put towards this project. I do not care how resilient or committed I was, for the truth is that ALL of what I put forward could have amounted to nothing had my study participants not committed their time in helping me through this journey. It was all made possible through their gallant sacrifice.

I could not have run this race to completion without the selfless, gracious and unconditional support of members of my community: The Crossing Church in Livingston, NJ, The Word Enlightenment Ministries, Bronx, NY, The Zion Prayer Ministry and The Calvary Church, Essex Fells. When I was in the “University of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement)” and my hopes of completing this degree were all but gone, you encouraged me, stood by me and above all prayed for me as the church prayed for Peter (Acts 12). Today, I am very honored and humbled to not only stand in your midst, but to stand before you with a new name (status) as a corporeal testament that we serve a ‘Living and Prayer-_answering God’ who has the final say in our lives. I do not know what Red Sea, Goliath, River Jordan or Jericho Wall you are facing, but may He do for you more than what He has done for me.

Last but not the least, I would like to thank my family (biological and/ or spiritual) for their unwavering support, love, encouragement, selfless and magnanimous acts during my titanic journey. I cannot thank God enough for creating me as part of this family. To my parents and siblings, the Babes, the Tamins, the Abams, Vim, Pawla, Emiline, Adijah, Dr. Y, MACDANs (Mantung Landers), the Karis, Glory and the many individuals who crossed paths with me and enriched me in the process, I say thank you. To my dear and beloved son, Ethan Kawah, I say thank you and I love you so dearly. You were a collateral or incidental victim of my academic
pursuit on two levels. Firstly, you were my study partner and even attended some of my classes and seminars. Secondly you missed out on having and enjoying some of the true daddy – son moments. Thank you so dearly. It is my hope and prayer that while my journey would provide a source of inspiration to you, it will also provide us an opportunity for better days ahead in Christ Jesus. Amen.
He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.
Isaiah 40:29-31

The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him, and He helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise Him. The LORD is the strength of His people, a fortress of salvation for His anointed one.
Psalm 28:7-8

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”
Jeremiah 29:11

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 4:6-7
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The recent change in the United States’ demographics (U.S. Census, 2010) correspondingly reflects an increased diversity of the student population across U.S. campuses. This diversity in student population also represents different challenges and experiences encountered by various students as they come into contact with the U.S. higher education. Among this diverse student population found on today’s U.S. university and college campuses are an increasing number of foreign-born students. The decision to immigrate to a foreign country is a life changing event but often times come with little knowledge and understanding of the nuances of the various facets of life for example higher education of the foreign country. For Sub-Saharan African (Black or African) immigrants studying in the United States, the transition to a foreign culture, environment and education system can be overwhelming or challenging. This creates the necessity for supporting this diverse student population’s unique and varied needs. Understanding a student’s culture and worldview helps in the delivery of culturally competent education and may contribute to positive educational outcomes in the student (Nieto, 1999). It is well documented that students from different cultures learn differently (Nieto, 1999). Learning is not merely a cognitive process but it must be understood in a broader context of the socio-cultural and sociopolitical lives of the students, professors and school administrators (Nieto, 1999). A migrant’s ability to adjust to a new culture and environment is influenced by his or her previously acquired, internalized as well as shared values, beliefs, attitudes, myths, legends, norms, convictions, assumptions, ideologies, principles, and self-concepts. African immigrant students are from a continent whose cultural, social, language, educational and political systems are different from American systems (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2002; Okoro, 2010).
The black immigrant population in the U.S. has grown tremendously in the past decades accounting for 3.8 million black immigrants which represents about 8.7% of the nation’s black population (Anderson, 2015). While the black immigrant population comes from various parts of the world, most of the recent upsurge of black immigrants are from Africa resulting to an increased African immigrant and/ or minority population with African immigrants making up about 36% of the total U.S. foreign-born black population today (Anderson, 2015). A walk across a U.S. campus will easily bring you into contact with a minority student as the presence of minorities has increased on U.S. campuses. Within the last decade, the number of minorities grew 56 percent to 5.5 million while the number of white students grew by only 14 percent to 11.1 million (Kim, 2011). During the 2007 academic year, about 23% of all undergraduates were immigrants of which 22% were of Black non-Hispanic origin (Staklis & Horn, 2012). Unfortunately, while this data takes into account first and second generations of immigrant or foreign-born students, it falls short to give a breakdown of the origin of the Black Non-Hispanic population.

A number of push factors have been cited for influencing Sub-Saharan Africans to leave Sub-Saharan Africa in pursuit of greener pastures in the West. These factors include poor quality of educational system at home, underfunding, financial reasons, limited career opportunities or low income, poor working conditions and management, corruption, limited resources, absence of family due to prior migration, exposure to endemic violence, political instability, persecution and oppression (Kissick, XX; Keteku, 2007; Okome, 2005). On the hand, the pull factors attracting Sub-Saharan African immigrants in the West include availability of funding, academic freedom, joining family members, hope, greater careers opportunities, better living standards, freedom from violence, persecution and oppression (Kissick, XX; Keteku, 2007; Okome, 2005). Education is
perceived as one of the determining push and pull factors (Kissick, XX; Keteku, 2007; Okome, 2005) as these African immigrants see education as a gateway to a better living.

Despite an increase in the population of Sub-Saharan African immigrants across U.S. campuses, no or very few studies have been conducted examining the challenges faced by these Sub-Saharan African immigrants. If American higher education faculty and administrators are better able to understand the specific challenges, experiences and desires of this immigrant student population that they may face, they may be better inclined to support and/ or promote the success of these African immigrant students on their campuses. Also, a better understanding of African immigrant students’ experiences during their transition from their African cultural and academic background into an American cultural and academic environment may lead to these students becoming more successful in their academic pursuits in America.

The purpose of this research therefore is to study and understand the experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant undergraduate students; persons born in any of the regions of Sub-Saharan Africa and have migrated to the United States to live here permanently upon the completion of their studies, who are currently pursuing an undergraduate degree at an American 4-year public institution of higher education. This topic will be explored qualitatively while utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis in a single case study examining the lived experiences of these foreign-born Sub-Saharan African immigrant students at a 4-year public American higher education institution. It is important to explore more about African immigrant students’ experiences in adjusting to the American cultural context and academic environment so as to increase their awareness of how these differences might be connected to their academic pursuit and success in an American environment. American higher education has earned a unique
place in the world and it is classified and ranked by many as the best (Labaree, 2007; Vedder, 2012). Many across the globe have migrated to the United States to learn from America’s higher education and many of these immigrants have improved their living thanks to the opportunities presented to them by America’s higher education (Allen, 2002). Unfortunately, because schools are not required to document the specific immigration status of students, data on these group of students are scarce. Because of this limitation, I will highlight the data of international students (also foreign born) to bring to light the increasing number and/or challenges of foreign born students in the United States. For example, in 2002 - 2003 academic year, there were 586,323 international students in the United States representing about 3.5% of the student population. This number increased to about 886,502 international students representing 4.2% of all U.S. higher education population in 2013 - 2014 academic year. New international students’ arrival increased from 200,460 in 2008 - 2009 academic year to 270,128 in 2013 - 2014 academic. The 2013 - 2014 figures represented a 7.5% change from the previous year (Open Doors, 2014). Many of these international students encounter challenges including language barriers, homesickness, loss of social and family support, loss of social status, a set of inferiority complex or decreased self-esteem, academic demands, lack of study skills, lack of assertiveness, perceived discrimination, and adjustment difficulties that have resulted from cultural differences and/or conflict (Pederson, 1991; Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson & Pisecco, 2002; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Reynolds & Constantine, 2007 & Karuppan & Barari, 2011).

Background

The black immigrant population in the U.S. has grown tremendously in the past decades. Today, there is a record 3.8 million black immigrants in the U.S. accounting for 8.7% of the
nation’s black population (Anderson, 2015). This number, which accounts for nearly a triple of black immigrant’s share of the black population from 1980, is about four times the black immigrant population in 1980. This rapid growth in the black immigrant population is expected to continue with the U.S. Census Bureau projecting that by 2060, 16.5% of the U.S. black population will be made up of immigrants.

**Graph 1:** The graph illustrates percentage of U.S. Population that are foreign born (U.S. Census, 2010)
Graph 2: This graph illustrates the total number of foreign born blacks in the U.S in thousands (U.S Census, 2011)

While the black immigrant population comes from various parts of the world, most of the recent upsurge of black immigrants is from Africa in contrast to the 80s when most black immigrants were from the Caribbean. For example, between 2000 and 2013, the black immigrant population from Africa has grown by 137% from 574,000 to 1.4 million. African immigrants now make up 36% of the total U.S. foreign-born black population compared to 24% and 7% respectively in 2000 and 1980 (Anderson, 2015). Sub-Saharan African immigrants make up 99% of black immigrants from Africa. This increase in immigrant population that has also translated to an increase in a student population of African descent can present stakeholders both opportunities and challenges on how to respond to this growing population group.
**Caribbean is top birth region; African immigrants soared since 2000:**

Population growth among foreign-born blacks by top regions since 2000 in thousands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black Immigrants</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>% Change since 2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>1,432</td>
<td>1,909</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>1,360</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South America</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central America</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1.* Population growth among foreign-born blacks by top regions. This table illustrates population and immigration trends among Black immigrants in the U.S (U.S. Census, 2010)
### Population Trend Amongst Black Immigrants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1980 (000s)</th>
<th>1990 (000s)</th>
<th>% Change 1980 to 1990</th>
<th>2000 (000s)</th>
<th>% Change 1990 to 2000</th>
<th>2008 (000s)</th>
<th>% Change 2008 to 2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Immigrants</td>
<td>14,079</td>
<td>19,682</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>31,133</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>38,244</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Black Immigrants</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>1,447</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>2,435</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>3,267</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black African Immigrants</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>1,081</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Caribbean Immigrants</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>897</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>1,428</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>1,701</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black immigrants from other regions</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>485</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: This Table illustrates Population trends Amongst Black Immigrants in the U.S (U.S Census, 2010)*

Sub-Saharan Africans are one of the growing communities of immigrants or international students that have migrated into the United States to pursue a postsecondary education. These
African immigrants come in different ages and they come with limited resources and preparedness for the American society (McDonough, 2004; Vargas, 2004; Erisman et al, 2007; and Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011). Often times, Sub-Saharan African immigrants are lumped into a larger group such as International students, Black Americans or African Americans. It is worth making some distinctions here among these terms.

International students are enrolled in United States higher education for a temporal and specified time frame while immigrant students intend or may intend to live in the United States permanently (Kim, 2014). These International students come here on F-1 visas as defined by the Department of Homeland Security. Their stay in the United States is limited to “Duration of Studies” or the time specified on their visas. The International Student must meet other immigration requirements including; enrollment in an academic, language or vocational program in a school which is approved by the Student and Exchange Visitors Program in DHS. The student must be enrolled on a full time basis at all times, must have sufficient funds to support his or her entire study and must maintain permanent resident abroad which he or she has no intention of giving up (DHS, 2013).

Immigrant students on the other hand, come here through other forms of visas for example they may come as Permanent Resident Aliens (especially through the Diversity Visa lottery program), Refugees, Asylum-seekers or family reunification channels (Capps, McCabe & Fix, 2012). Immigrant students are those students who were born in a foreign country and immigrate to the U.S. to reside there permanently (Kim, 2014). African American or Black Americans as they are sometimes called are people who were involuntarily brought to the United States by means of the historic Trans-Atlantic Slave trade. Though these people came from different and diverse parts of Africa, these Africans out of design or circumstances forged an African American
culture among themselves (Taylor, 2000). These former slaves were later granted United States citizenship in 1868 when the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution defining citizenship was passed.

It is very important to make this distinction between international students and immigrant students clear because as I have stated, international students come here on a temporal basis for the sole purpose of studying. As such, they mostly come from the affluent middle to upper or political class and can therefore finance their study and stay here from family resources or funding sources like government issued scholarships. These students are often constrained to stricter immigration regulations. Immigrant students on the other hand, who come here to stay permanently, come from diverse socio economic backgrounds and are often exposed to lesser immigration issues compared to international students. These immigrants in many instances are often limited by their social, academic and economic resources.

The terms Black Africans, Africans, Sub-Saharan Africans and African immigrants are used interchangeably and they all refer to individuals who were born in one of the 49 countries that make up Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

Geographically, Sub-Saharan Africa is the area on the continent of Africa that lies to the south of the Sahara Desert. Politically, this region is said to encompass all African countries that are fully or partially located south of the Sahara with the exception of Sudan even though Sudan sits in the Eastern portion of the Sahara desert. This region is sometimes referred to as “Black Africa” because of the many blacks that live in this region as contrasted with the North African region which sometimes is considered as part of the Arab world or Middle East (Jones, 2014; Atehnkeng et al, 2008; IAASTD, 2009; Foster, 2014). Based on cultural, linguistic, religious,
economic, social, geographical, historical and political sub-regional characteristics, this region is often sub divided into different types of classification. For example, some will list Sub-Saharan Africa to be divided along colonial lines, others divide it along linguistic lines while others divide it along the following six distinct sub regions; East Africa, Sudano-Sahel, West Africa, Central Africa, Southern Africa and the Islands of Indian Ocean (IAASTD, 2009). Sub-Saharan Africa is made up of 49 of the 54 countries that make up Africa. It is home to an estimated population of about 900 million people. This population is expected to grow to 1.2 billion and 2 billion by 2025 and 2050 respectively (AFIDEP, 2012). Sub-Saharan Africans are very religiously attuned while Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the most religious regions in the world (Awolalu, 1976; Oduyoye, 1977; Okure, 2011; and Zandt, 2011). There are between 1000 to 2000 different languages spoken in the region comprising about a third of the world’s languages (Harvard African Language Program; Tiffen, 1968 & Welmets, 1971). Seventy-five of these languages are spoken by more than a million people while the rest of the languages are spoken by a few to several hundred people (Harvard African Language Program).
This study will focus on Sub-Saharan African immigrant students, those who were born in any of the regions that make up Sub-Saharan Africa.

Statement of the Problem

The black immigrant population in the U.S. has grown tremendously in the past decades. Today, there is a record 3.8 million black immigrants in the U.S. accounting for 8.7% of the nation’s black population (Anderson, 2015). While the black immigrant population comes from various parts of the world, most of the recent upsurge of black immigrants is from Africa with Sub-Saharan Africa accounting for 99% of black immigrants from Africa. According to Capps,
McCabe & Fix (2012), there were about 1.1 million Sub-Saharan African immigrants in the United States as of 2012 with most of the population growth taking place in the 2000s as they grew from 574,000 in 2000 to 1.1 million in 2012. Sub-Saharan Africa’s mobility ratio (the movement of students to and from country or region as a percentage of all tertiary students in that country or region) between 1999 and 2007 increased by 0.8% representing the second most increase in the world following Central Asia’s mobility ratio of 1.1%. For example, the outbound mobility ratio, defined as “mobile students coming from a country/region as a percentage of all tertiary students in that country/region,” (Beall, 2012; Kritz, 2012 and OECD & UNESCO, 2012) for Sub-Saharan Africa in 2004 was 5.9% compared to a global average of approximately 2%. As such, a high number of Sub-Saharan African youths were seeking to study abroad especially in the United States. During the academic year of 2012 - 2013, the United States alone witnessed a total of 30,585 Sub-Saharan African immigrant students who immigrated to the United States to pursue postsecondary education. This number increased to 31,113 in 2013 - 2014 academic year representing an increase of 1.73%. Of the many African students attending colleges in the U.S. during the 2013 - 2014 academic year, about 56.35% were in undergraduate degree programs, about 29.12% were attending graduate schools, about 3.97% were attending non degree or some professional certification programs and the remaining 10.56% were enrolled in Optimal Practical Training, a 12-17 month STEM work and/ or study extension related to one’s major and/ or course of study (Open Doors, 2014).

Many Sub-Saharan Africans attend U.S. colleges but very few studies have been conducted examining the challenges faced by these students at U.S. campuses. In the few studies that have been done on these Sub-Saharan Africans, they have been grouped (either intentionally or erroneously) in larger and/ or homogenous groups like African-American, Black Americans or
international students (Charles et al, 2008; Torres, 2009; and Awokoya, 2012). Such grouping can
overlook the challenges and/or experiences of these Sub-Saharan African immigrants. It may also
lead to an ineffective and/or inefficient way of addressing academic issues of members of this
Sub-Saharan African ethnic group.

Since the 1960s, American higher education has been increasingly diversified racially,
ethnically and culturally giving rise to the growth of ethnic minorities (Sears et all, 2003; Kim,
2011). The number of foreign-born students present on U.S. college and university campuses has
increased over the past few decades (IIE, 2012). Some of these foreign born students are of
African descent. Like many other students, including U.S. born students, particularly those from
disadvantaged backgrounds, shaping their path to degree attainment is a challenging task (Scott-
Clayton, 2011). While Sub-Saharan African student experience United States higher education
like most other international students, could it be possible that these Sub-Saharan African students
may face a set of unique challenges while attending U.S. higher education? Could it be that they
may face challenges in making the successful transition to U.S. colleges and universities?

Several explanations have been given to account for the invisibility experienced by
resettled Sub-Saharan African immigrant students on U.S. campuses. One of the explanations is
skin color. Because resettled sub-Saharan African immigrant students share skin color with
native-born African or Black Americans, they are often perceived by native-born White
Americans to be African or Black American without fully exploring the diversity they present in
terms of language, culture, ethnicity, religious differences, and learning styles, both within their
group and among those who share their skin color (McBrien, 2005). When these students identify
themselves as Africans, schools often lack the systems to differentiate between international
students, immigrants (refugees and asylees included) and native born African or Black

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Americans. This leaves these Sub-Saharan African immigrants with limited options of identifying themselves or they are often identified as members of larger and/ or homogenous ethnic groups for example African or Black American. But Black or African American, is an individual (or his or her parents) of the black race who was involuntarily brought to the United States in the 1800s through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. African, Black African or Sub-Saharan African Immigrant on the other hand, is one (or his or her parents) who was born in Africa and voluntarily came into the United States through other forms of migration but slave trade. Sub-Saharan African immigrant immigration into the U.S. occurred for the most part from the 1980s.

Sub-Saharan African Immigrants and College Completion Rates

The college completion rates of Sub-Saharan African immigrants far exceed all groups in the United States (U.S. born included) and they have enjoyed a high employment rate (Capps, McCabe & Fix, 2012). With very few studies done on this diverse and heterogeneous population, the study of this population is therefore of significance for educational leaders and policy makers to better understand the nuances that surround their academic experiences. Some studies (Swigart, N.D; and Reed & Andrzejewski, N.D) have concluded that African immigrants are a highly educated group with at least 40% of the group earning at least a 4 year college degree. The *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (JBHE) Foundation (1999-2000, Winter) reported that African immigrants were the most highly educated in the United States according to the United States 2000 census data. Using 2000 U.S. Census data, Logan (2007) concluded that African immigrants on average attained the highest level of education compared with any population group in the United States although the limited literature fails to distinguish between those immigrants who came here with a college degree and those who achieved their college degrees while in the United States. For example, 43.8 % of African immigrants had earned a college
degree compared with 42.5% of Asian-Americans, 28.9% of immigrants from Europe, Russia and Canada and 23.1% of the entire U.S. population.

Although academic achievements of African immigrants (Sub-Saharan African Immigrant, Black African and African Immigrant are used interchangeably in this study) are notable, policy makers, researchers and educators have continuously lumped these immigrants into African American, Black American or International students thereby overlooking their successes, experiences and challenges.

Much attention has been paid to U.S. college graduation rates in recent years given its significance to the U.S. higher education, national security and workforce (Merisotis, 2012; Senator Kerrey, 2007; Senator Harkin, 2014 & Kay, 2009). Despite the focus on graduation rates in the U.S., graduation rates especially in underserved communities like African or Black American remain low. According to the U.S. Census, only about 28% of the adult population in the United States attained a Bachelor’s degree or higher despite the importance of the college degree. According to this data, only about 12% of African Americans ages 25 to 29 have completed a Bachelor’s degree compared to 9% of Hispanics and 19% of Whites in the same age group (Ogunwole et al, 2012)
Within the black community in the United States, the African immigrant has done better academically when compared to Native blacks and black Caribbean immigrants (Thomas, 2012). For example, less than 21% of black African immigrants ages 25 and over did not have a high school or GED between 2005 and 2009 compared to 31% and 32% of native born blacks and Caribbean immigrants respectively. More than 23% of black African immigrants had a college degree compared to 18% and 13% respectively for native born blacks and Caribbean immigrants between 2005 and 2009. Within the same period, more than 15% of black immigrants from Africa had a Masters, Doctorate or professional degree compared to 10% of native blacks and 7% of Caribbean black immigrants (Thomas, 2012).

Understanding the academic experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrants who are studying in a new environment and under a new educational system but yet faring better than
national average in educational attainment may present policy makers with some opportunities to learn something worth transferring from this successful ethnic group to other ethnic groups. This in effect, may help improve the overall college graduation rates of these other ethnic groups too. As policy makers and educators look to reverse these low graduation numbers in the U.S., one is left to ask the question(s) “what are the lived (academic and cultural) experiences of these Sub-Saharan African immigrants in the United States higher education?”

The continuous dominance of U.S. economy and higher education system in the world and the U.S. national security depend on an educated citizenry with great emphasis placed on citizens to earn at least a college degree in order to better compete in today’s competitive global economy. In order for the U.S. to maintain its global dominance, a strong workforce, a secured society and maintain its global dominance in higher education, more should be done to increase not only college access but also college degree attainment for its citizens. If the goal of the United States is to increase the graduation rates or educational attainment of its citizens, then the significance of studying the lived experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students becomes critical as it may present policy makers with an opportunity of learning something worth transferring from these successful achievers to other groups that have lower graduation rates. Although African immigrants have the highest educational attainment level in the U.S., their nuanced educational experiences have been overlooked. The decision to immigrate to and pursue postsecondary education in a foreign country could be a life changing event. But often times, such a life changing event may be undertaken under the cloud of limited knowledge and understanding of the complex nature of the socio-economic and cultural life in the host country. This event can be overwhelming on sojourners and present various challenges or life experiences. For example, Sub-Saharan African immigrants who had immigrated to and/ or pursued postsecondary education
in the U.S. were subjected to discrimination and racism (Ward, Sellers & Pate, N.D), stress adjustment problems (Kamya, 1997), invisibility (Swigart, N.D) and contradictory and complex processes while constructing and negotiating their racial and ethnic identities in the U.S. (Awokoya, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students who are pursuing a postsecondary education in a United States postsecondary institution. To fully understand these lived experiences, this study draws from two theoretical frameworks namely ecology of human development and Cultural-ecological theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner and John Ogbu respectively.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserts that “human development is a product of interaction between the growing organism and its environment” (p. 16). His theory states that human development is greatly influenced by different types of environmental systems in which the human has a direct or an indirect relationship. He conceives the ecological environment as a set of nested structures with each inside the next and he identifies these nested structures as microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem.

John Ogbu defines cultural-ecological theory as “the study of institutionalized patterns of behavior interdependent with features of the environment.” He identifies two forces namely system and community forces which contribute to how minorities respond to schooling. He further observes that there are three different groups of minorities: involuntary, voluntary and autonomous minority that should be taken into consideration when dealing with how these forces contribute to how minorities respond to school.
I will study the lived experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students as they interact directly or indirectly with their environment as defined in Bronfenbrenner’s human development theory. I will also study the lived experiences of this Sub-Saharan African immigrant students with regards to their groupings and how they respond to schooling when combined with the two forces identified by Ogbu’s cultural-ecological theory.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to understand the academic and cultural experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students and how they impact their college transition, persistence and degree attainment via a case study of a 4-year public U.S. higher education institution. It is the intent through this exploratory study to deepen the understanding of the challenges and experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students by examining the main issues that are lacking in current studies as described in the literature review.

In capturing the academic and cultural experiences of Sub-Saharan Africans in the U.S. higher education, not only can stakeholders understand what makes them attain the highest level of education but it may also give policy makers and school administrators some information on how to better deal or address cultural and academic issues that may be unique to this ethnic group.

The purpose of this study is not just limited to how these foreign born Sub-Saharan African immigrants experience the U.S. higher education or how they react to their environment but it is also how they think, feel, sense, self-assess themselves and finally how they interpret events in their new world.
This study therefore seeks to contribute to the field by providing greater depth of understanding of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students experience and how they mitigate challenges as they pursue postsecondary education in the United States.

Research Questions

This study aims to explore the academic and cultural experiences of Sub-Saharan African undergraduate students in a 4-year public U. S. higher education institution in an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1) How do Sub-Saharan African immigrant undergraduate students adapt culturally and academically to the environment of a 4-year public U.S. higher education institution?

2) How do Sub-Saharan African immigrants describe their cultural and academic experiences as undergraduates on an American 4-year public higher education institution?

3) What are the cultural and academic challenges Sub-Saharan African immigrants face in adapting to an American 4-year public higher education institution?

4) What resources, supports and relationships do Sub-Saharan rely on to mitigate any cultural and academic challenges they face in an American 4-year public higher education institution?

Significance of the study

Africa is the most diverse and heterogeneous region in the world, having a cultural diversity (cultural, linguistic, religious, economic, social, geographical and historical) that is more
than the rest of the world combined and it is a very complex continent which has the most ethnically diverse countries in the world (Kaji, N.D; Elbadawi & Sambanis, 2000). Africa has over 800 million people who live in more than 50 countries and who speak over 100 languages with more than a thousand dialects among these languages (Gay & Cole, 1967; Jenkins, 2011). For example, Sub-Saharan Africa consists of 49 sovereign countries and two territories. Out of the 49 countries, 23 are Anglophone or English speaking countries, 21 are Francophone or French speaking countries, 5 are Lusophone speaking countries while 3 countries speak other languages like Spanish, Arabic and others.

The study of the academic and cultural experiences of Sub-Saharan Africans with the U.S. educational system is necessary in order to provide stake-holders with empirical data to determine or understand some of the issues of persistence and degree attainment are a problem among Sub-Saharan African students. The study may also serve to bring to light any effects of wrongfully classifying Sub-Saharan Africans into a larger group as African American or Black Americans thereby addressing issues like transition, retention, persistence or degree attainment related to their academic experiences from a broader or distant perspective. Intercultural literacy creates a better environment for effective teachings and learning in a diverse society. A failure to get a better grasp of intercultural understanding can lead us to respond negatively to students and others (Mark Heyward, 2002). According to McCalman & Madere (2009), competence in intercultural issues or beliefs is an added plus in dealing or communicating with others in our today’s multicultural society. Many studies have documented the many challenges that international students have experienced in the United States. Unfortunately, very few studies have been documented on the challenges these Sub-Saharan African immigrants have experienced in this country and on U.S. College and University campuses.
Finally, the significance of this study is not only limited to policy makers and school administrators but it is also significant to these Sub-Saharan African immigrants as it will help them to better understand their experiences. This, in effect, will help them to appropriately deal with issues of transition, retention, persistence and graduation. This study will also help these Sub-Saharan African immigrants especially the new arrivals to better understand, adjust and adapt themselves to their new world as they pursue their dreams in the United States.

Definitions

1) **Sub-Saharan African (African Immigrant / Black African) Immigrant**: This refers to all persons who were born in any of the Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries and who migrated to the United States. For the purpose of this study, Sub-Saharan African Immigrant, Black African and African Immigrants are used interchangeably.

2) **Sub-Saharan African (African Immigrant / Black African) Immigrant student**: This refers to all students who were born in any of the Sub-Saharan African countries and are pursuing postsecondary education in any of the U.S. higher education institutions. They also do not have any intentions to go back to their home country. For the purpose of this study, Sub-Saharan African Immigrant student, Black African student and African Immigrant students are used interchangeably. Sub-Saharan African Immigrant undergraduate student is any student born in any of the Sub-Saharan African countries who is pursuing an undergraduate degree in the U.S.

3) **Sub-Saharan Africa**: This refers to the area in the continent of Africa that lies to the south of the Sahara Desert. Politically, this region is said to encompass all African countries that are fully or partially located south of the Sahara.
4) **International Student**: This refers to all students who are from other countries but United States and are studying at any U.S. postsecondary institution. They are enrolled in the U.S postsecondary education temporally as specified by their visas. But they may become immigrants to the U.S after undergoing other immigration procedures.

5) **Migration**: This refers to the movement or mobility of students and immigrants from their place of origin or place of birth to another country.

6) **Migration or Mobility Ratio**: This refers to the percentage of movement or mobility of students or immigrants from their countries of origin or place of birth compared to those left behind in their country of origin.

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**CHAPTER II**

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

**Introduction**

Studies have detailed the many challenges and lived experiences of foreign-born students in the U.S. postsecondary education. In this chapter, I will present a review of the literature on the challenges that these foreign born students have faced. Because of the limited literature on Sub-Saharan African immigrants, I focus this literature review on the experiences of international students, some of whom are of Sub-Saharan African descent. I will begin this literature review with a description of the theoretical frameworks that will guide this study and this will be followed by a brief introduction and the challenges faced by international students in the U.S. higher education. I will then review some studies that have been done on Sub-Saharan before concluding the section with some coping strategies that have been recommended to help mitigate the challenges faced by foreign-born students who study in the U.S. higher education system.
Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this study is to undertake a single case study to understand the lived experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students who are pursuing a postsecondary education in a United States postsecondary institution. In order to fully understand this, this study draws upon the ecology of Human Development Theory as proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological theory also called the “Bioecological systems” “Human Ecology Theory” or Ecological Systems theory” is the theory of human development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserts that “human development is a product of interaction between the growing organism and its environment” (p. 16). His theory states that human development is greatly influenced by different types of environmental systems in which the human has a direct or indirect relationship. This theory which was developed in 1979 has been widely used to study the education of disadvantaged and marginalized groups in a society. Through this theory, one is able to understand why one may behave differently when he or she is in different environmental systems; for example how one behaves when one is in the presence of his or her families, in school, at work or other environmental settings.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that “the ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between the settings and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded” (p. 21). His ecological theory identifies five different environmental systems that humans come into contact with during and over their life span and these different environmental systems may influence the human development or behavior in varying degrees. Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceives the ecological environment as a “set of nested structures, each
inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls” (p. 3). These nested structures or environmental systems are identified as; microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem.

The microsystem is a “pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). The microsystem refers to the human being’s immediate surroundings in which he or she is an active participant. This environmental context can include the person’s family, peers, school and neighborhood. The mesosystem “comprises the interaction among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as, for a child, the relations among the home, school and neighborhood peer group; for an adult, among family, work, and social life” (p.25). This refers to the relations between microsystems or connections between contexts. Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines an exosystem as “one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person” (p. 25). This setting involves the connection between a social setting in which the individual does not have an active role and the context where it is actively participating. The macrosystem refers “to consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies.” (p. 26). This describes the culture (ways of people) in which an individual lives. Finally, the chronosystem was not included in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory and was only developed in later years. It is the description of the evolution, development or stream of development of external systems in time. This model that can cover either a short or long period of time (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 201-202) refers to the transitions and shifts that take place in one’s life span. These are the patterns of
environmental events and transitions as well as socio-historical circumstances for example
divorce over the life of an individual. Such a system includes both rules and roles that can have a
strong impact on the development of a person.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) though a radical approach to human development was not a
novice in itself as it was a radical approach to Kurt Lewin’s principle which asserts that “behavior
evolves as a function of the interplay between person and environment” (p. 16). Lewin (1935)
classified this field theory as follows: B=f(PE), where behavior (B) is the result (f) of interaction
between person (P) and environment (E). But Bronfenbrenner (1989, 189-193; pp. 2002, 223-
224) extended Lewin’s classical field theory behavior formula into the radical formula of human
development as follows: D = f(PE), where developing (D) is the result (f) of interaction between
person (P) and environment (E). But because Bronfenbrenner saw human development to mean
change, a process, and that it takes place in time, he decided to improve or perfect the formula. He
expressed the time factor by bottom indexes as follows: Dt = f (t-p) (PE) (t-p), where ′t′ is time
under which the result of development (D) is observed and ′t-p′ is the period or periods in the
course of which the powers that are related to person and environment act together which leads in
the course of time to a result that is observed at a certain moment of time. The way he presented
the right hand ′t-p′ in the formula or equation meant that the process that produces the
developmental change in humans is not a static event but it is one that takes place in the course of
or over a period of time. This, just like the other factors of the change formula that change in
time, can change over time. For example, when a child grows older, the processes that are now
being observed become outdated or antiquated thereby calling for new and different processes to
be observed.
Figure A. The Ecological Approach; Various levels of influence on a child’s development (Penn, 2005).
This study also draws from John Ogbu’s Cultural-ecological theory which he defines as “the study of institutionalized patterns of behavior interdependent with features of the environment” (Ogbu, 1990a, p. 22). Ogbu in most of his career referred to his cultural-ecological theory as Cultural Ecology theory of minority student performance:

posits that there are two sets of factors influencing minority school performance:

how society at large and the school treats minorities (the system) and how minority
groups respond to those treatments and to schooling (community forces). The theory further posits that differences in school performance between immigrant and nonimmigrant minorities are partly due to differences in their community forces. (Ogbu, 1999, p. 156)

Ogbu (1983b, 1990d, 1991, 1992a, 1995a, 2003) identifies two factors or forces namely system forces and community forces which contribute to how minorities respond to schooling. While he did not assume that there was no discrimination and that discrimination did not have a negative effect on student outcomes, he believed that there was room for minority agency even in the systematic discrimination.

Ogbu (1983a, p. 168; 1985, p. 862) stated that it is imperative to distinguish between “different kinds of minorities” in order to understand the academic achievement of minority students. He identified three kinds of minorities: involuntary, voluntary and autonomous minority. Involuntary minorities are those whose position of minority was a result of historic subjugation after conquest or forced migration (enslavement). They did not choose their minority status but earned it through conquest, forced migration and enslavement. This group exhibits an oppositional approach to their host or environment. They have a distrust for and opposition to the dominant society and its institutions. He perceives involuntary minorities as persistent academic failures (Ogbu, 1990c, p. 146). Voluntary minorities are those that chose to migrate to their host environment. They see their host as a place of opportunity and they take an instrumental approach to their host. They view school as a place where to gain something and they are consistent and effective academic achievers (Ogbu, 1990c, p. 146). The final group is the Autonomous minority who has a distinctive ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic or cultural identity that is guaranteed by
national tradition or constitution. They are minorities and may be victims of prejudice but they are not subordinate groups in a system of rigid stratification for example the Jews, the Amish or the Mormons (Ogbu, 1983a, p. 169). Members of this autonomous group have a cultural frame of reference which demonstrates and encourages success (Ogbu, 1985, p. 862).

Yang et al (2011) in an effort to understand the role of culture in how people ask questions, seek information and socialize, conducted a survey in which they explored the cultural differences in people’s social question and answer (Q&A) behaviors across two Western countries (United States and United Kingdom) and two Asian countries (China and India). They surveyed 933 participants in these 4 countries who work for one organization, looking at the impact of culture on social search. Yang et al (2011) concluded that culture was a major factor in predicting people’s social question and answer behavior. They also concluded that culture accounts for more variance in a person’s behavior than other demographic variables. Members of a culture embody distinct cognitive patterns and social orientations, which can impact the way they seek information, ask questions and socialize.

Literature Review

Despite the high college graduation rates or college attainment rates of Sub-Saharan African immigrants, few studies have to date documented their challenges and/ or experiences in U.S. higher education. Where others have attempted to research or write about this group, they have lumped them in a larger homogenous group including international students, Black American or African American. Such grouping not only obscures the diverse and complex experiences of the African immigrant students; it overlooks the challenges of its members. Because of this lumping of Sub-Saharan Africans into a larger homogenous group and because of
the limited availability of research on Black immigrants, my literature review will extend to the experiences and challenges of international students. In doing so, I will examine the possibility of the existence of a historical and comparative context in the two groups; Sub-Saharan Africans and international students. I will draw my studies from empirical research articles, annual reviews, books, technical reports and dissertations where necessary.

Many studies (Freeman, 2002; Yoon & Portman, 2004; Lee & Rice 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Kegel, 2009; Barnes, 2010 & Tochkov, Levine & Sanaka, 2010) have detailed the challenges international students face while pursuing postsecondary education in the United States. While international students might face problems like most other students, there are some problems that may be unique to this group of students. Some of these problems may include language barriers, different academic systems, cultural differences, racial discrimination, societal interaction and personal adjustment (Yoon & Portman, 2004). International students also experience barriers adjusting in the U.S. upon their first arrival to the U.S. including academic life, health insurance, living conditions, social interactions, transportation and discrimination (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

Previous studies (Freeman, 2002; Yoon & Portman, 2004; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Kegel, 2009; Barnes, 2010 & Tochkov, Levine & Sanaka, 2010) have indicated that challenges faced by international students were as a result of adjustment issues. These studies listed adjustment issues as isolation and loneliness, lack of language proficiency and perceived discrimination. Jamie McAtee (2008) identified 5 things namely languages difficulties, adjustments problems, classroom interaction challenges, peer pairing and fear, that international students deal with as they persist to achieve their academic goals in the U.S. while a study by Lee & Rice (2007) concluded that the challenges faced by international students were as a result of
inadequacies found in the host country of U.S. namely unfairness, inhospitality, cultural intolerance and cultural confrontation. Some of the challenges faced by sojourners were as a result of factors in both the home and host regions (Gareis, 2012). She identified three factors that influenced international students’ friendship experiences in the U.S. namely; cultural similarity, intercultural communication competence and personality and identity. (Gareis, 2012) concluded that both the home and host regions have a significant effect on friendship numbers and satisfaction levels.

I will subdivide this literature review section into the following challenges faced by international students in U.S. higher education system; perceived discrimination, English language proficiency or fluency, homesickness and social support. I will examine these challenges individually by studying their effects on international students and possibly on African immigrants.

**Perceived Discrimination**

Perceived discrimination or prejudice which is a person’s interpretation of being subjected to some form of treatment, affected the adjustment of international students who are enrolled in U.S. Universities and Colleges.

Lee & Rice (2007) sought to understand the experiences of international students. Their findings concluded that international students experienced what amounted to discrimination in their host communities. Lee & Rice (2007) employed the neo-racism framework to analyze the data and determined neo-racism accounted for many problems faced by international students. In their words, “neo-racism emphasizes cultural difference as a basis of discrimination that appeals to popular notions of cultural preservation” (p. 33). International students experienced these
challenges both on and off U.S. campuses. These international students experienced these challenges on campuses when they were denied institutional funding and job opportunities or while interacting with peers, faculty or administration. They also experienced these challenges off campus while interacting with others as they shopped or looked for housing. It was not clear if what these students reported was actual discrimination or exclusion based on foreign status, language, or race and how much of all of this was solely a matter of misconception. But what was clear is that these experiences differed among racial boundaries among these international students. Lee & Rice (2007) reported that students of color reported a great level of discrimination unlike their White counterparts who reported none.

Sutton (2002) conducted two focus group studies involving a total of eighteen students from eleven countries in order to understand the experiences of international students at North Carolina State University and concluded that international students were subjected to discrimination. While the concept of discrimination took on different treatments, the international students “described discrimination as something that involves different treatment based on a characteristic such as color or gender or being foreign (p. 2).” These international students further viewed discrimination as "biased treatment" and having different standards for different people. Sutton (2002) reported that these international students at some point had experienced discrimination and harassment or knew another international student that had been subjected to discrimination and harassment. She concluded that there was a vague association between discrimination and job constraints faced by these international students.

Hanassab (2006), employing a survey method conducted a study involving 640 international students at University of California, Los Angeles UCLA. These international students, who were from different regions of the world excluding Canada, ranged from ages 17 to
These international students in this study were grouped into seven groups based on their geographical region of origin. The purpose of the study was to determine the experiences of international students with specific reference to perceived discrimination by the international students since enrolling at a U.S. higher learning institution. He looked at the role geographical and other demographic factors like gender, degree objective and field of study played on the similarities and differences of the students. The results of this study were consistent with most studies which concluded that international students experienced discrimination both on and off American campuses. Students coming from different regions of the world experienced varying degrees of discrimination. For example, students from Africa and the Middle East experienced higher level of discrimination when compared to other students. Using a Chi square test, Hanassab (2006) then performed a test on students that had reported experiencing discrimination. He concluded from this test that students from different regions of the world experienced different levels of discrimination when they interacted with faculty, peers and administrators and also that international students experienced more discrimination off campus than they did on campus.

One of the contributing factors in international students’ perceived discrimination is the lack of proper preparedness on the part of the host country given the fact that many institutions in the host country seem to pay less attention to the issues of these international students especially when they have arrived.

**Language fluency**

English language proficiency remains a major concern among international students. This improvement may come in part as a result of the fact that many opportunities are now available to international students to learn English in their native countries prior to coming to the U.S. This
problem is explained by the fact that some lecturers speak quickly, use sophisticated American vocabulary, accents and international students enter the U.S. with varying language proficiency (Lee & Rice, 2007; Barnes, 2010; Kuo, 2011 & Vogel, N.D).

Barnes (2010) did a mixed method study on first-year international students enrolled at the engineering department of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Barnes (2010) employed 422 students for her study but 2 students opted out of taking part in a follow up research. The second section involved focus group. During the focus sessions, participants were asked questions with the hope of determining their communication proficiency. Her research found that “international students may have a more difficult time understanding lecturers because they speak quickly or use sophisticated vocabulary (p. 41).” Barnes (2010) also found that the language problem arose more because international students had a difficulty understanding the accents of the lecturers.

Kuo (2011) conducted a survey study in which he sent out online surveys to 716 international graduate students through the Office of International Education at a University in Alabama. One hundred and fifty two students responded to Kuo’s survey representing a response rate of 23.3%. Kuo (2011) conducted the study in order to gain an insight into the language challenges faced by these international graduate students at this university. Kuo (2011) found that these international students had the most difficulty with comprehension and oral proficiency. He noted that some lecturers spoke too fast and it was difficult for the international students to understand the lecturer’s accent. The international students had difficulties following the lecturers let alone understanding them. The students also stated that their domestic counterparts spoke too fast and unclearly making communication and socialization with them difficult (Kuo, 2011)
Glen M. Vogel (N.D) looked at the cultural and language barriers faced by international students (enrolled in undergraduate, graduate and professional programs), which inhibit them from succeeding or in bringing out their full potential in a business and legal classroom. Vogel (N.D) after a review of the literature, observed that international students had a lack of proficiency in English and that these deficiencies could be accounted for by numerous factors. Some of these factors included; the student’s country of origin, the degree of English language education attained by the student in his or her country of origin, the length of time the student has been in the United States, and the student’s goals with regard to whether he or she plans to stay in the United States or return to his / her country of origin after completing his or her education.

Even though most international students are required to take English assessment test prior to admission which can help alleviate the language problem, the results of these English assessment tests are sometimes often misleading (Barnes, 2010; Kuo, 2011 & Vogel, N.D). For example, the scores reported by the students on the assessments are sometimes marred with fraud as the reported scores show students to have a greater fluency than they actually have. And even if the scores are valid, they sometimes tend not to be an accurate assessment of the student’s ability to be successful in the classroom (Vogel, N.D). For example, in 2011, in Kansas State University, many of the Chinese students attending class did not match their security photos they had taken when they wrote the TOEFL exams. While at Iowa State University, the school noticed a 10 point jump on TOEFL from 30 to 40 out of a possible score of 120 without a corresponding improvement in the students’ ability to speak English. Vogel (N.D) concluded that “if Americans wish to maintain a global presence and global influence, it is time our institutions of higher education think seriously and systematically about what they want to do with their international students (p. 2).”
In sum, an international student’s English proficiency plays an important role in his or her adjustment. The body of the literature suggests that English language proficiency not only affect international student performance in classroom or on campuses but it also affects their performance post college.

**Homesickness**

Numerous studies have concluded that international students have faced the challenge of homesickness (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Kegel, K 2009; & Tochkov, Levine & Sanaka, 2010). These studies also concluded that international students experienced varying forms of homesickness depending on how long they have been in the host country. Poyrazli & Lopez (2007) through an exploratory study examined the level of homesickness among international students and domestic students who were leaving away from home. Utilizing surveys, Poyrazli & Lopez (2007), randomly selected courses and 439 students who were enrolled across two campuses of the same university. Each student was then given a survey package containing the measures namely demographics, homesickness and discrimination. They examined the relationships between homesickness, discrimination, age, English proficiency and the number of years an international student has been in the country. They concluded that international students experienced a higher level of homesickness than their American domestic counterparts. Also, the level of discrimination faced by these international students directly reflected the level of homesickness felt by them.

Kegel (2009) conducted a literature review on homesickness among international students and reported that international students experienced homesickness. She stated that at least 30% of international students regularly experienced feelings of homesickness. Kegel (2009) further stated
that international students engaged in building new social networks, adjusting to new cultural and environmental demands while in the host environment. They also spent time grieving for missed places and persons. He concluded that homesickness negatively impacted a students’ academic performance. In some cases it led to eating and sleeping problems, low energy and headaches while in extreme situations, it led to depression among these international students (Kegel, 2009).

Tochkov et al (2010) conducted a quantitative study to examine the incidence and determinants of homesickness among two groups of students; American domestic students and a sample group of Indian international students. This study involved 75 students who ranged in age from 18 to 51. Fifty-five percent of these students were female while 45% were males. Tochkov et al (2010) examined the incidence and determinants of homesickness in the international students and compared the results to American domestic freshmen students who were used as a comparison group. Their findings showed that the Indian international students experienced at least some minimal form of homesickness when compared to their American counterparts. Their findings also stated that homesickness among the Indian students has a positive correlation with anxiety and depression. Tochkov et al (2010) also found that there was a considerable relationship between homesickness and the time the international students spent in the U.S. and the total number of credit hours accumulated. For example, they concluded that Indian students who had accumulated a high number of credits, experienced less feelings of homesickness when compared to their Indian counterparts who had accumulated less credit hours. But Tochkov et al (2010) also concluded that other factors, internal and external, related to the new environment, also impacted the degree of homesickness among these students.

International students who leave their home countries to study in the U.S. often feel a sense of homesickness. This leads them to feel a sense of isolation and/ or loneliness. The feeling
of loneliness and isolation can be mitigated if the students had prior instances of leaving home. Holding other things constant, students leaving home for the first time can feel higher adjustment issues associated with homesickness when compared to others who have left home before (Brewin et al, 1989 & Thurber et al, 2007). While there is no consensus among researchers on what constitutes homesickness as various definitions are given, it is clear that homesickness has had a negative impact on international students. But does homesickness have the same impact on immigrant students as it does on international students given that some immigrants either travel here with their families or come here on family re-unification visas while others who come here are running away from persecution and/ or natural disasters?

**Social Support**

Several researchers have investigated the challenges international students across U.S. campuses in relation to the social support these students have (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Misra et al.2003; Poyrazli et al …2004; Ye, 2006; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Atri, et al…2007; Dao et al..2007; Johnson et al.2008; & Sumer et al, 2008).

Dao et al (2007) conducted a study to examine the relationship between acculturation, perceived English proficiency, perceived social support and depression among international students. The study was done with 112 graduate Taiwanese students who were enrolled in a University in the Southeastern region of United States. Of these 112 students, 57% were male students and 43% were female. The study sought to increase awareness on adjustment levels of international students by examining individual characteristics as well as internal and external attributes and their relationship to depression among these students. Their findings indicated that students who were at risk of having depression were those who had lower perceived social
support, lower perceived English proficiency and lower acculturative levels. They also found that female students were more at risk than their male counterparts (Dao et al., 2007).

In a qualitative study, Mittal & Wieling (2006) examined the experiences of doctoral international students enrolled in accredited Marriage Family Therapy programs in the U.S. They conducted 13 detailed interviews via face to face, phone and via email. They reported that stress levels among these international students had an indirect relationship with social support. International students with greater graduate social support tend to have had less stress levels than those international students who had lower social support.

Sumer, Poyrazli & Grahame (2008) conducted a study and concluded that social support is a significant contributing factor predicting an international student’s level of depression. The purpose of the study was to predict the role of gender, age, race/ethnicity, length of stay, social support and proficiency in English on an international student’s level of depression and anxiety. The quantitative study involved 440 international students who were in the U.S. either on an F-1 or J-1 visa. These students ranged from age 18 to 49 and 57% of them were male students while 43% were female students. These students were enrolled in either undergraduate or graduate programs at two different campuses situated in the Eastern part of U.S. Sumer et al (2008) found that international “students with higher social support tended to experience higher adjustment levels and lower levels of depression and acculturative stress.” The results suggested that social support might serve as buffer and help these international students to cope more effectively with any challenges they encountered in the U.S. (Sumer et al, 2008). Their study therefore concluded that social support was a significant contributing factor in predicting depressions in international students.
Johnson, Batia & Haun (2008) conducted a qualitative study in which they examined perceived stress of 12 graduate students with regards to roles, responsibilities and social support. They found that changes in a graduate student’s social support when they enrolled in graduate programs negatively affected these students. These students’ inability to adequately cope with stress caused burn out symptoms in them which in turn led these students to consider withdrawing from school without completing the degree.

In sum, social support from family, peers, faculty and administration can be a major contributor to safeguard stress among international students. Social support can lead to feelings of isolationism, loneliness, unfairness, inhospitality or cultural intolerance.

The literature is evident that international students face some adjustments issues as they try to acculturate into U.S. Universities. These challenges can result from personal factors like age, gender, social contact, a student’s geographical home region, his or her length of time in the U.S., the student’s level of studies (undergraduate or graduate), level of fluency in English and the student’s family or personal background (Yoon & Portman, 2004). These challenges can also result from external or environmental factors; for example perceived prejudice from host country and discrimination in host country, unfairness, inhospitality, cultural intolerance and cultural confrontation (Yoon & Portman, 2004; Lee & Rice 2007).

These challenges can encompass a host of many things including perceived discrimination, language proficiency, homesickness and social support. These areas are an important component of acculturation by internationals students. Not only can these challenges have an impact on international students’ academic success and psychological wellbeing, it can also have an impact on the effectiveness of institutions’ ability to address these challenges and retain these students. While these challenges are associated with international students, it may
also be associated with African immigrants especially given the historical, comparative and transnational context within the two groups and/ or given the fact that some of the international students are students coming from Africa. Understanding these challenges and experiences presents an opportunity to create a conducive cultural and learning environment by aligning together how students make sense of their identities and interpret the things they see in their environment to achieve better academic outcomes.

**African immigrant students and African international students in America**

Some studies have been conducted on Sub-Saharan African immigrants in the U.S. and how some in the U.S. view the continent of Africa. These studies have focused on the segregation patterns of Black immigrants in the U.S. (Freeman, 2002), the health and wellbeing of African immigrants (Ward et al, N.D), coping with challenges (Kamya, 1997) how Africans and Africa is perceived in the U.S. (Kambutu & Nganga, 2014), African immigrants extended lives in the U.S. (Swigart, N.D), challenges faced by African immigrants in the U.S. and why Africans immigrate to the U.S. (Marcketti et al, 2006) and the relationship between African immigrants and African Americans (Darboe, 2006),

Using the spatial assimilation model and the primacy of race and identity perspectives, Freeman (2002) sought to explain the segregation patterns of black in the U.S. The assimilation model suggests that “immigrants will achieve greater residential proximity to native Whites as they acculturate and become upwardly mobile (p. 1984).” It explains how immigrants in the U.S. move into a dominant culture. The primacy of race and ethnic identity models describe whether spatial assimilation by Black immigrants is likely to occur into native White or African American community (Freeman, 2002). He sought to test these hypotheses using a quantitative analysis. The
study involved Black immigrants that were settled in New York, NY and Miami, Fl. Freeman (2002) concluded that Blacks were forming enclaves by living in areas that had a heavy presence of blacks. Immigrant Blacks were less segregated from native Blacks while the degree of separation between native Blacks and immigrant Blacks was modest. Race therefore impacts outcomes of Black immigrants and black race is “a major obstacle that will hinder the smooth transition into mainstream (p. 2000)” U.S. society for some Black immigrants. Freeman (2002) also concluded that English proficiency is a significant determinant of segregating Black immigrants from Whites. There is an inverse relationship between the English proficiency level of both native and immigrant Blacks and the segregation from Whites. Blacks who were fluent in English were less segregated from Whites than Blacks who were less fluent in English.

Ward, Sellers & Pate (N.D) examined the health and wellbeing experiences of African immigrant women in the U.S. The qualitative study involved 5 women who were recruited through two African associations located in the Midwest. The women reported that they were subjected to racism, discrimination and stereotyping and this affected their mood (Ward, Sellers & Pate, N.D). Some of the racism was at times directed at these women indirectly through their loves ones. For example, one participant stated that her girls told her that they were the only Blacks in their class and the teacher hardly called on them to say something. And when the children volunteered or offered to say a word, they were never listed to.

Kamya (1997) conducted a quantitative study which involved a sample that was drawn from 125 African immigrants who were randomly selected from a list of 300 immigrants. The mailings resulted to 57 responses representing 46 percent out of which 52 African immigrants representing 42 percent were used for the study. The ages of these African immigrants ranged from 17 to 50 years. The purpose of the study was to determine whether relationships exist among
spiritual wellbeing, hardiness and coping resources. Fifty eight percent of the participants were men and 42% were women. The participants identified themselves as African immigrants who were born and lived in Africa for at least 10 years. The participants also lived in the U.S. for a minimum of at least 3 months. Participants were from 9 African countries and 85% of them reported that they immigrated to the U.S. for educational reasons. He also found that participants faced stress adjustment problems such as conflicts (intergenerational and role), conflicts with self and with family, poor self-esteem, low confidence and loss of control. Kamya (1997) reported that there was a positive correlation between spiritual wellbeing and hardiness while there was a negative and strong correlation relationship between stress and self-esteem for African immigrants in the U.S. He also reported a positive relationship between self-esteem and coping resources. Spiritual wellbeing was an important factor that when combined with other factors improved the wellbeing of an African immigrant in the U.S. (Kamya, 1997)

Kambutu & Nganga (2014) conducted a narrative study to explore the impact of cultural immersion in terms of helping the study participants to developed understanding of the African continent. Study participants were selected from a cross section of the society including American college students. From 2004 with the exception of 2008, participants went to Kenya where they spent at least 3 weeks of cultural immersion. Prior to going to Kenya, they held monthly preparatory meetings for up to six months. During these monthly meetings, participants listened to guest speakers and formal lectures and they took part in reading assignments, online threaded discussions and question and answer sessions which provided them with helpful information. While in Kenya, participants explored Kenya’s historical, economical, geo-political, cultural and social aspects. The study involved both pre and post visit interviews. Kambutu & Nganga (2014) gathered from the pre-visit interviews that there were lots of misconceptions about Africa. Some
participants thought that Africa was a country and not a continent made up of several countries. Others thought it was a needy country while other participants thought that Africa is a territory that lacks food, formal education, medical services and technological amenities. But most of these views were changed during the post visit interviews. Kambutu & Nganga (2014) reported that as African immigrants, they had experienced numerous challenges adjusting into the U.S. These challenges included language based discrimination because they spoke with what they termed “heavy African accents.” Because of their “heavy African accents,” their cognitive abilities were called into question especially in higher education.

Swigart (N.D) conducted a study on the extended lives of African immigrants. He reported that African immigrants had the highest level of education among all immigrants to the United States, they spoke many different languages like Amharic and Wolof in addition to French and English, and that African immigrants embodied a new trend of trans-nationalism which is “characterized by the maintenance of identities that extend across national borders and by the ongoing active participation” of these immigrants in both their home and host countries. African immigrants experience immigration to the United States in ways that are both similar and different from other immigrants. African immigrants extended their identity, family, community, sense of home, occupation, education, lives and spirit (Swigart, N.D). He further stated that African immigrants, once in the United States become invisible as the larger society perceives them as African Americans. While this grouping of African immigrants into a larger African or Black Americans community helps African immigrants to blend in and survive the challenges of immigration, it may also lead to undesirable consequences for these African immigrants. First, such a perception may subject African immigrants to “racial discrimination, erase their cultural and historical uniqueness, and lead to the assumption that their behavior will conform to
American standards that they find unfamiliar (p. 4).” Second, by virtue of shared heritage, relations between African immigrants and Native Blacks are not the best as their cultural differences have often created obstacles to a mutual understanding among them (Swigart, N.D).

Limited literature has documented the experiences and challenges of African immigrants in the U.S. higher education. Some of the challenges by African immigrants and students of African descent include a feeling of isolation, challenges adapting to different learning and teachings styles, financial constraints, challenges adjusting or assimilating unfamiliar climates and cultures. Marcketti, Mhango & Gregoire (2006) conducted a study involving 9 African graduate students in a college of Human Sciences in a Midwestern part of the United States. Three themes emerged from the interviews; reason why these students study in the U.S., the challenges they faced in the U.S. and the desire to return home upon completion of their studies. Most of the interviewees stated that they chose to study in the U.S. because of lack of resources in Africa. Participants noted that they faced challenges in balancing employment, relationships and family at home and also challenges of feelings of belonging. Marcketti, Mhango & Gegoire (2006) also found that most participants expressed a desire to return to their native countries upon completion of their studies.

In 2006, Foday Darboe conducted a mixed method (interviews, surveys and library research) study to examine the relationship between Africans and African Americans. Darboe (2006) sought to probe and analyze the relationship between these two groups and how this relationship impacts their co-existence and adaptation to each other. Specifically, Darboe (2006) analyzed the inter-group effects of stereotype, ignorance, misconception and grudge that exist between Africans and African Americans by exploring the cultural and cross-cultural interactions between the two groups. Participants were from Portland University, the African immigrants’
community and the African American community in Metro Portland areas in Poland. The participants who took part in the study ranged from ages 18 to 75. Members of the African immigrant community were from 11 African countries. Darboe (2006) concluded that “the stereotypes, ignorance, misconceptions and grudges have overshadowed the strained relationship between these two groups (p. 29).” Darboe (2006) further concluded that whatever beliefs each group held against each other emanated from the broader American society. This broader American society was largely influenced by mainstream media and America’s educational system which are dominated by a Eurocentric perspective. Darboe (2006) criticized the U.S. media and educational system for failing to educate the population on the historical and cultural perspectives of Africa and the contributions Africa and Africans have made to today’s world.

Using Multiple Worlds (the movement from and inter-relationship between different contexts and how meanings and understandings are derived from these worlds as proposed by Phelan et al... (1994) and Typology (how race and ethnicity are central to one constructs of self and to their experiences with others proposed by Waters in 1994 & 1999) frameworks, Awokoya (2012) sought to explore how three major contexts: family, school and peer groups; affect the ways in which African immigrant youth constructs and negotiates his or her ethnic identity in the U.S. She employed 12 college participants made up of 9 women and 3 men who were purposefully sampled by choosing participants who (i) immigrated to the United Stated before the age of 12; (ii) who were born in the United States to Nigerian parents who had resided in the United States for a minimum of 15 years; and (iii) who were between the ages of 18 to 32. She interviewed them from 2008 to 2009. The participants of her study were 1.5- and second-generation Nigerian immigrant youths who were recruited via email sent to multicultural student organizations on District of Columbia (DC’s) area universities and colleges. While her study was
not generalizable to broaden the African immigrant population, she sought to explore and to begin a theory of this Nigerian immigrant youth that can be expanded in future studies. Awokoya (2012) found that African immigrant youths experience a complex and contradictory process while constructing and negotiating their racial and ethnic identities. She found that the African immigrant youth faces challenges on three levels; as a Black, as an immigrant and as an African. The African immigrant youth faces racism and stigmatization in these areas (Awokoya, 2012).

In summary Sub-Saharan African Immigrants face a lot of challenges as they immigrate into the U.S. as noted above. For example, English proficiency is a significant determinant of segregating Black immigrants from Whites Freeman (2002), African immigrants were subjected to discrimination and racism (Ward, Sellers & Pate, N.D), they faced stress adjustment problems (Kamya, 1997), they become in the U.S. become invisible as the larger society sees them as African Americans (Swigart, N.D) and they experience a contradictory and complex process while constructing and negotiating their racial and ethnic identities in the U.S. (Awokoya, 2012).

**Coping mechanism and/ or solutions**

International students and African immigrants have experienced challenges as they adjust to a new learning environment. The existing research has identified several challenges such as academic life, health insurance, living conditions, social interactions, transportation, perceived Discrimination, English language proficiency or fluency, homesickness, social support, unfairness and inhospitality by the host, cultural intolerance and cultural confrontation (Freeman, 2002; Yoon & Portman, 2004; Lee & Rice 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Kegel, 2009; Barnes, 2010 & Tochkov, Levine & Sanaka, 2010).
Zhai (2002) found that in order to overcome these challenges, these sojourners have employed various coping strategies to ease their integration into the U.S. higher education. International students rely on the support from their friends, family, external family (other international students), Office of International Education, Academic Advisers, faculty, classmates and colleagues to handle their adjustment and personal problems. Family and friends are their most important source of help (Zhai, 2002). Tseng & Newton (2002) conducted a study and reported 8 strategies employed by international students to cope with their adjustment challenges. These strategies included knowing and understanding themselves and others; building relationships with others; widening their worldview and how they saw things, seeking for help when necessary, developing cultural and social contacts, establishing relationships with academic advisors and instructors, learning and understanding English and letting go of their problems which will help them mitigate the challenges they face in the U.S. In another study, international students developed relationships with U.S. domestic students in order to reduce the negative effects of stress which resulted from cultural differences with their new environment (Kaczmarek et al., 1994). International students were very self-confident in their abilities, they maintained a level of satisfaction and they made use of every available resource to cope with the challenges that came with adjusting to U.S. university campuses (Parr et al., 1992 & Luzzo et al, 1990).

Charles Abel (2002) notes that social and academic assistance provided through study and/ or peer groups and the types of professors chosen are very important in helping international students’ experiences and academic outcomes. These actions can help international students with mitigating the challenges they may face as they immigrate in to the U.S.

Smith & Khawaja (2011) highlight three intervention strategies that have been employed by international students to enhance their adaptation. The first intervention strategy is the use of
Behavioral programs is based on a cultural learning framework that seeks to enhance socio-cultural adaptation of sojourners. The second strategy is the employment of multi-cultural intervention strategies to improve social ties, cultural orientation and psychological adaptation. Another strategy employed involves the reliance on support programs to target individual factors like increasing coping skills, aiding adjustment into the host environment, offering culturally sensitive counseling, addressing acculturative stressors and normalizing students’ experiences.

Summary

Adjusting into a new social and academic environment in the United States by foreign born students is often a challenging and difficult process. In this chapter, I examined the academic and cultural adjustments of international students by reviewing the literature from different perspectives. The United States is undergoing a major demographic transformation in its racial and ethnic make-up. This growing diversity in the United States’ multicultural population is easily seen in the diverse student population that educators intermingle with on daily basis.

I examined many studies (Freeman, 2002; Yoon & Portman, 2004; Lee & Rice 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Kegel, 2009; Barnes, 2010 & Tochkov, Levine & Sanaka, 2010) that have detailed the challenges international students face while pursuing postsecondary education in the United States. The purpose of the study is to understand the lived experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students who are pursuing a postsecondary education in a United States postsecondary institution but because of the limited literature on Sub-Saharan African immigrants, I focus this literature review on the experiences of international students, some of whom are of Sub-Saharan African descent.
In order to fully understand this, the literature draw upon the ecology of human development Theory as proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner which he asserts that “human development is a product of interaction between the growing organism and its environment” (p. 16). That is human development is greatly influenced by different types of environmental systems in which the human has a direct or indirect relationship. The literature review also draws from John Ogbu’s cultural-ecological theory, which he defines as “the study of institutionalized patterns of behavior interdependent with features of the environment” (Ogbu, 1990a, p. 22).

Sub-Saharan African immigrant students play a vital role in the U.S. educational system. Not only are they a source of revenue to the U.S. economy especially U.S. colleges, they bring with them a wealth of diversity and experiences that can enrich the overall student learning experience across U.S. campuses. For example, researchers have also recommended various strategies on how to address their challenges. Stebleton et al (2010) have recommended first that student affairs practitioners should co-facilitate the creation of student led organizations and associations, collaborate and reach out to student organizations. They should provide opportunities and structures to help immigrant students feel a sense of place on campus. They should create new curricular opportunities to help students engage academically and socially through high impact educational practices by implementing peer mentoring programs, pairing upper level immigrant students with new, incoming students. Second, Stebleton et al (2010) recommended that policy makers should improve admissions, student services and institutional research procedures and strategies, add innovative financial aid opportunities for immigrant students and encourage faculty and student affairs professionals to invest in ongoing training and education.
The review of the literature has yielded some great insight and findings into some of the lived experiences of foreign born students, some of whom are of African descent. One theme that runs through the literature is the challenges faced by these foreign born students while pursuing a postsecondary education in the United States. These studies (Freeman, 2002; Yoon & Portman, 2004; Lee & Rice 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Kegel, 2009; Barnes, 2010 & Tochkov, Levine & Sanaka, 2010) have mostly detailed the challenges faced by international students while pursuing postsecondary education in the United States. Some of the challenges identified by these researchers include language barriers, homesickness, loss of social and family support, loss of social status, a set of inferiority complex or decreased self-esteem, academic demands, lack of study skills, lack of assertiveness, perceived discrimination, and adjustment difficulties that have resulted from cultural differences and/or conflict (Pederson, 1991; Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson & Pisecco, 2002; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Reynolds & Constantine, 2007 & Karuppan & Barari, 2011).

But the literature also brought to light that challenges faced by and/or the lived experiences of these sojourners are not identical or alike but rather, they are different for different groups or students depending in part by the origin of these students.

Also, the old saying that “one size fits it all” is an idea whose time has come and gone. Hence a specific method may not necessarily be the best medium through which to study a phenomenon. And even if it does, the conceptual framework and/or method will yield the best possible results when the participants’ origin and/or background are taken into consideration.

Whereas many other foreign-born students may face the same challenges while pursuing a post-secondary education in the United States, researchers, policy makers and the various stakeholders will be doing a dis-service to Sub-Saharan African born students by lumping these
immigrant students into one category especially given the huge (cultural, linguistic, religious, economic, social, geographical and historical) diversity that exists between the various sub regions that make up Sub-Saharan Africa. Even within these in groups exist tribes and clans. Such in-groups or sub-groups may tend to lend more credence to one’s regional group.

Finally, there has been few studies done on the lived experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students. The steady rise in the size and/or composition of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students across U.S campuses therefore merits a study or an increased amount of studies on the academic and cultural experiences of this rising group.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to explore the academic and cultural experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students who are pursing postsecondary education at a 4-year public U.S. higher education institution. These Sub-Saharan African immigrants were living in the United States as permanent residents as they pursued their education or academic dreams at the time of this study. The study examined how these immigrants have been influenced by their culture, how they respond to the pressures to succeed, how they have adjusted into the U.S. postsecondary education system and what challenges they have faced as they adjusted into their new environment.
Research Goals

Due to the limited research on the challenges and experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students in the United States, it was the intent through this exploratory study to deepen the understanding of their challenges and experiences by examining the main issues that are lacking in current studies as described in the literature review. I sought to contribute to the field by providing greater depth of understanding of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students’ experience and how they mitigated any challenges, if any, as they pursue postsecondary education in the United States.

Research Questions

This study aimed to examine the academic and cultural experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students at a 4-year public United States higher education institution. The following research questions served as a guide to this study.

1) How do Sub-Saharan African immigrant undergraduate students adapt culturally and academically to the environment of a 4 year public U.S. higher education institution?

2) How do Sub-Saharan African immigrants describe their cultural and academic experiences as undergraduates on an American 4-year public higher education institution?

3) What are the cultural and academic challenges Sub-Saharan African immigrant students face in adapting to an American 4-year public higher education institution?

4) What resources, supports and relationships do Sub-Saharan rely on to mitigate any cultural and academic challenges they face in an American 4-year public higher education institution?
Methodology

These questions were best examined through a qualitative research design. I employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a distinctive approach to conducting qualitative research in psychology that was introduced by Jonathan A. Smith in 1996. IPA, which has been defined as “an approach to psychology which was able to capture the experiential and qualitative” (Smith et al. 2009, p.4) is concerned with individuals’ subjective reports rather than the construction of an objective account (Flowers et al. 1999). It recognizes that research is a lively process (Smith, 1996) and acknowledges that a researcher’s attempt to access participants’ world “depends on and is complicated by the researcher’s own conceptions…required in order to make sense of that other personal world through a process of interpretative activity” (Smith et al., 1999, p218-219). IPA originated from the study of phenomenology and symbolic interactions, which holds that human beings are not just inactive or inert beings who become aware or conscious of an objective reality. Instead, it holds that human beings are active participants in a setting who are actively interpreting and understanding their environment by formulating their own biographical stories into a formula or procedure that makes sense to them. IPA therefore focuses on the exploration of participants’ experience, understandings, perceptions and views (Reid et al. 2005). Interpretative phenomenological analysis is an integration of three theoretical approaches namely phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography to qualitative inquiry (Smith et al., 2009), which presents the researcher with a logical opportunity of gathering and examining a phenomenon that deals with a participant’s lived experiences as the researcher makes interpretations (hermeneutics) of the distinct (idiographic) and lived (phenomenology) experiences of the participants.

Phenomenology helps to explore how certain individuals have lived through a specific phenomenon. It provides a rigorous philosophical means of gathering and examining a
phenomenon pertaining to the lived experiences of a study’s participants (Smith, et al. (2009). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach gave me the opportunity to make interpretations of the distinct lived experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students who study at a United States’ postsecondary institution.

I employed semi-structured in-depth interviews because IPA requires that participants give a first-hand account of their experiences (Smith, et al. 2009). This approach uses an open-ended interview protocol and calls for subsequent categorization during the analysis. This approach is consistent with suggestions made by other notable scholars (Creswell, 2007).

Merriam and Simpson (2000) suggest that phenomena “includes both the acts- such as thinking, believing, perceiving- and the things to which these acts are related such as ideas or material objects” (p. 91). That is, people’s experience of a particular phenomenon is portrayed in how they describe the phenomena and how they make meaning of the phenomena through their life experiences.

Phenomenology was first brought to light by Hegel who said it is “knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). But Edmund Husserl further developed this methodology to permit a clearer, unbiased and objective study of human experiences and consciousness (Cross, Stewart, & Coleman, 2003). Husserl envisioned giving researchers an opportunity to discern or unearth key elements of subjects’ lived experiences while removing an outsider observer from merely interpreting human experiences (Cross et al, 2003).

Moustakas (1994) states that phenomenology carries with it some basic assumptions. It “focuses on the appearance of things, a return to things just as they are given” (p. 58) as opposed to seeking explanations and/ or casual relationships that are related to the experiences. The
researcher brings to light the end result of a phenomenological study by exploring an experience in its entirety while objectively examining the various participants’ viewpoints of the experience. To achieve this, the researcher must immerse self in the data, reflecting on it while conducting a self-reflection throughout both data collection and analysis.

Conscious experiences are therefore unique because one can experience them as I live through them or perform them (Moustakas, 1994; Stanage, 1987). Describing, explicating, and interpreting this experience becomes very critical to phenomenological research (Patton, 2002). As a result, phenomenology underscores how “we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world and, in so doing, develop a worldview” (Patton, 2002, p. 106).

A Phenomenological approach was best suited for this study for two reasons. First, phenomenological interviews target to explore individuals’ lived experiences thereby giving voice to participants to allow them to make sense of their own experiences (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Finally, Sub-Saharan African immigrants may bring with them previous academic and cultural experiences that can have a significant influence on their adaptation and adjustment into their new community. These experiences may influence them to re-examine both the previous and current experiences as they attempt to make sense of their lived experiences. Phenomenological interviews can therefore be employed to capture the broad range of the lived experiences of the participants in the study, which will help to reveal “what [they] experience and how they interpret the world” (Patton, 2002, p. 106).

Hermeneutics, the study and interpretation of human behavior, helps to explore how certain individuals interpret their lived experiences. It will help present understandings of these experiences through interpretation, which are complex and different for each individual (Van
Manen, 1990). Hence, this approach helped me to gain an understanding of the immigrant students' lived experiences in the U.S. higher education. It was possible this perceived experiences of each student in this study emerged from my own interpretations as a result of my interactions with them, I do recognize that there are multiple ways of interpreting these experiences to gain meaning and construct reality (Bogdan & Bilken, 1992; Van Manen, 2005). Because of the possibility of multiple interpretations, my research design took into consideration five qualitative paradigm assumptions namely; my assumptions of reality, values, relationships, the use of language and what constitutes an appropriate methodology for this research (Creswell, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

To ascertain my interpretation of reality in this study I depended on the voices of the Sub-Saharan African immigrant students and I considered the different aspects of their lived experiences that these students offered about their perceived experiences in the U.S. higher education. I captured the voices of these Sub-Saharan African immigrants through the extensive use of their words verbatim from interviews (Creswell, 1994). The interpretations of these realities helped provide meanings that are rooted in the interviews (Neuman, 2000). As a researcher, I was mindful that interpretations are not independent acts but rather they are dependent on and evolve from past experiences and interactions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

I also employed an heuristic approach to inquiry in collecting the data for this study. As noted by Moustakas (1990), heuristic, a word that has its root from the Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning to “find” enables a researcher to find things out or to discover things. This approach allowed the researcher to be present throughout the entire process of the study. It also allowed the researcher to understand the phenomenon with increasing depth while at the same time
experiencing self-awareness and knowledge (Moustakas, 1990). I employed the heuristic approach for a number of reasons.

The heuristic approach allowed me to draw on my own lived experience as a Sub-Saharan African immigrant student in American higher education. Through this approach, I was able to explore the lived experiences of other participants, and this gave me the greatest opportunity to relate their experiences to mine given that I am also a Sub-Saharan African immigrant. Because of the unique position that I enjoy, I did not disengage myself from the study as I explored the lived experiences of my study participants. Also, I chose this approach because of my personal interest, experience and assumptions that my study participants would share similar experiences. The heuristic approach of inquiry highlights a concentrated human experience from the viewpoints of the researcher and the study subjects (Patton, 2002). Heuristic approach is the “combination of personal experiences and intensity that yields an understanding of the essence of the phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p.207). As Moutakas (1990) observes, at the center of the heuristic approach are several key concepts and processes, which are organized along a six-phased model namely, initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis.

Finally, I purposefully employed a flexible design to allow for unexpected changes or insights gleaned in the course of data collection. I anticipated that the data I will gather from the study might not only suggest different interpretations to the existing themes in the literature but it might also generate new and conflicting themes that cannot be addressed with or via a fixed design structure.

I adopted a “two-stage interpretation process [in exploring how] . . . the participants are trying to make sense of their world” (p. 53) as suggested by Smith and Osborne (2007). This
process is called a “double hermeneutic . . . [in that] the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith & Osborne, 2007, p. 53). Each participant was prompted through interview questions to tell his or her story based on his or her individual experiences or from his or her lens. I then made the best effort to interpret and/ or analyze their individual experiences as presented to me.

**Site Selection**

It is important to seek individuals that have experienced the specific phenomenon that is being studied (Creswell, 1998 & Maxwell, 2005) when conducting a phenomenological study. It is also important that “the ideal site is where (1) entry is possible; (2) there is a high probability that a rich mix of many of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and/ or structures that may be a part of the research question will be present; (3) the researcher can devise an appropriate role to maintain continuity of presence for as long as necessary and (4) data quality and credibility of the study are reasonably assured by avoiding poor sampling decision” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 55). I sought participants for this study at a public university located at the Northeastern part of United States. While participants for this study could have possibly come from multiple universities that have experienced the phenomenon that was considered for study, I was confident that I would enroll enough participants from this one site that had experienced the phenomenon under study. While it true that multiple settings could improve the quality of the data and research findings (Patton, 1990), the single setting presented me with the opportunity of a convenient sample that has experienced the phenomenon under study under a similar institutional culture. Also, a single case design is warranted on the foundation that the case is revelatory (Yin, 1989, p.48).
Not claiming theoretical representativeness, I purposefully targeted this public university in the Northeastern part of the United States because of the average concentration of Black non-Hispanics and foreign born undergraduate students on this campus when compared to other institutions in the vicinity. Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain specific data from the institution on the number of Sub-Saharan African immigrants enrolled there as they are not required by law to collect, report and retain such data. I therefore relied on the percentage of Blacks and foreign-born as proxies to help identify possible populations of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students at this institution. For example, nationally, in 2007-2008 academic year, blacks and foreign born represented 15% and 10% of U.S undergraduate students while at this institution, about 11% and 3% of this institution’s undergraduates are Black and foreign born students respectively (NCES). While 3% will seem like a far lower percentage than the normal national percentage, it is representative of the colleges and universities around the Northeastern region of the country where this study is undertaken. Unfortunately, no school is required by law to track the immigration status of its students hence immigration status of students become very obscure and as such I could not obtain specific data from the institution on the number of Sub-Saharan African immigrants enrolled there. Also, I targeted this institution because it is noted for its partnerships with various regions of Sub-Saharan Africa and tends to enroll many students from there even though this is not representative of all the colleges and universities in the region. Finally, this institution is located in a locale that happens to have a high presence of Sub-Saharan African immigrants living within it when compared to other communities in the region. For example, in 2005, the largest percentage (14%) of African born blacks lived in the NY-NJ- PA areas alone while another 13% lives in the DC metropolitan area (Kent, 2007). With no legal requirement for schools to keep track of the immigration status and nationality, it becomes difficult to get data on
students’ immigration status and/or nationality background to decipher the number of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students who are enrolled at this or any other institution.

It was important that I developed a good rapport with key members of my subjects as suggested by both Creswell (1998) and Patton (2002). For my study, the key members were the Adviser, the President, the Vice President, the Secretary or the Public Relations Officer of the Organization. The key members did not only help to act as gatekeepers to my selected study group but they also helped to act as negotiators between the selected group and myself. In addition, these key member(s) helped in selecting the participants for the study. They helped in providing critical feedback on the data gathering process as well as the instruments used for the interviews. For example, these key members provided me with critical information as to when their clubs’ meetings and/or social events were taking place thereby enabling me to visit the campus when it was best to meet with students. For my study, I reached out to the leaderships of the African Students Association, the Black Organization of Students, Intervarsity Christian Fellowship and International Student Organization for undergraduates. I was in contact with some of these individuals as part of my pre-dissertation preparations and I briefed them on my study and solicited their participation and/or assistance.

Participants

Patton (2002) observes that qualitative research does not have any set rules with regards to sample size but notes that the “sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility and what can be done with available time and resources” (p. 244). Moustakas (1990) in addressing the issue of sample size in a heuristic research observed that it is possible to conduct such a study with one participant but in
order to collect a deeper, more profound, richer and more varied meaning from participants, a sample size of 10 to 15 is preferred.

Twenty (20) participants (immigrant students) who voluntarily immigrated to the United States to stay and at the time of the study were pursuing postsecondary education at a 4-year public United States University were included in this study. An immigrant student is one who was born in a foreign country who voluntarily immigrated to the U.S to live here permanently (Capps, McCabe & Fix, 2012; Kim, 2014). Participants must have lived in any of the 49 countries that make up Sub-Saharan Africa for 5 years and must have lived in the United States for at least 3 months. While it may be possible that a person who has lived in Sub-Saharan Africa for 1 – 5 years and in the United States for 1 month to 1 year may have different experiences and exposure than one who had lived in both places for a much longer time frame, expanding time lived in Sub-Saharan Africa and the United States to 5 years and 3 months respectively helped to accomplish two things; (i) provided rich and diverse data and (ii) increased the size of the population from which I was able to generate a sample. For these same reasons too, participants were not excluded based on age and sex. My goal was to have the participants of my sample equally recruited and/or grouped under the following categories; (i) mode of immigration into the United States (Refugee / asylee, family reunification and Diversity Visa lottery; (ii) time of immigration (more recent immigration, 0-5 years and less recent immigration, 6 years plus immigration); (iii) Sex / Gender (Male, Female), (iv) Sub-Saharan African region of origin (West, Central, East and South), (v) Religion and (vi) Language These criteria helped to ensure that participants would share diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under study, that is, how these immigrants have been influenced by their culture, how they dealt with the pressures to succeed, how they adjusted
into the U.S. postsecondary education system and what challenges they faced as they adjusted into their new environment.

Initially, I had access to about 103 possible participants. But after an initial screening of the participants for a possible fit, about 67 of them representing about 66% were a fit for the study. Of this 67, about 39 students or about 58% agreed to take part in the study. About 25 students (about 37%) did not follow up with me or did not respond to my follow up invitation while 3 students (about 4%) declined to take part in the study. Because this study actually took place during the summer hours when most students were not taking summer classes and were away for summer holidays or the few that signed up for summer classes were operating under a tight schedule, I could not interview all of the 39 that fit the study criteria and had agreed to take part in this study.

In order to help ensure a rich and diverse data, the sample size was limited to 20 undergraduate students. In addition, limiting the sample size to 20 gave me the opportunity to “give full appreciation to each participant’s account…” (Smith et al., 2012). This IPA approach is an ideographic approach “concerned with understanding particular phenomena in particular contexts” (Smith, et.al., 2009, p. 49). This sample size was perfectly aligned with IPA analytic approach as suggested by Smith et al. (2009) who argued that IPA researchers should work within a sample size which “should provide sufficient cases for the development of meaningful points of similarity and difference between participants” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51).

**Brief discussion of the sample size**

This section outlines a brief demographic and/or characteristics of the participants (Co-Researchers) that took part in this study. In a nutshell there were 20 participants drawn from the 4
regions that make up Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) with the following number of participants from each region: 6 from Central Africa, 5 from East Africa, 3 from South Africa and 6 from West Africa. Of the 20 participants, 13 were males while 7 were females. The participants ranged from age 20 to 49 and each is represented in this study by pseudonyms that were agreed upon during the study. All participants spoke multiple languages that included some regional African languages. About half the participants had more than 1 language as language of instruction with a combination of English / Swahili, English / French, English / Portuguese and French / German, Spanish as prominent combinations.

It is worth noting here that three (3) of my study participants lived in one house (building). While they lived in one house, each participant had his or her own individual private bed / study room as the house was made up of eight (8) rooms and rented to individual students. Even so, necessary steps were taken to ensure that the collected data was not tainted. For example, all the interviews took place the same day in each person’s room and no participant had an advance knowledge of the interview questions.
Graph 4A: Regional Representation of Participants (Co-Researchers)

Graph 4B: Mode of Immigration of Participants to the U.S
### Demographic and/or Pertinent Information About Study Participants

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<th>Level of Studies</th>
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Participants' Profile: DV = Diversity Visa Lottery, FR = Family Reunification & RA = Refugee / Asylum
W&A = West Africa, RA = East Africa, C = Central Africa & S = South (aka Southern) Africa
* These are pseudonyms used in order to protect the confidentiality of study participants
** Official Language(s) and / or Language of instruction; F = French, E = English, S = Swahili, A = Amharic, A* = Arabic, B = Bambara & P = Portuguese
**** Religion: P = Pentecostal; C = Catholic; I = Islam & A = African or "Non-western" or Atheist; C* = Christianity

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A Brief Profile of each study participant

In this section outlining the brief overview of each participant, I will group the participants according to the various regions namely West Africa, Central Africa, East Africa, and South Africa. All names used are pseudonyms that were agreed upon with the participants in the course of the study.

West Africa: The Sub-Saharan African region of West Africa is made up of 16 countries namely: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Cote d’Ivoire aka Ivory Coast, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, Niger, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo and Mali. There were 6 participants from the West African region of Sub-Saharan African namely Foli Aijeba, Moktoi Queddai, Raj Bititi, Azubike Habre, Janga Nini and Boatema Oumkou.

Foli Aijeba immigrated to the United States from Burkina Faso through the family reunification visa program to re-unite with his dad. He is the second child of 5 children born to his mother and father. This was Aijeba’s second Bachelors degree as he earned one in his home country. He is a member of the U.S. military and has been stationed to various parts of the world. He credits his easy integration into the American society and his success in school to his step mom. When Foli arrived in the U.S., his step mom first talked him into joining the U.S. military and offered to drive him to one of the recruiting offices in the area. She then talked to him about the don’ts and dos in a face pace world like the U.S., warning him against employing any form of short cuts to life. He recalls his step mom advising him that in a society like this (U.S.), it is always better to take the stairs up a high-rise building as opposed to taking the elevator so that if he falls, he can land on the stairs below. Whereas if he took the elevator, he can find himself at the bottom of the floor in part because of the absence of any support to hold on to.
Ms. Moktoi Queddai emigrated from Mali to the United States at the age of 18 thanks to U.S. Family Reunification programs. While French and Fulfulde were the languages of instruction and administration in her native country, it was not the primary spoken language at home. They spoke the mother’s tongue, a local native African language. Prior to immigrating to the U.S., Moktoi Queddai was enrolled in college for a term (semester) but as she claims, this was just a matter of formality to keep her busy as her immigration to the United States was all but certain at this time. While in Mali waiting for her dad to purchase their tickets, she was actively involved in church activities. She immigrated to the U.S. with her two younger siblings and her mother. The time it took for her father to process their documents to the time the permanent residency papers were issued was relatively short given that they were under 21, single and they were travelling with their mother, the only and legally married wife to their father. Any delay to their travel plans were more so because her father had look for a bigger space to accommodate the family and he had to single handedly raise enough funds (some $9000.00) to pay for their flight and other travelling related expenses.

Raj Bititi is a 23-year-old female who migrated to the U.S. from Nigeria thanks to a Diversity Visa lottery she and her husband won. Her husband who had been working for a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO aka non for profit organization) in her native country played and won one of the 50,000 slots reserved for immigrants who want to immigrate to the U.S. At the time of immigration, Raj was enrolled in college in her native country. She saw the work her husband was doing and was motivated to enroll into college with the hope of helping others when she was done. Hence her decision to enroll into Pre-Med. Their siblings, parents and closed loved ones were all in their native country. Every now and then, she and her husband will send money
home to be of assistance to their loved ones especially considering the fact that her husband was a
great source of financial support to the both families when they were back in Nigeria.

Azubike Habre immigrated to the U.S with her 3 siblings and her mother to re-unite with
her father thanks to a Family Reunification visa. Azubike’s father had been in America and away
from the family for about seven (7) years. Because his father was a naturalized citizen legally
married to Azubike’s mother, and Azubike and her siblings were all minors, it took them a total of
about year from the time they started processing the immigration papers to the time they
immigrated to the United States from Liberia. Azubike arrived the U.S. just few months shy of
her 17th birthday. She enrolled into high school. Upon graduation, she enrolled into a community
college before transferring to the present institution where she is pursuing a degree in Women
Studies with a minor in Legal Studies. She explains that she arrived here in the heart of the winter
and that in itself was not a fun experience at all given that she knew very little about the snow.
Her father had suggested to them to delay their coming to America to the Spring or Summer
months but because of their excitement not just to re-unite with him but to come to America was
so overwhelming, they paid deaf ears to any effects of winter. While they will not change their
travel plans if they were given another opportunity and given what she knows, she acknowledges
that dealing with the winter was very challenging.

Janga Nini immigrated to the U.S. from Ghana after winning the Diversity Visa Lottery.
Before coming here, Janga was a second year law student in his native country (you can leave
high school and go straight to studying law). Still passionate to study law with the hope of
returning home one day and fight the blatant social injustice that takes place in his native country,
Janga is currently pursuing a degree in Economics with a minor in Legal Studies. Janga maintains
a job off campus working with a local law firm as a Paralegal Assistant. He is also involved with
a local religious entity where he volunteers his time in providing basic legal guidance to newly
arrivals into the U.S. Plans of someday returning to his native country were very fresh in his mind.

Boatema Oumkou, who immigrated from Sierra Leone, had always dreamed of immigrating to the West for greener pastures. This dream came to fruition when Baotema won the Diversity Visa lottery. After winning the Diversity Visa lottery, he almost could not immigrate to the U.S. as his parents were unable to put together the necessary financial resources for him to embark on this life changing journey. His parents were forced to liquidate the only family wealth (land) at below market value to raise the necessary money Boatema needed in order to undertake his immigration to the U.S. Boatema is currently pursing a degree in Arts with a concentration in Fashion Design. He credits his hard work in school in part to his desire not to disappoint his family and also to secure a good job in the future which will enable him to buy and give back enough land to his family to replace the one they were forced to liquidate at below market value so he can travel.

Central Africa: There are nine (9) countries that make up the Central African region of Sub-Saharan Africa namely: Angola, Cameroon, Republic of Central Africa, Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabo and Sao Tome / Principe. In all, 6 participants were from the Central African region namely Bonwi Biyogo, Boganda Macias, Mbasogo Mboma, Goukouni Milongo, Achta Lamia and Raoumbe Molack.

Bonwi Biyogo who hails from Cameroon, came to the U.S thanks to the U.S Diversity Visa lottery program. He played the lottery on 3 conservative years before being selected on the third time. Bonwi is the 10th child to his father’s 29 children and the 2nd child to his mother’s 5
children. His father is married to a married to 4 wives and he has 3 other children from women he was never been married to.

Boganda Macias is from the French speaking region of Cameroon and he speaks more than 5 languages fluently including French, English and German. He is the only child of his parents. He immigrated to the U.S. after winning the Diversity Visa lottery. He currently pursues a degree in Philosophy with a minor in Peace and Conflict Studies with the hope of one day working for an international organization that can benefit from his multilingualism.

Mbasogo Mboma is a refugee who immigrated to the U.S. with his family after fleeing civil unrest in his native country, Gabon. Before settling in the U.S., they spent about 6 months in a U.N. refugee resettlement camp. His father was a businessman while his mother a primary school teacher. While his parents were not directly involved in any political activities, they were not immune from the political unrest as his father’s business was looted and the school where his mother taught was set ablaze. He stated that they credit God for their new found opportunities noting that what the enemy (perpetuators of the civil unrest and the undemocratic regime in power) meant evil for them, God used it for their God. They were now living a much better life compared to the average standard of living in African context they had at home.

Goukouni Milongo immigrated to the U.S. with the family following civil unrest in their native country of the Democratic Republic of Congo where the disenfranchised mineral rich region of the country was constantly engaged in civil unrest with the political class of the country for the government’s mismanagement of natural resources, corruption and the government’s failure to invest in social services in the mineral rich regions. The civil unrest that claimed so many lives was largely on tribal and religious grounds. When Goukouni Milongo and his parents
arrived in the U.S., they first settled in 3 other states before finally settling in this Northeastern part of the country in order to be closer to other folks from their native country.

Achta Lamia who comes from the Central African Republic (CAR) is a 26-year-old female who immigrated to the U.S through the family reunification visa program. Her parents won the Diversity Visa lottery but she could not be part of the visa application or travel with the parents at the onset because her parents could not afford the necessary financial resources to travel with the entire family. When her parents became naturalized citizens, they immediately applied for her. She is currently pursuing a second Bachelors degree, which will enable her to make up some classes that are necessary requirements for her to apply to Pharmacy and/or Medical school.

Raoumbe Molack is a nursing student and he immigrated to the U.S. to meet his wife, his high school sweet heart. His wife had immigrated to the U.S. many years prior with her parents but the distance had little effect on their solid love they had built while in high school. A father of three, Raoumble who hails from the Republic of Congo, is enrolled in school full time and also maintains a job off campus so that he can support his family. He feels so blessed having the right family that gave him so much by paving the way for him to immigrate to the U.S. He noted that “from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” He therefore was working hard to give back not just to his immediate family but his community back at home by way of his commitments and sacrifices but acknowledged that it was challenging though uplifting.

**East Africa:** As per the United Nations (U.N.), there are twenty (20) countries that make up East Africa but as per East Africa Community (EAC) they include only 5 countries in their
body. For this study, I am using the U.N classification and the countries that make up this region include: Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique, Madagascar, Union of the Comoros, Mauritius, Seychelles, Reunion and Mayotte. In all, 5 participants originated from the East African region of Sub-Saharan Africa namely Ilola Mathembu, Imara Jabali, Nalyazi Nehanda, Nkole Ukuu and Oteka Zuberi.

Ilola Mathembu is a second year undergraduate student pursuing a degree in International studies and Economic Development. While her parents are from Southern part of Africa, she was born and raised in the Eastern region of Africa in Kenya where her father worked with an international organization. She attended her kindergarten and primary school in an international school and was exposed to different educational and cultural settings from her early years. Upon graduating from high school, she interned with an international organization. During this time, she played and won the Diversity Visa lottery and finally immigrated to the U.S. At the time of interviewing her, she was sharing a house with 7 other students, 2 of whom will be participants for this study and which re-enforces the “new family” formed here in the U.S. away from the family in Sub-Saharan Africa. She indicated that her dreams of immigrating to the West were instilled into her life early when she went through international schools. She credited her ability to integrate into a new culture and education to her exposure to diversity while she attended various international schools in Kenya where some of the pupils were children whose parents worked for the diplomatic community or international organizations.

Imara Jabali who is from Ethiopia is a Pre-Med student and lives with the wife who attends a local community college. They do not have children yet though they plan on doing so as soon as his wife finishes school and picks up a nursing job. His wife is the one who actually won
the Diversity Visa lottery application but listed him on the application as a spouse. If Imara is not in class or in the library, he is at work where he maintains two (2) jobs; a full time and a part time job to support them. He spends most of his leisure time with the wife at home relaxing and cooking enough food that will last them a week or two. He also spends a lot of his leisure time with the wife in a local church where they are very active members. He noted that part of his quick learning process involved learning to cook, to do laundry and to go grocery shopping something he was less inclined or expected to do had he stayed back in Ethiopia. He lamented the time spent away from the comfort of his house [apartment] given the busy nature of the society.

Nalyazi Nehanda immigrated here on humanitarian basis (a refugee) following the outbreak of war that took place in his native country of Somalia. Nalyazi who is pursuing a degree in Social Works claims that he was once a child soldier recruit recruited by rebels to fight the system. As a child soldier, he was subjected to lots of inhuman abuses as he spent many countless hours in the bush training under horrible conditions. But he feels no regret because he did it to regain his country, which was being ruled by a brutal regime that looked out for the interest of a select few. He acknowledged that the choice of joining the fight was not an easy one as he was caught between the rocks or in the middle of the ocean. Failure to fight the regime will mean that you are perceived as a coward and traitor and your family will be attacked by the rebels. He further stated that not joining the fight will also see your family in the cross roads as the government forces were targeting people indiscriminately in the community. The question he was faced with was not “if he should join the fight” but “when he joins the fight, on whose side should he belong?” Fighting with and for his people was the logical option that he could take.
Nkole Ukuu worked with the government in his native country of Uganda and defected when he became so critical of the government and its human rights abuses on innocent citizens. He became so sympathetic to the cause of the masses and felt that his moral conscience could no longer permit him to work for a dictatorial regime. He immigrated to the U.S. as a political refugee. At the time of the interview, he was pursuing a degree in Psychology and plans to further his education with the hope of understanding the human psychology and how it operates. He is a married father with children. He bemoaned his disgust for the social and economic injustices he saw orchestrated by government officials and their loves ones and regretted for not speaking up against these vices quick enough. But he added that his only regrets that hunt him to this day are for those things he did not do or speak up against. He does not spend time to regret the things he did and when he did them to make the public aware of these injustices and if possible fight to bring them to an end.

Oteka Zuberi immigrated to the U.S. from Kenya thanks to a visa she secured through the family reunification program. She is married with no child. She is a Pre-Dental program student with the ultimate goal of enrolling into a school of Dentistry. She also works as a Dental Assistant. Her main languages of instruction in her native country were English and Swahili. But when she immigrated to the U.S., she decided to enrolled into English as a Second Language class with an agency. She spent about six (6) months with this agency and she spent quite a good amount of time in the city’s public library to improve her English. She credits her success in school to this basic but important foundation she laid for herself in perfecting her English and acquainting herself with the American accent.
South Africa: According to the United Nations, there are 5 countries that make up Southern Africa namely Namibia, Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland and the Republic of South Africa. While I am using the United Nations classification for this study, it is worth noting that the Southern African Development Community (SADC) will list fifteen (15) as members of its body. Most of these additional 10 countries are from what the United Nations will classify East Africa. There were 3 participants from the South African region namely Antankara Zelealem, Chimwal Kimaryo and Chewa Chimutengwede.

At the time of the interview, Antankara Zelealem who came from Zambia had been in the country for about 15 years. He immigrated to the U.S. after winning the Diversity Visa lottery visa and currently resides close to campus with his brother who later joined him in the U.S about 3 years later. He is a Pre-Pharm student. Prior to enrolling at this institution, he first enrolled at a local community college in order to acquaint himself with the educational system while at the same time minimizing the cost of education. He also maintains a full time job in a pharmaceutical company working as a lab technician. Before immigrating to the U.S, Antankara was employed with an international private company in his native country. He explains that the lack of opportunities in his native country prompted him to seek for greener pastures in the West. Antankara explains that he was doing quiet fine [showing off his old pictures as proof] given his country’s standard of living and he was admired by his friends for his good living. But even so, he was not satisfied with his current state of being as he always wanted to go to college and improve his life and that of his family. When he is not work or at school, Antankara spends his leisure time playing football [soccer]. Despite many years in the U.S. he does not understand most of the American sports with an exception of basketball.
Chimwal Kimaryo hails from Zimbabwe. He first left his native country as an Exchange student thanks to an international Christian scholarship program spending 4 and 6 months respectively in the Republic of South Africa and Britain during his high school years. Upon graduating from high school, he was fortunate to win the Diversity Visa lottery which enabled him to immigrate to the U.S. He is a Business major student with a minor in International Business. His ultimate academic goal is to pursue an MBA and a certification in either human resources or financial management. He also plans to work for a multi-national corporation because he loves to travel. He loves to travel and to explore the world. He has developed so many friendships all over the world and he plans to visit most of his friends when he is done with school. Upon completion of graduate school, he plans to work within Africa, a continent so rich with resources [natural] and opportunities but crippled with poor management and governance. He laments this and thinks that the future of Africa rests in the hands of upcoming leaders like him. He thinks that the education and exposure he and others are getting in America will be very helpful to Africa especially the up and coming generation of Africans will own the problems Africa currently faces. He largely blames the woes of Sub-Saharan Africa on the current generation who spends most of the time blaming the older generation for the problems of Sub-Saharan Africa but fail to provide any solutions or take part in the actions that will bring about any lasting and positive results. He thinks that the current crop of Sub-Saharan African leaders should be excused to an extent because they were greatly manipulated by the informed West.

Chewa Chimutengwede and her husband immigrated to the U.S after winning the Diversity Visa lottery. She is a mother of 4 and is majoring in International studies. Her husband comes from West Africa and they met during a religious concert in her native country of the Republic of South Africa. Initially, her parents did not approve of their relationship and/ or
marriage. Chewa and I met in the library for the interview and she brought her children along. The youngest was just a few months old. She also brought a friend along with her to help her babysit while she studied. At the time of the interview, her husband was away with the church on an evangelization mission in a foreign country. Prior to immigrating to the U.S, Chewa worked in the foreign ministry in her home country for about 8 years. He lamented that before coming to America, she did not think that things were this tough here [U.S.]. She finds it very difficult to balance the responsibilities of child-bearing / raising, school, work and being a housewife. But she credits God for blessing her with a church community who are willing and ready to help whenever the need arises especially with child caring duties.

Institutional Profile

The research site located in the Northeastern region of United States is a research 4-year public University that has been dedicated to attracting and engaging a diverse population with the hope of pursuing a greater human understanding and good through education, research and community engagement (public service). The seeds of diversity at this institution were planted almost from its birth. For example, during this institution’s early years, a high number of its freshmen came from different U.S states and different foreign countries. The University continues to reflect the growing ethnic scope of its students and the increasing diversity of the society it serves. For example, the total percentage of minorities in this region increased from 27% in 2000 to 31% in 2010 (Humes et al., 2011). This institution is a close-knit and inclusive community with students, faculty and staff coming from around the world. This diverse population brings with it a wide range of experiences and perspectives, creating a diverse yet unified campus environment.

The university is a public four-year Doctoral-granting institution serving national and international population. In Fall of 2014, about 65% of the school’s total student population were
undergraduates while about 35% were graduates. About 59% of the student population is females while 41% are males.

In Fall of 2014, the institution employed about 950 faculty of whom about 570 were employed as Full Time faculty representing about 60% while about 380 were hired on contingent basis representing about 40%. About 89% of the faculty was holders of a terminal degree.

The institution offers over 90 academic programs with an average class size of 21 students while the student – faculty ratio is about 14:1. About 25% of the incoming freshman class scored above the national SAT score while about 25% scored at or below the national SAT score.

Each year, the school gives out about 2 M dollars in institutional aid to students and about 68% of its students receive financial aid which is typical of what most schools in the region. About 65 % of the institution’s incoming receive some form of scholarships and/ or grants while about 58 % receive some form of student loans.

Today, the institution has a very diverse student population with most of its students coming from the United States specifically the Northeastern region with a total of about 70 countries represented on the campus which is similar to most public institutions in this region. Most of the foreign-born students on this campus seem to come from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean even though the institution could not give actual statistics for this.

This institution, which operates in a diverse and collaborative environment, focuses on academic excellence and ethical development while developing its students to become servant leaders with increased vigor and commitment in their various communities in and around the globe.
Data Collection

This study, to explore how Sub-Saharan African immigrant students experience higher education in the United States, is both phenomenological and heuristic. As a result, I employed semi-structured in-depth interviews as suggested by (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 62) because IPA requires that participants give a first-hand account of their experiences (Smith, et al. 2009). I also employed in-depth interviews as suggested by Creswell (2008) and these in-depth interviews were designed following the three approaches suggested by Patton (2002) namely informal conversational, general interview guide and standardized open-ended questions. I applied these three (3) approaches so as to enable my participants to be comfortable and willing to talk and to divulge more information. I formulated these semi-structured interview questions based upon my personal reflection of my own experiences of coming into the United States and studying as a Sub-Saharan African immigrant and also the experiences of others who were in my similar situation.

Prior to recruiting the participants, I secured the necessary IRB approval needed to undertake the study (Appendix A: IRB Approval). I also secured the consent of the participants prior to undertaking the study (Appendix B: Unsigned Consent Form).

I recruited participants through the school by putting up a flyer on their notice boards (Appendix C) and also a general email sent to students of African descent and/ or members of the African Students association and the Black Organization of Students (Appendix D: Recruitment Letter). I employed the services of a representative of the leadership of the African Students Association, the Black Organization of Students, Intervarsity Christian Fellowship and International Student Organization for undergraduates to provide me with student’s emails. I also employed a face-to-face recruitment tactic whereby I personally handed invitation letters to
students of African descent at the school’s library and cafeteria (Appendix D: Recruitment Letter). These students were either introduced to me by key members of the various organizations I was in contact with or by other participants who were part of the study. I employed a word of mouth referral system also known as snowball sampling to get enough participants who met the sampling criteria for this study. I relied on African immigrant students who were already signed up for the study to introduce me to other students who are of Sub-Saharan African descent. Because the school does not track the legal status of students and as such there is no data that indicates the immigration status and nationality of students, I could not recruit these students through some form of a specific and/or targeted list from the onset.

Finally, where and when necessary, I employed social media (Facebook) to post my flyer to recruit participants. Once participants were recruited, I determined if they were a fit for the study taking into consideration the nature and purpose of the study. In order to be a fit for the study, participants had to meet all of the following criteria namely; (a) must have lived in Sub-Saharan Africa and the United States for at least 5 years and 3 months respectively; (b) must be immigrant students that is immigrated to the U.S voluntarily to stay permanently under 1 of 3 visa types: Diversity Visa lottery, family reunification and refugee/asylee; and (c) must be descendants of at least 1 of the 4 sub regions that make up Sub-Saharan Africa. I employed the use of biographical and/or demographic questions (Appendix E, Part A) to determine the eligibility of my participants. Those that were found to be eligible were invited to participate in a face-to-face semi-structured interview session that lasted between 45-60 minutes. Upon receipt of an initial acceptance of participants, I furnished them with the letter of introduction (Appendix F: Letter of Introduction).
Smith et.al. (2009) suggested that participants be given the opportunity to choose the location of the interview hence I was very flexible with my participants as to where and when the interviews took place without compromising the study. Most of my participants opted that we meet in a public environment (the school, public library or restaurant) not far from their place of residence while a few allowed me to conduct the face to face interviews in their place of abode.

Before interviewing and/ or meeting the participants, they responded to a biographic questionnaire made up of 5 questions to make sure that they were a fit for the study. These biographic questions were mostly administered in person with about 3 done over the phone. After determining a fit, a total of about 10 to 13 interview questions were employed for this study (Appendix E: Part B; Interview Protocol). I asked follow-up questions to gain clarity and insight when and where necessary.

I employed a digital recorder to record the face-to-face interview. Prior to utilizing this digital recorder, I requested the permission of participants to allow me to have an audio record of the interview. During these face-to-face sessions, I asked participants the questions directly. This method of collecting data was consistent with suggestions by Smith et al. (2009).

**Data Storage**

Data was stored on my laptop that is password protected. Back up data was stored in a password protected external hard drive and in a password-protected file in Dropbox for safekeeping. All printed transcripts were kept in a secured file cabinet and all printed transcripts were immediately destroyed upon the completion of the study.
Data Analysis

I personally transcribed the data in order to capture the nuances of each interview. While the Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) does not prescribe a single method for data analysis (Smith, et al. 2009), it states that “the essence of IPA lies in its analytic focus” (p. 79). This analytic focus enables “participants to tell their stories and to speak freely and reflectively” (p. 56).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis calls for a joint engagement between the participant and the analyst as the participants make meaning of their lived experience while the data analysis is an account of how the “analyst thinks the participant is thinking—a double hermeneutic” (Smith et al. p. 80). In order to accomplish the task of data analysis, I adopted the following process.

Reading

The participants were the focus of analysis. I therefore explored in detail how each participant made sense of his or her experience at an American postsecondary institution. The first step in this interpretative process was to listen to the recorded interview in its entirety followed by reading the transcripts. When and where necessary, I listened to the recorded interviews a second time and re-read the transcripts. This process of listening to the interview in its entirety and reading the whole transcripts multiple times enabled me to fully engage with the participants’ world with the hope of getting a good grasp of every detail of the interview as subscribed by some scholars like Smith & Osborn (2008) and Smith et al (2009). Where and when necessary, I also followed up with questions that arose during the interviews and/or after I read the transcripts. On a few occasions, I also followed up with my interviewees to get clarity on anything that was not
clear to me upon reading the interview transcripts. These follow ups were done in person and were easily necessitated because I had informed all my participants and we agreed from the onset that I may follow up with them if the need arose.

**Coding**

For this study, I coded two (2) types of data namely field notes and observations as suggested by Miles & Huberman (p. 56, 1984) though much of my coding involved field notes and observations given that there was limited archival material. I also employed three possible approaches of coding as suggested by Miles & Huberman (1984). These three approaches to coding include; descriptive or interpretive codes, inferential or explanatory codes and pattern or Leitmotiv codes. Using this method of coding helped to illustrate that codes can be at different levels of analysis, they can happen at different times of or during the analysis and that codes are astringent (p. 58).

I began my coding by creating a provisional “start list’ of codes namely immigration, academic, cultural, identity, religion and homesickness prior to my fieldwork as suggested by Miles & Huberman (1984). This provisional “start list,” most of which will change, came from my conceptual framework, my research questions, problem area and/ or key variables that I brought to the study. I gave the codes clear operational definitions so that they can be applied consistently and I gave the codes names that closely described the concepts (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Coding was done on an ongoing basis for example I coded my previous set of field notes before embarking on my next trip into the field.
**Transcription**

I developed a 2-column table to help with recording the descriptive notes for each participant. The left column was utilized for the original transcripts while I used the right column for indicating comments and/or observations and other significant information about the data. For example, I recorded investigative notes, key phrases, or even explanations by the participants in this column.

As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), these initial comments were both linguistic and/or conceptual in order to highlight the assumptions, sound bites, experiences, and emotional responses of the participants.

**Emerging Themes**

I created another table; a 3-column table, for each participant. The first column of this table contained emerging themes from the transcripts; the second column contained the original transcripts while the third contained the investigative notes. I analyzed the investigative notes to look for emerging themes by mapping out the data for possible interrelationships, connections and patterns.

I then ordered the emerging themes in a chronological order as they came to light in the data. I created another table in which I classified related emerging themes in a group. This grouping allowed me to locate and develop broader themes, which were titled accordingly. I then created another table to give a graphic presentation of the major themes for each participant. This gave me the opportunity to capture, note and analyze the distinctive nuances of each participant.

After transcribing the interviews, I utilized the Traditional Data Analysis sequence as suggested by Miles and Hubermann (1994) to analyze the data. First, I created a table of super
codes or main themes. I followed up this step by re-reading each transcript a minimum of three times to identify any additional super codes and/ or emerging sub codes which was coded under the super codes. I also differentiated between super codes and sub codes. I then employed the comment box and color-coding capabilities provided by Microsoft Word to identify insightful and reflective codes. These reflective codes were written in the margins to aid with any additional challenges or experiences that I gathered from the interviews.

I mulled over the transcripts of each participant, individually coded and analyzed them in greater detail as suggested by Smith, et al. (2009). This was done while utilizing an inductive coding process. As suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), I reviewed all my notes with the hope of identifying similar relationships and phrases that are found between themes, patterns and distinctive differences between groups. First, I identified specific text segments related to my objectives and proceeded to labeling the segments of texts to create categories. I then continued my revision and refinement of the created categories to reduce any possible overlaps and redundancies among the categories. When this was done, I created a model incorporating most important categories or small number of summary categories to arrive at my findings. Where possible, I reconfigured and re-labeled emerging themes with the hope of creating a master table of themes. I created room for modification of this process as the study moved from one stage to another.

Data Reliability, Validity and Credibility

Marshall & Rossman (1989) suggests that the strength of a qualitative study that aims to explore a problem depends on the validity of the data. I took a few steps in order to achieve or accomplish the reliability, validity and credibility of my data. As indicated before, I obtained inform consent
from all participants prior to engaging in this study with them. During and upon the completion of
the study, I shared the collected data and findings with my participants to ensure the validity and
credibility of the data I collected in the course of the study. I provided each subject with a
verbatim transcript, individual profiles and a draft of the core themes that I drew from my
findings. The benefit of this process was twofold. First, it enabled me to edit and affirm the
accuracy of subjects’ words, descriptions and profiles. Finally, it gave my subjects the
opportunity to verify that I accurately reflected their viewpoints in the data analysis. The data
collected from the interviewees only became valid when they recognized them as true record of
their interview responses. As Moustakas (1994) remarks, “verification is enhanced by returning
to the research participants, sharing with them the meanings and essences of the phenomenon as
derived from reflection on and analysis of the verbatim transcribed interviews and other material,
and seeking their assessment for comprehensiveness and accuracy (p. 33-34)”. I also maintained a
frequent, close and open communication with my dissertation mentor who confirmed the accuracy
of my themes and the suitability of the word-perfect transcripts that I used to justify my findings.

Because I am also a member of the subjects under study, I made every effort to keep my
experiences out of this study and made the participants to be the focus of the study. I maintained
an open, curious and objective attitude so that participants were given the opportunity to tell their
lived experiences without interruptions and coercion. Not only did I admit my biases, I set them
aside and every effort was made not to inject my perception of the phenomenon into any of the
participants’ experience of the phenomenon by utilizing reflective memos.

Prior to engaging in the study, I developed and tested an interview protocol. I employed a
sample focus group with students who fit my study who are pursuing their postsecondary
education in a different institution and I allowed for a review by an expert so as to enable me address any credibility issues.

I spent a reasonable amount of time, about an hour to an hour and half with my subjects which gave me the opportunity to develop “an in depth understanding of the phenomenon under study and can convey detail about the site and the people that lends credibility to the narrative account” (Creswell, 2009. p. 192).

I gave participants the opportunity to view and critique the collected data with the hope of ensuring the “credibility of the findings and interpretation” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). I also gave participants the opportunity to read both the draft and the final product with the hope of ensuring the reliability and credibility of the data and its interpretations. This was in line with the suggestions by Creswell (2009) who recommends using “member checking to determine the accuracy of qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions of themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate” (Creswell, 2009. p 191). Some of the participants took up this offer while others could no in part because of scheduling conflict as the study was completed when most of the students were away for summer break.

In order to enhance the accuracy of the study, I employed the service of a “peer de-briefer” and/or an external auditor to review the entire project. The “external auditor” was very versed with both settings; Sub-Saharan Africa and America, and had nothing to lose or gain from this project and as such was in the better position to give me an honest and objective feedback. This therefore provided my “external evaluator” the opportunity to provide me with “an objective assessment of the project throughout the process of the research or at the conclusion of the study” (Creswell, 2009. p. 192).
Citing cultural reasons, some participants were not completely forthcoming because they felt uncomfortable talking about their experiences or they held back information that might affect the collection of rich data. I was fully aware of this and took measures that helped my study participants to open up or speak freely to me. I educated all participants on the confidentiality of the data collected. I also let them understand that all names will be replaced with pseudo names so as to mask their identities in the final report. Each participant had the opportunity to either choose his or her pseudonym or grant me the opportunity to choose one for her or him. Finally, I let them know that I will destroy all data as soon as the study was brought to fruition. These actions helped to minimize any level of uncomfortableness.

**My Role as a researcher and my biases**

Creswell (1998) defines the role of the researcher in qualitative research by stating “The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p. 15). Also, the role of the researcher is cited as a data collection instrument (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994; Patton, 1990; and Hatch, 2002). Data collected by the researcher in this study included interviews and field notes.

I came to the United States in the mid-90s as a political refugee to seek a safe haven. Shortly after arrival in the country, I enrolled into college to pursue a Bachelors’ degree. As a Sub-Saharan African immigrant student, my personal, cultural and academic experiences qualify me to fit the criteria for inclusion into this study; hence I collected the data for this study as an insider participant observer. Insider participant observation (being a member of a group, an African immigrant in this case, as well as the researcher) is considered the most important and challenging instrument in qualitative studies (Herrmann, 1989). The role of the member /
researcher differs from the role of a member alone and from that of a researcher alone. For example, comparing the role of a researcher alone, there are many advantages as well as disadvantages of being a member / researcher (Coghlan, 2003; Herrmann, 1989; Mercer, 2007; Rouney, 2005; Tedlock, 2000). I should point out that even though I may have had a close social contact with members of this group, I did not have any power, influence or authority over my subjects that can affect the data collection process negatively (Smyth & Holian, 2008). I did not maintain much contact with my subjects besides when I came into contact with them on campus while conducting this study and/ or during the organization’s meeting. My study participants are undergraduate students. Therefore, I carried out my research from within in the sense that I was on site yet academically and professionally, I was not an integral part of the Sub-Saharan African immigrant student population being studied.

As a Sub-Saharan African immigrant who was once an undergraduate student at an American university, I went into this study with some prejudgments, biases and preconceived ideas about things. In fact, this study was shaped by my beliefs, biases, values, culture, education and experience in the United States (Michie, 2004).

As a Sub-Saharan African immigrant, I felt strongly about the role education plays in my life and I certainly believed that education allows for a sense of empowerment. However, I knew that students face a variety of challenges during the educational process, particularly minority students, and the sense of empowerment can easily be overpowered by the levels of frustration. As an undergraduate student, not only did I have to contend with the challenges all students deal with, I had to deal with a different and new educational system. For example, I had studied in an English and French educational systems where students were given say two to three tests over the term (semester) with a final exam at the end. Test and exams questions were set in the form of
essay questions and the school year was divided into three terms. But now I was faced with writing quizzes that were given in a multiple-choice format. I barely took an active role in class and/or group discussions because our school system encourages individualism and also because I felt most students did not understand me especially my deep Sub-Saharan African accent. Others mistook my deep accent for academic inferiority. I recall a time when we were taking our first quiz on International Business and our professor asked each student to write his or her overall GPA on the back of the paper before turning in it. I had never participated in any class discussion and I was the last to leave the class on this day as I have done in most of my other classes especially when we were writing quizzes. When the professor saw my GPA on the paper, he stated that I have disproved his long held theory about students like me because he always knew that students who did not actively participate in class and who stayed in class longer than others when quizzes were administered were struggling academically. Although help was readily available both in class and on campus, even then it was sometimes challenging to admit the need for help. However, I remember the joy I felt in learning the required information. I can remember the specific instances I was very reluctant to seek assistance with my academic challenges but I was abundantly thankful after doing so.

I also had to contend with issues of immigration, discrimination, housing, finances, loneliness, homesickness, lack of social support, and concerns for my loved ones who were left back in deplorable situations in Sub-Saharan Africa. As a result of these challenges, I had to maintain multiple jobs off campus not just for my personal support but to support my loved ones. Despite these challenges, I had to maintain more than a full time class schedule and I recall one of my professors remarking that this was nothing but “academic suicide.”
While I did not completely disengage myself from the study, I was very careful and sensitive to my own preconceptions and biases and abstained from imposing them into the data. I considered the concept of reflexivity as an essential component to ensure the integrity of the study. Reflexivity is defined as the researcher’s ability “to keep track of one’s influence on a setting, to bracket one’s biases, and to monitor one’s emotional responses” (Hatch, 2002; p. 10).

One approach of data analysis of phenomenology inquiry requires what is called *Epoche* (Patton, 2002), which stems from a Greek word meaning, “stay way or abstain from...” Staying away, abstaining from or setting my own biases, preconceived ideas or preconceptions about things will be in alignment with the suggestions of Moustakas (1994). Ongoing collaboration with my mentor during the study was one way of refraining from imposing my views into the study. I did this by sharing the interviews and transcripts with my mentor to make sure that I have captured verbatim what the participants are sharing. I also used the framework in this study to closely analyze my data and avoid subjectivity that can come at the expense of data integrity thereby skewing the results.

My unique position as a Sub-Saharan African immigrant student who has experienced the phenomenon under study was an asset instead. Some of the advantages as an insider participant/researcher came from the fact that I am already an insider, an accepted member and probably a respected member of the African immigrant student population. Being accepted in this case meant that I was already familiar and friendly with many members of this population group. It gave me the opportunity to combine my personal experiences and the intensity or passion for this study with that of my study participants to yield a rich, deeper and diverse data. It did not only grant me easy access into this class of participants but it encouraged these participants to talk especially in sensitive areas they may not have spoken if the researcher was an outsider. My possession of
cultural knowledge and pertinent tools of engagement was an added asset. I therefore served as a vital resource of elucidating the experiences of others.

“Qualitative research is interpretative research with the inquirer typically involved in a sustained and extensive experience with participants” (Creswell, 2009, p 177). As a researcher and an interviewer, my job required me to be an active participant in the entire interviewing process. This required that I take on a role that goes far beyond just being a mere observer (Patton, 2002). Because of this complex task, I took great cognizance of the biases that I brought with me into the study. I provided “controls for bias in interpretation” (p. 147) as suggested by Marshall and Rossman (1989, p.147). As a researcher, I was fully aware of the importance of creating a conducive environment in which all participants were given the equal opportunity to freely express themselves without any interruptions and/ or fear of retribution. I created this environment by informing the participants through the consent form that they will have the opportunity to discuss the collected data, would be given the opportunity to take part in a debriefing session and that there are no foreseeable risks associated with this project. Finally, students who may experience some discomfort when reflecting upon instances of experiences and challenges were given the opportunity to opt out from or terminate the interview.

Second, as an advocate for diversity and a Sub-Saharan African immigrant, I believed that dialogue on diversity warrants a permanent platform in academia. This could be, but not limited to diversity in opinion, experiences, knowledge, understanding and our worldview and I went into this study with such biases. But because these biases could inform the way I approached this research and my research agenda, I employed several specific procedures to keep these biases from affecting the objectivity of my study and the data collection.
In order to keep these biases from affecting the objectivity of my study, I used several methods to ensure that the data collection and the conclusions that I arrived at are both credible and are free from my biases as much as possible. I employed different methods to verify the objectivity of the data that I collected including, but not limited to, the use of peer de-briefers and comparing themes with and between subjects. I did not rule out the option of setting a “Trustworthiness committee” which could have included my dissertation advisors, an outsider and myself. A member of such a committee would have acted as an “outsider” to make sense of the data by asking “the real questions” while another member, possibly me, acting as an “insider” because of my knowledge of my participants, to be a key informant.

Finally, while I observations were not a key part of my data collection, any observations that I made of my participants were not revealed to them. Instead, I wrote my impressions, feelings and thoughts in my research journal which I was ready to share with my dissertation advisors should the need arise. This ensured the participants’ trust in me during the research process while at the same time ensuring that I did not lose any valuable qualitative data.

**Building and gaining the trust of my subjects**

A Researcher “must gain some understanding, even sympathy, for the research participants in order to gain entry into their world” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 147). Trust is very critical in a study of this nature. Hence, it was important that I get the buy in of my participants by way of extending them a high level of trust. Patton (2002) lists several things to help in gaining the trust of your participants. First and most importantly, I must protect the participants from any possible harm. Although my study did not expose the participants to any physical harm, there might have been circumstances where specific questions may evoke or bring
to light emotionally painful memories. As such, I communicated to all participants via a consent form that they reserved the right to terminate the interview process and discontinue their participation in the study, at any point, without any fear of negative repercussions. As a part of the informed consent process, I informed the participants that they had the opportunity to discuss the collected data and that they would also be given the opportunity to take part in a debriefing session. This gave the study participants the opportunity to dispute any of my findings and also to help me understand if there may be any differences in our conclusions.

I assured all participants of the strict confidentiality of the conversations and that every effort was made on my part to protect their identities and a direct linkage between them and the data collected. To help mitigate this issue, I gave each participant the opportunity to help suggest an alias that can be used in place of his or her name. I did communicate to all participants that any data collected will be used for this study only and that all recordings and transcripts will be kept in a secured environment and will only be available to me. Also, I let them understand that all data will be properly disposed of upon the completion of the study.

Finally, I made sure that my biases did not compromise this study. I made sure that I was very careful in not developing the study only to validate my worldviews or only to select data that support my current viewpoints. This was particularly important in the selection of the participants of the study especially given the fact that I used the purposeful sampling technique. It might have been very tempting to select only select participants that will support my preconceived theories or worldview, which in effect would have compromised the study even before it began. In order to prevent this scenario from occurring, I worked extensively with peer de-briefers to ensure that all of the questions and criteria for participant selection were free from any biases as much as possible. I openly discussed my preconceived biases and world-views with my peer de-briefers,
which gave them the opportunity to recognize my personal biases from within the confines of the study and bring them to my attention. This helped to insure that I was not being deceptive to both the participants and myself as I gathered the data for my study thereby maintaining data credibility, integrity, reliability and validity for the study.

**Limitations**

While I interviewed 20 participants for this study as opposed to the 3-6 participants as suggested by Smith, et al. (2009), their experiences reflected a small sample of Sub-Saharan African immigrant population currently residing in the United States especially given the huge (cultural, linguistic, religious, economic, social, geographical and historical) diversity that exists between the various sub regions that make up Sub-Saharan Africa. Because of this small sample size and the huge diversity that exist in the population under study, the results may not be transferable to the entire population of Sub-Saharan Africans who are studying in a United States’ postsecondary institution of education.

While this study deals with the study of experiences of Sub-Saharan Africans, it is worth mentioning that there is a huge cultural diversity that exists between the various sub regions that make up Sub-Saharan Africa. Limiting the study to say West, East, Central, Southern Africa Sudano-Sahel, the Islands of Indian Ocean or the Horn of African could not capture a true representation that can mirror the population. Even within a geographical region and/or a country, there exists a vast cultural diversity. Limiting the study along linguistic lines will also not get a true representation of the population as the regional groups are not spread along language or linguistic lines. Sub-Saharan Africa does not have a common language as the territory is made up of 23 Anglophone or English speaking countries, 21 Francophone or French speaking countries, 5
Lusophone speaking countries while 3 countries speak other languages for example Spanish and Arabic. This is further complicated by the fact that several hundreds if not thousands of other African languages co-exist within a linguistic region and/or a country. Finally, limiting the study along ethnic and religious boundaries could have failed to give a true picture of the population. The territory practices about 5 major religions namely Christianity, Islam, Folk or African religion, Bahai and Hinduism. The territory also encompasses about 4 major ethnic groups namely Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan and others (Khosian, Indo-European, Cushitic, Semitic and Phylum).

Institutional Review Board and/or Protecting Human Subjects

I submitted my dissertation proposal and any information indicating the successful defense of my dissertation proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Seton Hall University prior to undertaking any study with human subjects. I officially began the study upon receiving the appropriate confirmation or authorization to proceed with the study. I obtained full informed consent from all participants prior to the study. Their identities were well protected during and after the study. I did disclose the full nature and purpose of the study to all participants.

Conclusion

This research was designed as a qualitative study to examine and understand the academic and cultural experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students who are pursuing postsecondary study at a U.S. postsecondary institution of education. The design adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to make meaning and interpretation of the unique experiences of the participants. This approach was best suited for the research questions listed in
the statement problem. The Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the preferred method of study because it provided the participants with the opportunity to freely share their experiences as they see and understand their academic world in the United States without any restriction.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND/ OR FINDINGS

This chapter discusses the findings that were derived from this study as a result of the analysis of the data collected from the interviews and field notes. I made every effort to make these interviews as confidential as possible for all participants by conducting the interviews at their private homes (7), at a quiet public library (3), at the school’s library or in an empty classroom on campus (8), in a quiet spot in a restaurant (1) and in a quiet spot in a coffee shop (1). Although this study does not give rise for transferability given the number of participants, it is an exploratory study that illuminates the lived experience of Sub-Saharan African immigrant undergraduate students in the U.S higher educational system. The chapter is sub-divided into four sections namely: (i) a brief and/ or general summary of the experiences of the participants (ii) a graph outlining the super and sub codes from which the findings were derived, (iii) a discussion of the emerging themes or findings, and (iv) a conclusion.

Brief and/ or General Summary of participants’ experiences

While a majority of the participants were happy with their stay here in the United States as they have experienced an improved and a better academic system and/ or opportunities, each
participant also expressed being subjected to some form of unequal treatment at least a few times. Most participants did point out that there were so many differences between their home country’s educational systems and that of the U.S. but also acknowledged that the U.S. higher educational system presented them with opportunities they would not have had if they had stayed back in their native countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Most participants were also happy learning about and integrating into a new culture. They expressed great admiration for America’s culture that promotes the spirit of competitiveness, self-confidence, optimism, hope, nationalism and community service or volunteerism. But they also acknowledged that cultural and/ or language differences may have negatively impacted their relationships with others and their education.

Also, while it was clear from their stories that their experiences with the U.S. higher education as Sub-Saharan immigrant undergraduate students were unique, there were some commonalities that ran through their stories. These Sub-Saharan African immigrant students’ stories pointed to the fact that their experiences were not just academic and cultural but rather, it was so diverse as it included political and health issues.

Finally, these sojourners all faced a new culture and/ or educational system which presented them with challenges that included, among other things: education, culture, financial, health and perceived discrimination. They pointed out that given the challenges they faced, they adopted various coping mechanisms and/ or adjustment strategies through various institutions, namely the church, school and the family, to help them mitigate the challenges they faced while adapting and adjusting into a setting.
Emerging Codes: Super Codes and Sub Codes

The following common super codes emerged out of this study, namely Academic, Social, Cultural, Perceived Discrimination, Adjustments and Coping strategies. These codes from which my findings emerged best represent and convey the lived experiences of the participants, in addition to my interpretation. I used participants’ verbatim words with the goal of presenting “a scholarly report of the analysis” (Braun et al, 2006. P, 35).
Emerging Codes: Super Codes and Sub Codes

ACADEMIC
- Language
- System: Teaching Method, Grading
- Courses
- Class Size
- Learning

SOCIAL
- Interactions with Americans
- Interactions with other Foreign-Borns (Non-SSA)
- Interactions with other Sub-Saharan Africans (SSA)

CULTURAL
- Language
- Food
- Dressing
- Ways of Life

PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION
- In Class Discrimination
- On Campus Discrimination
- Off Campus

ADJUSTMENTS
- Academic Adjustments
- Social Adjustments
- Institutional Adjustments
- Personal Adjustments

COPING STRATEGIES
- Family
- Church
- Institution
The following themes and/or findings emerged from the study as a result of in-depth interviews with the participants while utilizing both research and interview questions, transcription of recorded interviews, comprehensive field notes, comprehensive researcher’s field notes, references to existing literature and research, theoretical framework and a personal journal in which I reflected on my feelings, the participants’ feelings, and the setting in which the interviews were conducted.

**Academic: The U.S. higher education system presented participants with opportunities not present in their native countries.** In answering the research questions “How do Sub-Saharan African immigrant undergraduate students adapt culturally and academically to the environment of a 4-year public U.S. higher education institution?” and “How do Sub-Saharan African immigrants describe their cultural and academic experiences as undergraduates on an American 4-year public higher institution?,” it was evident that these Sub-Saharan African immigrant students viewed the U.S. higher education system as presenting them with an opportunity they would not otherwise get in their native countries. In a nutshell, most participants expressed great satisfaction with their academic experience, although they stated that in the beginning they had some challenges with the system. Most Sub-Saharan African immigrant students believed that the American higher education system presents them with boundless or infinite possibilities. As Boganda Macias from the Republic of Central Africa, who is studying International Studies with a minor in Peace and Conflict studies noted:

I am so thrilled with the many opportunities I see in front of me after graduating from here…ummm… My African background and the fact that I speak multiple languages and the fact that I am studying in an American university is a game changer for my future. I can work here with multinational organizations wanting to do business in Africa or other parts of the world. I can work with many international organizations [smiles]. Studying here in America has really given me hope, real hope.”
Raoumble Molack, a nursing student, originally from the Republic of Congo explained that he liked the opportunity and flexibility the U.S. academic system provided him:

You have many choices as there are many programs to choose from...this increases my opportunities in life. There is a program for everyone. [Giggles]...and even when you choose the program you want to concentrate in, you have so many concentrations or disciplines to choose from. And you know one other thing, you take classes from other concentrations, for example Liberal Arts classes. And I also have the options of choosing my free electives. I just like this flexibility because it gives me the opportunity to take classes that I like or when it is most convenient for my schedule. In my country, when you major in Geography, all your classes are from Geography...this limits your scope of knowledge because there is no motivation to take other classes.

Another participant, Azubike Habre, pointed out her satisfaction with the educational system in terms of the quality of education she was getting which was a function of her liking the teaching:

I think the system of education here [America] is efficient and effective. The teachers will use every means to make sure you grasp the knowledge. They allocate office hours to meet with students if you need extra help. You walk out of the class knowing that you have learnt something or that you can still meet with your teacher for extra help. The teachers stay in class after class for few minutes to help clarify a concept you did not get. I really feel (raising his voice) this is an effective and efficient way of educating students...we are here to learn and I think it is the teacher’s job to make sure that we are learning something...I like it.

**Differences in Educational Systems:**

Study participants pointed that there were differences between the educational systems found in their native countries and in the United States. While there was general satisfaction with the educational system due to the opportunities an American education offers, most of these Sub-Saharan African immigrant students were amazed with the different educational system they were now exposed to and they found this a bit challenging. These differences were evident in the areas
of class settings; teaching methods, namely a participatory system where students were expected to present papers, be more active in class; a fast-paced classroom environment, a two-way communication environment between the teachers and the students, group activities; the high reliance on technological equipment and applications; and the aim of the educational systems.

Participants noted the differences that existed in class settings between classrooms in U.S. and classrooms in Sub-Saharan Africa, while paying particular attention to the informal settings and class sizes. In the U.S, there was a lot of “informality” in class and a small class size, whereas in Sub-Saharan Africa, a formal setting was strictly enforced and the class size was large. Boatema Oumkou was amazed at the informal environment that takes place in class and remarked:

The first thing I noticed in class on day one was the informal nature. The teacher was dressed casually and he will very easily carry on an informal conversation with students. You can eat and drink in class and no one will say anything. You can walk out [of class] if you needed to use the restroom without interrupting the teacher. The teacher at some point was called by his first name. I could not believe what I was seeing, especially when I know that all teachers in my country are called Professors and they were like demi-gods…this was very amazing, but I was kind of afraid this can translate into poor quality education…but I was wrong. At home [Sierra Leone], you cannot walk in and out of class like this…you cannot eat in class.

Oteka Zuberi, a participant who hails from Kenya and who is enrolled in Pre-Dental studies, also agreed with this assessment and added that there was a huge difference in class sizes / ratio:

The classes here are very small…you have about 25 to 30 students in each class. This creates a great environment for learning…ummm…you get to know the teachers personally...yes, you develop some close teacher – student relationships… and teachers can easily identify you by name. This helps with teaching…I my country, there are hundreds of students in a class. The teachers do not even know most of the students in class.
Nalyazi Nehanda also aptly shared the differences that exist in the school systems, pointing out that differences exist in the teaching methods (style and grading). While in the U.S. the teaching style is more of a two-way communication and a participatory style, this was not the case in Sub-Saharan Africa:

The teaching methods are different… it [the teaching method in the U.S.] is more of a discussion, it is interactive, it is participatory. Students are encouraged to answer or answer questions. The teacher does not only come to class to share information… he or she come to also gain information. It is very interesting the interactive nature of things in the class… the class is lively… this helps you to come to class prepared.

Bonwi Biygo also asserted this and added that there is a difference in the grading method seen in the different school systems. He points out that in Sub-Saharan Africa, grades are based on tests and exams only but in the U.S. class participation/attendance, quizzes, tests, presentations and term papers make up your class grade:

On the first day in school, I was given the course syllabus and wow… I saw the make up for the grades. I did not even understand it until the professor went over each item… I was like… wow… all of these things for a grade. I also saw that each letter grade had a minus or plus grade… we do not have this at home… and then I also quickly noticed that their grades are out of a possible 100. Our [Cameroon] grades are out of a possible 20 with only four (4) grades; A, B, C and F [failed].

Nalyazi Nehanda confirmed such differences adding that “our [Somalia] subjects are assigned units while here [U.S.], they are talking in terms of credits.”

Another area of difference in the school systems was in the use of technology to enhance teaching. Participants asserted that there is over-reliance on too much technology in the U.S. to enhance the teaching of the subject matter. Participants agreed that the use of technology by teachers greatly helped them with their academic journey. They also acknowledged the limited
reliance on technology in Sub-Saharan Africa for teaching can be attributed to the lack of
resources. As stated by Nalyazi Nehanda:

The teachers here [U.S.] depend so much on technology. They use
projectors that are visible in every lecture room and their laptops to
project their lessons. Almost everything is posted on
Blackboard…[smiling]…when I first heard that the syllabus and
discussions will be posted on Blackboard, my mind first went to our
blackboards at home [Somalia]. I did not think it was an application. We
did not have these things in my country [Somalia]. I guess because the
ministry does not have the funds to equip the schools with these things.

The aim or purpose of the school system was another area in which the study uncovered
another difference. Participants revealed that they perceived the American educational system as
g geared towards helping students to cultivate their creativity by allowing them to criticize,
challenge, and create ideas or concepts. They also stated that the aim of the American educational
system is also to help students with critical thinking by letting them create a sense of
independence and self-determination. The aim of Sub-Saharan educational systems, on the other
hand, is to help students to accumulate, manage, and use knowledge through memorization and
retention. As noted by Foli Aijeba who hails from Burkina Faso:

Here [U.S. educational system], they teach you critical thinking…how to
be creative, the system teaches you independence and self-
determination…the school system teaches you how to think out of the
box [nodding his head and smiling] …this is not the case in Burkina
Faso…our system [education] or the teacher just feeds us with ideas and
asks to reproduce these ideas during the tests and exams.

These sentiments were also echoed by Achta Lamia. She noted that the American
educational system teaches principles or concepts and “how to apply these principles in society or
life.”
The participants nonetheless found the teaching style very good in helping their studies. The teachers were very engaging and were also out to learn. The participants admired how teachers were good at integrating different styles of teaching in the classroom without losing focus of their goal of teaching them. As Foli Aijeba who majors in Public Administration stated:

Most of my teachers were very apt at integrating both teacher centered and student centered into the classroom. They [teachers] were very informal but they maintained formal authority in the class. They were the experts and were the role models to us. At the same time, they [teachers] were acting as facilitators and delegators. They (teachers) did not only come to class to teach you but they also came to learn…it is a cooperative learning environment.

**Academic Challenges.**

Transitioning or integrating into a different and/or new educational system can sometimes be marred with challenges. Such challenges may be rooted in differences from participants’ previous learning experiences, their altitude towards learning, and how accommodating the host environment is. Despite the new opportunities that participants felt the U.S. educational system presented, learning something new may at times present some challenges. Partly answering the research question, “What are the cultural and academic challenges Sub-Saharan African immigrants face in adapting to an American 4-year public higher education institution?”, it was evident that these Sub-Saharan African immigrant students faced some challenges with the new academic system including: language proficiency, not being used giving in-class presentations, cultural, and financial challenges.

Language related issues were the top of the challenges faced by these Sub-Saharan African immigrant students as they were transitioning or integrating into a new educational and cultural environment. Mbasago Mboma, a participant from the Republic of Gabon who is
majoring in Political Science, lamented the challenges he faced with language. He came from a country where French was the language of instruction and administration. With barely a year in the United States, he found himself in the class studying in English:

When I started classes, I had so many challenges with the language…you know…uhmm, you know [assuming I know he speaks French] we speak French at home [Gabon]…I really had a difficult time. I knew I had to do something very fast…I almost wanted to withdraw…yes, I thought school was not for me. I saw my dream of studying in America falling in front me of me. But then I decided I will not just give up. I will have to do something real fast. I wanted to go to school and I was not going to let this language stand in my way. I will give it my all first.

Boganda Marcias, a participant from the Republic of Cameroon who is majoring in International Studies also re-iterated this language challenge while adding that his difficulties came as a result of differences in accent:

I felt like some of the teachers spoke so fast and in ‘wrapped tongues’…I do not know what they were saying. For the first 3 classes, I do not think I understood anything in class. I was forced to study the lesson in the textbook before and after class. I needed to put in an extra time to grasp the concept. I also noticed that some of my classmates spoke so fast and in ‘wrapped tongues’…In the beginning…I was…uh…uh…ummm, I was upset, kind of angry. But then when I said something many too did not understand me. Some people thought I spoke very fast with a deep and commanding tone…uh…uh…Others who did not understand me thought I did not know what I was talking about…or that I had an inferior academic foundation…But I knew this was not just my problem but also a problem with those who also misunderstood me…I knew this was about the accent.

These participants, coming from educational systems where they were fed with knowledge and their in-class participation was limited to asking and/ or answering questions for clarity, found in-class presentations to be challenging. Bonwi Biygo, who considers himself as an introvert, noted that he was a so overwhelmed in the first few days of encountering this educational system, particularly when he was doing his first in class presentation, a requirement
that is absent in his native country where teachers are expected to feed the students with knowledge. He recalled how nervous he was undertaking this exercise:

I was nervous...you know...umm...I thought to myself...I was going to have a nervous breakdown. I am shy...so many things were going through my mind. Instead of focusing on the topic and the substance, I spent the greater part worrying what others will think of me; my accent, my demeanor. We do not have in class presentations in my country...oh, I was really shaking. But I had to do it so I can get my grade.

Adjusting into or studying in a new cultural environment may give rise to challenges. The findings reported that these Sub-Saharan African immigrant students were faced with cultural challenges as a result of culture shock which they experienced. Basic daily living necessities like food or commuting from one place to another was a difficulty. As Chewa Chimutengwede noted:

Food [nodding her head]...it was so difficult...it was even more difficult as a mother. As an adult, you can manage or try anything when you are hungry. But children, it was rough...they are not used to most of the food here. We had to struggle with this. And even when we were getting acquainted with the food or we knew where to go get some of our [African] food, we had difficulties getting around...we did not have a car to get around. We depended on public transport and you know how it [public transportation] is...it is not reliable. Getting around or going to church without a car and with became a very difficult task.

Achta Lamia re-enforced this when she asserted that, “I had problems with their food. I could not eat at all. I did not like it. Their food is completely different.”

One of the major challenges faced by participants was in the area of finances. Almost all participants could directly or indirectly link some of their challenges to the lack of money as most of what they needed to do involved money. As Boganda Marcias pointed out:

I arrived the U.S. with less than $300 and about 11000 Frs. CFA [his native currency equivalence of about $6] in my pocket. I had to buy toiletries, I needed proper accommodation, a phone, I needed basic household necessities like gas, electric, water and cable...I needed a bus pass, I
needed a driver’s license, I needed a Social security number [holding back himself with a force smile]...the Bible says the love of money is the root cause of all evil...but this was not the love of money, I needed money to get all of these necessities...But this motivated me to work hard...they say, “Money may not buy happiness, but I'd rather cry in a Jaguar than on a bus [quoting Francois Segan]”

Adding a voice to this plight was Raj Batiti, who stated that, “We had many challenges in the beginning because of lack of finances...and to add to this, our loved ones at home [Sub-Saharan Africa] depended on us to send the money for their daily living...it was challenging.”

Social: Participants prioritized their social interactions with others to facilitate broader transition into a new society and facilitate adaptation and/or adjustment.

Four findings emerged in this category, namely: participants’ eagerness to establish relationships with native students, participants’ responses to the negative perceptions of Africa/Africans by their native American friends, participants’ sought out social relationships with fellow Sub-Saharan African immigrant students and participants’ involvement in extracurricular activities on campus.

Eagerness to establish friendships with native (American) students

Sub-Saharan African immigrant students expressed their eagerness to establish friendships with native students. They said that they could adjust well socially and were able to attain good interpersonal relationships and were also able to relate with others with minimal challenges or social adjustment issues. While cultural and/or language differences could have negatively impacted their relationship with others, most participants were generally open to building relationships with others. As Raj Bititi from West Africa, who is majoring in Pre-Med studies
stated, she was so excited to make friends with Americans because she felt it was the best way to easily integrate into the system.

I was looking forward to making friends with Americans…you know…the best way of learning the society is to hang out with members of that society…the more you hang out around them (smiling), you…you know…you pick up how they speak, what they eat and how they do things…and before you know, you will start talking like them or eating the things that they eat. I was not about trying to imitate them or to be like them…but it was about learning their ways and adding to my reservoir of what I grew up with.

Chimwal Kimaryo, who had made several American friends, supported this idea by adding that, “when you are new in a society, the best way to learn that society’s ways of doing things is by making friends with…[citizens]…who have lived in that society for so long…you learn by interacting with them…uh…uh…uh…these people are not going to change easily because they have a stranger around them…so they will be teaching you their ways without knowing that they are really teaching you something. I knew my success in America meant that I had to have American friends.”

Participants’ Responses to negative perceptions of Africa and/ or Africans by Native (American) Students

However, while they were very willing to make friends with Americans, some of them were also troubled with some jokes or statements, intentional or not, that some native born American students often made giving rise to the second finding in the social category, the response of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students to the negative perceptions expressed by native American students. Although most of what was said by their American friends was in the form of jokes than factual statements, it was evident that most of these Sub-Saharan African immigrant students were not so happy or amused with these utterances. Mbasogo Mboma from
Central Africa pointed out that his friend often asked if it is true that one can easily see elephants, lions and snakes in people’s backyard. He remarked:

> Is it true that in Africa you can see big snakes around? Is it true that people live with lions and elephants…I will answer these questions without showing my disgust to those questions…I used to take them lightly until one day…[visibly upset] my friend asked me if it is true that people live on trees in Africa…I told him it was true and that their representative [ambassador] also lives on the tree…I could see my friend visibly upset as could be seen by the change of his facial skin color…I think you [his friend] watch too much television and you watch the wrong TV stations or programs.”

Janga Nini agreed with this assessment and stated that, “my friend once asked me where I learnt English from…When I told him that I learnt English at home, he was so shocked and added that he thought they didn’t speak English in Africa.”

Another participant, Iloa Mathembu, stated that she feels so upset when someone tells me Africa is a country. She said:

> My friend once asked me why there was so much disease and corruption in that country [Africa]. I stared at him in the face and told him Africa was a continent and not a country as he thought…he was so embarrassed but you can tell from his looks that it was an honest mistake or lack of information…that is what some of them have grown up to know…they see all these negative things on TV about Africa and that is all they know…Even though I feel very upset with these things, I do not blame them…ummm…I blame their sources of information

**Participants increased comfort to socialize with fellow Sub-Saharan African immigrant students.**

A third finding that emerged from the social category is participants’ interactions with fellow Sub-Saharan African immigrants and their increased level of comfort to establish these social ties. Many participants, even though they enjoyed making friends with non-Sub-Saharan African immigrant students, expressed that they felt more comfortable and safer making friends
with fellow Sub-Saharan African immigrants because they understood them, appreciated them and they saw each other more as a brother or sister than just a friend. As Goukouni Milongo from Central region of Sub Saharan Africa aptly puts it:

...you know...um.um [smiling] ...they understand me...and...and I understand their ways too...our culture is almost similar. We may not eat the same type of food or speak the same language but I know that our history, culture and geography is interconnected...we have more similarities than differences than many in the world want to show...I can make jokes with my fellow Africans and I feel safe and comfortable...we have almost similar interest.

Nalyazi Nehanda supported this idea but went further by adding that his fellow Africans are his brothers and sisters:

I see... [my fellow Africans] as my brothers and sisters [with a broad smile]. They act like, talk like me, eat like, dress like me...you...know...[smiling]...we have one mother [Africa]...that who unites us together...take the fish [Africans] out of the water [Africa], the fish remains to be a fish...we will one day go back home to our mother, Mother Africa [with a laugh] now that is home; home sweet home. You see hmm, we do not just make friends. We build relationships.

Antakara Zelealem from the Southern region of Sub-Sahara Africa added that the distorted image of Africa and some of the disrespectful jokes he hears others say about them (Africans) and the African continent gave him enough reason to hang out more with fellow Sub-Saharan African immigrants. As he puts it:

I hang out more with my brothers...I cannot stand someone disrespect my culture, history and my identity...we come here and make every effort to learn others’ cultures and histories but... [sits back, takes a deep breath while nodding] ...it is very unfortunate some will not learn ours...such is life. It makes me more culturally and historically rounded [informed]. I see these people [Sub-Saharan Africans] as people with home I can work to change the fate and future of Africa...we are the ones to re-write our history and our destiny.
Participants’ involvement in extracurricular activities.

Another sub theme that emerged in the social category is participants’ involvement in extracurricular activities. A few of them belonged to other clubs on campus besides the African Students’ Association. Some of their decisions to belong to these groups were guided by their future career interests. Boatema, an immigrant from the Western region of Sub-Saharan Africa and who majors in Arts with a concentration in Fashion Design had this to say:

I am into fashion design… I hope that one day, I will step up my own clothing line based on African styles…so I decided to join the fashion club… my thinking is that I will be able to learn a lot from this group. It is an opportunity to put to into action some of the theories we learn in class.

Goukouni Milongo, an Account - Finance major supported this idea and added that “through [Finance Club], one is privileged to learn from and network with others...I want to help my mother with her accounting and finance as she is a small business owner. My [Accounting / Finance] is a great source of information. Sometimes, I bring situations my mom faces on the job and we discuss them. And when I do back to the business, we implement some of those ideas.”

Almost all participants were quick to assert that they belong to some form of tribal, national or religious group off campus. As one of the participants pointed out; “this is where we feel a sense of belonging. This is where we appreciate our identity, socialize with each other and keep our rich culture much alive.” They feel a great sense of community, togetherness, belonging and spirituality when they are among these groups.

Culture: Cultural Differences and participants’ admiration for American culture.

There is no doubt that two cultures differ in significant ways and adjusting into or adapting a new culture can without doubt necessitate one of two responses; a dislike or admiration for the new culture. Responses to my research questions revealed two findings which include the
perception of American culture by Sub-Saharan African immigrant students through the lens of
differentiation and an admiration for and incorporation of American culture.

All the participants reported that they viewed the American culture from the point of
view of the differences it had with their home [Sub-Saharan African] culture. While the
participants were happy learning and integrating into a new culture, they did acknowledge the
stark differences that existed. They found it very interesting to see the cultural differences of
individualism versus collectivism at play as they adjusted into their new world. As Chewa
Chimutengwede stated:

I find this idea of individualism very interesting…ehh.. It is about
‘me’…hmmm…’my world’…everyone thinks about themselves. But this is
not what we see on TVs when we were back home…and this goes against
the group or team work we are taught in class. In Africa, we see
[Americans] as very united people…I could never imagine that in America,
it is about ‘me.’ In Africa, we speak and act in the light of the group…we
do things for the collective good. We were brought up to be mindful of the
other person.

The differences were also highlighted in the areas of language, food, dressing and the way
of life. Most participants found the American English very exciting and intriguing especially the
‘many Englishes’ that exist in America. As Antakara Zelealem pointed out;

One country with many languages ['accents'] though they claim they speak
with the same language [English]. They speak very fast and I think they
speak through the nostrils…at times I find myself laughing at the way they
have to pronounce my name. I am tired of correcting them. I think they just
do not want to take the time to learn it…they want it very easy. But in my
country [Zambia], the differences in our languages are only found in our
Mother Tongues [African dialects].

Another participant, Achta Lamia, echoed the theme of food in addressing her experience.

The food is completely different…I only eat most of their food when I am
out with my non-African friends. I do not think they even enjoy their
food…they do not take time to cook their food. They talk of burgers,
sandwiches…is that food? No it is not…that is why most of the times, I
[with a broad smile] take them [non-African friends] to African restaurants. We have quite a few in the area. At home [their places of abode], all we cook is African food. I enjoy my African food. There are African stores around so it is not hard to get these foods. It takes a while to cook but it is ok.

Other sub-themes that emerged under this category were the dressing and the way of life. Participants stated they had to adjust to dressing differently for different seasons unlike in Africa where they wore almost the same type of clothes year round. As one of the participants, Nalyazi Nehanda, puts it:

I did not get it at first. Wearing different types of clothes for different seasons…while it is necessary, I am disgusted with the sense of materialism and capitalism…hmmm…yes, I know different weather calls for different clothing…we have only two seasons and you can wear the same types of clothes in these seasons… uhms…but the environment calls for that…Here while the weather calls for different clothes…I see there is a big push for must haves…and I am not talking of one…you know…I am taking of having many.

Chimwal Kimaryo confirmed this idea by stating “we need a jacket but many…? [pauses]. The society encourages you to have many…I want to look good and in good hygiene but must one [I] have many?”

**Admiration for American culture**

While participants recognized the cultural differences that existed and were not very supportive of America’s culture that promotes individualism, materialism, arrogance and superficiality, they admired aspects of its culture that promotes competitiveness, self-confidence, optimism, hope, nationalism and community service or volunteerism. As Foli Aijeba puts it:

[Smiling while nodding his head] I really admire the sense of nationalism and patriotism that is exhibited by Americans…they take pride in their country…they are willing to die protecting their country…go to any public event and you will see the way they are
responding during the singing of their anthem and the pledge of allegiance. During campaigns, you hear them [candidates] attacking each other as if they are enemies but when their identity [American] is on the line, they speak with one voice…they are very competitive and self-confident…they think that they are the best at everything hmmm…and they can do what they put their minds at. I think they hate to lose.

These views or opinions were also supported by Oteka Zuberi, who added that she admires and applauds the Americans’ sense of giving back to their communities by way of their time and other resources:

One thing I love about the Americans is their sense of giving back to their communities…I wish we can adopt that in our communities [Sub-Saharan Africa] …about 3 to 4 times a year, my job allows us to take paid time off to go and volunteer our time in the community. Twice a year or so, my job [company] goes to shelters and conducts free education and lessons of dental hygiene…I have seen many people come here and get free dental care without paying a penny…that is something we should implement in our communities [Sub-Saharan Africa] …I will love to give back to my people without any thought of getting back from them [smiling].

**Perceived Discrimination: Feelings of discrimination.**

While all the participants were happy with their overall experience in the United States and the college experience, each participant expressed that he or she was at some point predisposed to some form of discrimination as a result of his or her cultural background and/or origin. These prejudicial or discriminatory treatments were experienced in classrooms, on campus or off campus all of which make up the sub-themes of this category.
Perceived Discrimination in classroom settings

The first sub-theme that emerged in the data analysis in this category is perceived discrimination that took place in classroom settings. As one of the participants, Oteka Zuberi, puts it:

I have been reluctant to answer or ask questions in class because most [Americans] viewed my accent as being less intelligent compared to them. Once, I gathered courage to answer a question in class, and I saw all these [angry] faces looking at me. I found myself lost for words and started second guessing myself. I thought it was only me but when I talked to my fellow sister [Sub-Saharan African immigrant] it became clear that I was not the only one with such a feeling. The next time, I decided to sit in front of the class so that my eyes will be focused on the board and the teacher.

Nalyazi Nehanda also echoed this sentiment but added that some of her faculty treated her differently from others stating “he [faculty member] hardly called on me when I raised my hand to answer a question. Once, I volunteered to answer a question and he [faculty] will not look at me while I was answering the question. I don’t see him doing the same things to others. He focuses on others. But he looked away most of the time when I was talking.”

Another sub-theme was the reported perceived discrimination on campus but out of the classroom setting. Participants noted that they had been called names and racial slurs by others on campus. Some participants also noted that some native born on campus typically perceived them as less intelligent compared to these native born students. As Foli Aijeba once noted:

Once, my friends and I went out to eat something at the school cafeteria…I was not yet familiar with their food and…and I didn’t have much money to spend on food…and…and I was trying to play it safe by buying some fruits. My friends didn’t understand why I will only eat fruits especially bananas…but rather than asked, they alluded it to monkeys liking to eat bananas.

Goukouni Milongo added that once he was involved in a knowledge-based conversation with an administrator on campus, he [professor] was very surprised at how knowledgeable she
was by stating, “...wow, you seem to know a lot. I didn’t think you [an African] will know as much as our students [native students].”

Finally, there was the sub-theme of perceived discrimination off campus especially when dealing with housing, shopping and job search. As explained by Nkole Ukuu, when they first came here and were looking for an apartment, they contacted some landlords who had posted flyers on campus about available rooms in their houses. But when they reached out to these potential landlords, these landlords upon hearing the accents of the participants directed them to some apartments or told that the rooms have already been taken.

We first drove to this house and saw the signs for available rooms in this house. But when we called to inquire about the availability of these rooms, the landlord told us that the rooms were no longer available and was so quick to point us somewhere else. The following week, we found out that the rooms were still available for rents...we couldn’t believe it.

Raj Bititi also added that she was exposed to what she thinks is discrimination when she was looking for a job but was quick to add that she is thankful to have taken up a field that many will avoid. “I interviewed for many jobs but never got a call back...this was frustrating but it informed my decision to pursue my current field of studies [smiling] because I know that not so many students choose this field and the jobs are there. As much as I need the job, they [companies] will also need someone with my educational background...let them discriminate against me to their own detriment.”

While the participants noted that perceived discrimination had a strong and negative impact on their academic experiences, they did all they could to ignore it and focus on their ultimate goal; pursuing and achieving their education, the only means through which they knew they can gain some level of acceptance.
**Adjustment: Participants’ state of being and level of commitment to the system**

Another theme that stood out was participants’ feelings, commitment and attachment to the circumstance or environment and participants’ responses. While this theme could have easily aligned with another theme, coping strategies, since it emerged from answering the research question, “What resources, supports and relationships do Sub-Saharan rely on to mitigate any cultural and academic challenges they face in an American 4-year public higher education institution?” it warrants a separate discussion especially given the number of sub themes that emerged from it. The sub themes that emerged from this major theme include personal adjustments, institutional adjustments, academic adjustments and social adjustments.

Personal adjustments deal with the participants’ emotional, psychological and physical state of being as they adopt and adjust to their new environment and the level to which they deal with any related distress and/ or problems. Most participants expressed that they were happy on a personal level with their adjustments. But a few exceptions were noted especially with those who came here without any family members. As noted by Raj Bititi, she had to deal with some adjustments issues on a personal not:

> When I came here, I was all by myself, caught in a new environment and I was living with these distant relations. The relationship with them was not as closed as that with my immediate family. I had to go to school quick with the hope of getting a better education and acquainting myself with the new environment so that I can get a god job and move on to my own place…it was not easy. It was emotionally stressful living with people you have not lived with before [nodding her head from left to right] but…but…I had no choice. But I thank God, it could have been worst.

These sentiments were also echoed by Raoumble Molack who commented, “…I was so stressed in the beginning because I was in the house most of the time by myself while everybody was gone about their daily activities…”
Institutional adjustment deals with how participants feel about the institution, their attachment to the institution and their overall commitment to their academic pursuit. Participants indicated that they were very committed to their academic goals and they readily made use of available resources like the library that they became aware of on campus. This was critical as these resources helped foster their academic pursuit. As pointed out by Moktoi Queddai from Mali in the West African region of Sub-Saharan Africa:

Since I became aware of resources on campus like the library, writing center, academic advisement department, I have made sure I make use of these resources…yeah…[nodding his head with a smile]…I used my spare time on campus visiting these places…that is part of the tuition I pay and I will make use of any or ever resources that will help me to accomplish my academic goals…I do not want to regret at the end of the semester that I wish I made use of these resources. If I want the good grades, I must put in the time [with a boastful laugh] that includes making time to use all available resources. It time consuming but it is worth the sacrifice…I am sure it will pay off one day [smiling extensively]…some people want the good grades but they do not put in the time…not me. I will sacrifice now and smile tomorrow either with good grades, going to graduate school and studying what I want and in good school…or ummm getting a good job.

Interestingly, almost all of the participants indicated that they did not make use of campus resources like the gym and the cafeteria. Most participants were therefore not committed and/or attached to such amenities like the cafeteria and the gym. It is clear that the reluctance to use these resources was either because they did not have time as some of them held jobs off campus, they did not have enough financial resources to afford to eat out or that they were still adjusting to the American cuisine. As Imara Jabali who immigrated from Ethiopia in the Eastern Region of Sub-Saharan Africa stated:

uumm, I have two jobs off campus…I work as a security guard and as a parking garage attendant…I do not live on campus to make time to go to the gym. I do not like most of the food they sell [in the cafeteria], so I bring my food especially fruits. When I go home and cook a nice home cooked African fufu [meal]… the same amount of money I can use to eat here [in
the cafeteria] for a meal, I can cook my own food and eat for few days…or
I can send that money home and it will help feed many…why should I
waste it for a meal?

Another sub theme that emerged from this is the sub theme of academic adjustment. This
focuses on how the participants handled the academic demands that came with adjusting and
adopting a new educational system and the educational demands that characterizes the college
experience. As mentioned inter alia, participants have to contend with language, the educational
system (method, grading, in class activities, courses, class size and teaching style) and the
different relationships with faculty but they expressed overall satisfaction with the adjustments.
But the newness of things was seen as an opportunity to learn and grow and not as a draw back or
an impediment. As Iloa Mathembu stated:

It gives me an opportunity to enrich myself. I am here to learn. [Smiling].
You learn because you don’t know. When you are willing to learn, you
adjust and adopt yourself to situations very fast. Learning serves as a
pathway to enter into mainstream American society; it also serves as a way
to secure and maintain a middle-class lifestyle in a knowledge-based
economy. One is always learning…who is not happy when you are learning
something new? [Leans forward with a broad smile to the face].

The final sub-theme that emerged out of this theme is that of social adjustment which
focuses on participants’ dealings of interpersonal and/or societal demands that are inherent in
their adoption of their new world and college experience. Most participants reported that they
were able to adjust with little or no issues. As noted before, Sub-Saharan African immigrants’
social adjustments could be classified into four categories namely their interactions with native
born students, interactions with other foreign born (FB) students, interactions with fellow Sub-
Saharan African immigrants and their involvement with extracurricular activities. They expressed
that they could adjust well socially and as such were able to attain good interpersonal
relationships and were also able to relate with others with minimal challenges and/or social
adjustment issues. While cultural and/or language differences may have negatively impacted their relationship with others, most participants were generally open to building relationships with others. They saw this as their best and quickest way of integrating into the American society.

**Coping strategies: Systems utilized to cope with challenges.**

Adapting and adjusting into a new cultural and academic setting is a process that takes place over time. Because this process is not static, participants at different points encountered different challenges and/or experiences which called for different types of levels of coping strategies. The research question, “What resources, supports and relationships do Sub-Saharan rely on to mitigate any cultural and academic challenges they face in an American 4-year public higher education institution?” gave participants the opportunity to express some of the institutions they utilized to cope with the various challenges they faced. Under this theme, three sub-themes emerged namely the role of the family, the church and the institution.

**Reliance on the family to mitigate challenges**

Most participants echoed the sentiment that they relied heavily on their families to cope with the various challenges they encountered. Some of the participants, especially those who came here through the Diversity Visa Lottery program and family reunification visas, were here with at least a family member. They could share their challenges with family as described by Nkole Ukuu:

I live at home with my spouse, my kids and my mother-in-law...[smiling]...they have been a huge support system...I don’t [nodding his/her head] know how I could have done without their support. My mother-in-law has taken up some of the parental responsibilities lessening the [negative] impact on my studies.
Iloa Mathembu supported this fact by stating that even though her parents were not here, she consulted with them over the phone on every situation as often as she can. As she stated, “I don’t mind making those phone calls…I will rather discuss my challenges with my parents who can help me than to discuss them strangers who can do nothing good about it or can even make the situation worst.’

Those without immediate family members saw fellow Sub-Saharan African immigrants as their family. They felt very comfortable in approaching them especially those that have been here much longer. As Boatema from Sierra Leone noted:

I do not have immediate family members here…all my family is back at home [Ghana]…I see any African here as my family…It does not matter where he or she comes from. That is why it is easy to hear me refer to an African as my sister, brother, uncle, aunt but in reality, that person is not my blood relation. We may not even come from the same country or part of Africa. But I see them as family.

This idea was supported by Janga who comes from Ghana. He added that not only does he see any other African as a family member, he feels very comfortable to approach those that have been here much longer as this helps him to learn from them.

Any African here is my family [smiling broadly]…I do not have immediate family members here [U.S]. This are my family [gesturing his hand as if he pointing to people around]…I like to associate with those who have been here for some time so I can learn from…yea…you know…I do not hang have problems hanging out with them.
The church as a means to mitigate challenges

Most of my study participants belonged to or were members of local churches though there was no evidence that they belonged to the same local churches or denominations. It should be noted that the community has noted a rise in “African Pentecostal churches” in the area in recent years. Most of these churches tailor to the spiritual needs of citizens of a specific African country while a few of them are inclusive. Some of these churches run social programs that support the social wellbeing of their members for example new immigrant orientation workshops, financial literacy workshops, employment counseling workshop, and food and health programs.

As noted by Chimwal Kimaryo:

I go to church regularly. The church family has been very supportive and instrumental in my adjustment. I see the church family as the family I left back at home. They are very caring. Not only do they guide members in their spiritual journey but I was supported in my settling into the community. They provided me with some basic living necessitates.

Bonwi Biygo added that not only did a church member recommend her current school but guided him with the application process. He also got his first job thanks to an elder in his church:

From day one, this elder took a particular interest in my wellbeing. He influenced my school choice, helped me with the application process. He also referred me to someone who hired me for my first job…the church is a big support.

The role of the institution in mitigating challenges

Most participants indicated that they made use of every available resources on campus that they became aware of to help with their challenges. Most participants indicated that they took advantage of programs like Educational Opportunity programs, faculty office hours to seek for extra help, freshmen services and they were members of clubs that tailored their services to their needs. As Achta Lamia pointed out:
I made sure I went to see my professor during office hours to get extra help. I signed up for tutoring and I belonged to multiple clubs… I wanted to make sure I am taking advantage of every resources to foster my education…I am paying all these fees; I might as well make the most out of it...or get my money’s worth.

Moktoi Queddai noted that she relied so much on the school library and its staff. “Books are so expensive here…I could not afford it. I will go to the library every time to borrow a book and scan it…I didn’t know that this is how expensive books are here [America]. I didn’t know how to use the library at first but the staff there were very patient with guiding me through.”

**Summary of Results**

This chapter reported the results of data analysis and findings of this study that were gathered following in-depth interviews that were conducted by the researcher. The findings include; the U.S. higher education presented participants with opportunities not found in their home countries; participants predisposed to academic and cultural challenges; participants’ prioritized their social interactions to facilitate their transition into a new society; participants’ admiration for the new culture; participants’ predisposition to discrimination; and participants’ use of various institutions to mitigate to the challenges they encountered while integrating into the U.S educational system and culture.

The next and final chapter focuses on the issues and themes that came to light in this study, a discussion of the implications and conclusion. I will interpret and discuss my findings, how they affect educational practice and what, if any, future research should be conducted to further this study.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This chapter focuses on the issues and themes that came to light in this study, a discussion of the implications and conclusion. I will sub-divide this chapter into six sections, namely: a brief discussion of the dissertation, summary of the study’s findings, a brief discussion of the theoretical frameworks, what relation, if any, this study’s findings have with existing literature, the implications of the findings and a conclusion.

**Brief Discussion of the Dissertation:**

The purpose of this study was to understand how Sub-Saharan African immigrants experience higher education in the United States. The study was guided by the following research questions: (a) How do Sub-Saharan African immigrant undergraduate students adapt culturally and academically to the environment of a four-year public U.S. higher education institution? (b) How do Sub-Saharan African immigrants describe their cultural and academic experiences as undergraduates on an American four-year public higher education institution? (c) What are the cultural and academic challenges Sub-Saharan African immigrant students face in adapting to an American four-year public higher education institution? And (d) what resources, supports and relationships do Sub-Saharan African immigrant undergraduate students rely on to mitigate any cultural and academic challenges they face in an American four-year public higher education institution?

These questions were best examined through a qualitative research design by utilizing an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and a heuristic phenomenology. Through these approaches, I was able to draw my own lived experiences as a Sub-Saharan African immigrant
here in the United States. This study was motivated by my own personal experiences, the limited availability of research dealing with the experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrants in the U.S. higher education and the fact that many at times the lived experiences of marginalized groups are often ignored or silenced in academic discourse. Through this study, I was able to give an opportunity to these Sub-Saharan African immigrants to voice their experiences, to be heard and understood with respect as to how they have experienced higher education in an environment where they are a minority.

**Brief Discussion of my key findings:**

Six super themes emerged from this study, which resulted from in-depth interviews with the participants while utilizing both research and interview questions, transcription of recorded interviews, comprehensive field notes, comprehensive researcher’s field notes, references to existing literature and research, theoretical framework and personal journal in which the researcher reflected on his feelings, the participants’ feelings, the setting in which the interviews were conducted.

The first theme that emerged from this study dealt with the academic experiences of my participants. While there were some differences that were evident in the academic systems specifically in the areas of language, the educational system (method, grading, in class activities), courses, class size and teaching style, the U.S. higher education presented an opportunity to the study participants. Most participants expressed great satisfaction with their academic experiences even though some of them stated that in the beginning they had some challenges with the educational system. The second theme that was prevalent was that of a social nature in which it was concluded that there was eagerness by participants to establish friendships with others.
Various sub-themes like the following emerged from a further analysis of the findings in this social category: interactions of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students with native born students, interactions with other foreign born (FB) students, interactions with fellow Sub-Saharan African immigrants and the involvement of Sub-Saharan African immigrants with extracurricular activities. Most participants indicated that while cultural and/ or language differences could have negatively impacted their relationship with others, they were generally open to building relationships with others. A third theme that emerged from the study was in the area of culture and participants pointed out some cultural differences that exist between their culture and that of the host country. For example, they found it very interesting to see the cultural differences of individualism versus collectivism at play as they adjusted into their new world. While the participants were happy learning and integrating into a new culture, they acknowledged that adjusting into an unfamiliar culture was very stressful in the beginning. A fourth theme that emerged from the study dealt with the notion of perceived discrimination by the participants. While all the participants were happy with their overall experience in the United States and the college experience, most participants expressed that they at some point were predisposed to some form of discrimination as a result of their cultural background and/ or national origin. These prejudicial and/ or discriminatory treatments were experienced in classrooms, on campus or off campus. The next theme that emerged was that of adjustment with participants indicating that they were generally happy with their state of being and had different levels of commitment and/ or attachment to various systems. This theme could have easily aligned with another theme but it warranted a separate discussion because of the numerous sub themes that emerged under it namely personal adjustments, institutional adjustments, academic adjustments and social adjustments. The final theme that emerged from the study dealt with coping strategies in which
participants noted that they utilized various institutions to mitigate the challenges they encountered while adjusting into the new environment especially the U.S. educational system and culture. Adapting to a new environment takes place over time, which results in different challenges and therefore calls for different levels and methods of coping strategies. Under this theme, three sub-themes emerged, namely the roles of the family, the church and the institution.

**Brief Discussion of the Theoretical Frameworks**

To fully understand the lived experiences of the Sub-Saharan African immigrants, I drew from two theoretical frameworks, namely ecology of human development by Urie Bronfenbrenner and Cultural-ecological theory by John Ogbu. Bronfenbrenner (1977), a social development theorist who posited that “human development is a product of interaction between the growing organism and its environment” (p. 16) in which the developing person experiences physical, cognitive and emotional growth as a result of the interactive and fluid nature of environmental systems. John Ogbu defines cultural-ecological theory as “the study of institutionalized patterns of behavior interdependent with features of the environment” and he identifies two forces namely system and community forces which contribute to how minorities respond to schooling.

Bronfenbrenner (1977) in his ecology of human development framework, identifies five sub systems: namely microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (that influence human development). A brief discussion of these nested structures or environmental systems follows.

The microsystem can include the person’s family, peers, school and neighborhood. Sub-Saharan African immigrant students have relationships with family, peers, school and
neighborhoods that inform participants’ lived experiences and/or perceptions about schooling. While some participants did not have immediate family members around, their schooling was still informed by family members back in Africa or by the broader “African family” here.

The mesosystem refers to the relations between microsystems or connections between contexts. Most participants were actively involved in multiple settings that informed their lived experiences and perceptions about school. All participants were involved with work (on and/or off campus), family, church and other social groups that tailored to their national and/or regional interests.

An exosystem involves the connection between a social setting in which the individual does not have an active role and the context where the individual is actively participating. While some participants stated that the activities of where their parents or spouses work impacted their studies, almost all participants indicated that their schooling was impacted by the happenings in their native country.

The macrosystem describes the culture (ways of people) in which an individual lives. Sub-Saharan African culture greatly influenced the way Sub-Saharan African immigrants experienced, viewed and perceived their family, peers, teachers and how they approach schooling.

Finally, the chronosystem refers to the transitions and shifts that take place in one’s life span. These are the patterns of environmental events and transitions as well as socio-historical circumstances which may include both rules and roles that can have a strong impact on personal development. Some participants, especially those who came to the country through asylum and refugee status, had been victims of disruptive family home lives given their exposure to political and/or natural disasters in their native country. The normalcy or consistency suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1977) was therefore absent in their lives especially prior to immigration.
Viewing the lived experiences and perception of education through Bronfrenbrenner’s ecology of human development shows that Sub-Saharan African immigrants were constantly negotiating and immersing themselves into the U.S. higher education and were faced with several challenges which can in part be explained by the participants’ cultural beliefs. Also, it can be said that there are different forces within Bronfenbrenner’s ecological human development theory that are influencing a participants’ schooling, especially given that Sub-Saharan Africans view education from a point of view of privilege. Family, peers and teachers tend to have a great impact not just on participants’ education but also on their personal and social life.

Ogbu (1983b, 1990d, 1991, 1992a, 1995a, 2003) in his cultural-ecological theory identifies two factors or forces, namely system forces and community forces, which contribute to how minorities respond to schooling. While he did not assume that there was no discrimination and that discrimination did not have a negative effect on student outcomes, he believed that there was room for minority agency even in the systematic discrimination. Ogbu (1983a, p. 168; 1985, p. 862) stated that it is imperative to distinguish between “different kinds of minorities,” namely involuntary, voluntary and autonomous minorities in order to understand the academic achievement of minority students.

Voluntary minorities are those who choose to immigrate to their host environment. They see their host as a place of opportunity and school as a place to gain something. Most Sub-Saharan African immigrant students voluntarily immigrated to the United States. They therefore saw their host as a place of opportunity and education to them was a means to excel and tap into the opportunities their host presented. Also, voluntary minorities take an instrumental approach to their host and are consistent and effective academic achievers. Sub-Saharan African immigrants were proactively and constantly looking for opportunities in the system to improve their standards
and the lives of their loved ones. As defined by Ogbu (1990), they were consistent and effective academic achievers.

Involuntary minorities are those whose position of minority was a result of historic subjugation after conquest or forced migration (enslavement). They did not choose their minority status but earned it through conquest, forced migration and enslavement. While it could be said that all participants did not fit Ogbu’s definition of involuntary minority, it could also be said that most if not all came here involuntarily. Circumstances like wars, famine, political instability, lack of opportunities and the outbreak of diseases “forced” participants to immigrate to their host country. In other instances, it was the choosing of their family members. These participants did not therefore voluntarily immigrate to the United States. This could probably explain why there was some form of consensus among the participants to go back “home” at some point and re-build their native community. Ogbu also describes the involuntary minority class as persistent academic failures (Ogbu, 1990c, p. 146) and they exhibit oppositional approach to their host through their distrust for and opposition to the dominant society and its institutions. The Sub-Saharan African immigrant student did not fit this description by John Ogbu because they saw the institutions like education as a source of opportunity and they were very eager not only to develop friendships with others including members of the dominant class, but they were also eager to learn the cultures of the dominant class.

The final group is the Autonomous minority who has a distinctive ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic or cultural identity that is guaranteed by national tradition or constitution. They are minorities and may be victims of prejudice, but they are not subordinate groups in a system of rigid stratification for example the Jews, the Amish or the Mormons (Ogbu, 1983a, p. 169). Members of this autonomous group have a cultural frame of reference, which demonstrates and
encourages success (Obgu, 1985, p. 862). While Sub-Saharan African immigrants were not members of such an autonomous group, their cultural belief remains a source of reference as it strongly demonstrates and encourages success.

Ogbu (1974, 1978) concluded that the performance of minority students was impacted by three things, namely (a) the treatment of these minorities by the school in particular and the society at large, (b) the perceptions of the minority students and (c) the responses of these students to school as a result of their treatment. In this study, it was evident that participants’ studies were impacted by these forces. While it was evident that the treatment these sojourners received and their perceptions were mixed, their overall response to studies was that of an upbeat or buoyant altitude as they saw their studies as an opportunity or path to overcoming their challenges or accomplishing their dreams. Ogbu’s research in explains the differences in academic performance among minorities, and Sub-Saharan African immigrants performed at different levels when compared to other minority groups, supporting or giving credence to Ogbu’s theory of differences in academic performance among minorities.

**How the Findings in this Study Relate to Existing Literature**

While the study produced some interesting findings, it was necessary to see how these findings contrast and/or compare to what we already know about foreign born students. In this section, I will first look at how the findings affirm existing literature before concluding the section with how they negate the literature if any.

Almost all participants indicated that they have at some point in their course of their studies been subjected to some form of discrimination. This perceived discrimination has not only been limited to the classroom and/or university settings but it had taken place on off campus
settings as well. Previous studies have confirmed that foreign born students were subjected to some form of discrimination (Lee et al, 2007; Stton, 2002; Hannassab, 2006; & Yoon et al, 2004). The major reason for some of the perceived discrimination was blamed on the heightened race and immigration pressures in the host country and the institution’s less than enthusiastic dealings with immigrant students at or after arrival on their campuses.

Another finding that affirms existing literature is participants’ overall agreement that the U.S. academic system though different from those found in their native countries, presented them with lots of opportunities very rare to come by in their native countries. Existing literature (Allen, 2002; Yoon et al, 2004; Poyrazli et al, 2007) while pointing to some of the differences that exist between American educational system and those of their study participants have also concluded that these foreign born students have experienced more opportunities in America and the world thanks to an American education than they would have in their native countries. The participants see these opportunities from two stand points. The participants first see these opportunities from the view point that the American educational system presents them with varied academic and funding choices. They also see these opportunities from the stand point of the many career opportunities that lie ahead of them in America and around the globe upon completion of their studies. One of the main reasons African immigrants have put forward to account for their decision to leave their native countries is the lack of opportunities in their native countries and the presence of opportunities in their host countries ((Kissick, XX; Keteku, 2007; Okome, 2005)

This study also confirmed what we already know in existing literature that foreign born students rely on various social support systems to help mitigate some of the challenges they face while pursuing their studies. Various studies (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Misra et al.2003; Poyrazli et al
…2004; Ye, 2006; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Atri, et al. 2007; Dao et al., 2007; Johnson et al. 2008; & Sumer et al, 2008) have recounted that foreign born students depended on social support systems like family, peers, faculty and administration to help alleviate their challenges. Participants in this study noted that they depended on social support systems like the family, the church and the institution to deal with the many challenges they were faced with.

Cultural differences between host country’s culture and participants’ culture is another area in which this study affirms what existing literature has previously stated. Many studies (Freeman, 2002; Yoon & Portman, 2004; Lee & Rice 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Kegel, 2009; Barnes, 2010 & Tochkov, Levine & Sanaka, 2010), have noted that international or foreign born students have experienced cultural differences during their academic pursuit in the U.S. Participants of this study did acknowledge the existence of cultural differences especially in the areas of language, food, way of life, dressing and the stark difference of individualism in host Country’s culture and collectivism in their native cultures.

While the findings of this study largely affirm what we already know, it should be noted that there was some minor divergence from the literature especially when one looked beyond the main themes to sub themes. For example, while this study affirms that social support was largely used by the participants for survival, they differed in the types of social support used. Participants in this noted the critical role the church played in mitigating their challenges, a point not articulated in existing literature. Also, in some cases, these differences are noted in the level or extent of impact experienced in the areas of affirmation. But these differences are beyond the scope of this study and can provide an opportunity for future research.
Implications

In the wake of the heightened discourse that is currently taking place in the country around diversity related issues, the importance of reaching out, attracting, recruiting and retaining minorities cannot be downplayed if we are serious about diversity and seeing a more inclusive diverse community.

All participants were happy with their overall stay in the U.S. They saw learning and integrating into a new culture and academic system as an opportunity to advance their social wellbeing. Participants’ experiences and academic pursuit were therefore informed by the relationships they developed within their environment. While participants fit into John Ogbu’s classification of “voluntary minority” and share such characteristics as evident by the way they perceive education and their host environment, some of the participants, especially those who are here as refugees / asylees had experiences that were void of what Bronfenbrenner describes as “consistency” given what they had been exposed to prior to settling here.

Overall, all participants acknowledged that their Sub-Saharan African culture positively influenced their relationships with various members of their environment and how they perceived their academic pursuit. African cultural values call, for among other things, a sense of (i) communal life (ii) good human relations (iii) sacredness of life (iv) hospitality (v) the sacred and of religion (vi) language and proverb (vii) time and (viii) respect for authority and elders (Davidson, 1969; Steve, 1978; Ifemesia, 1979; Achebe, 1975; and Lassiter, 2000). Sub-Saharan African immigrant students, therefore, not only were self-motivated but also maintained an open communication with institutions like the school, church and family. These open communication or fostered relationships, while attesting to the participants’ cultural values, also enabled them to cope and/ or address some of the challenges they were exposed to.
Studies have identified several challenges that foreign-born students encounter in the U.S. both on and off college campuses, including discrimination, cultural, language proficiency, financial, academic, loneliness, Social, homesickness, health and climatic (Constantine et al. 2005; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Klomegah, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2006; Lin & Yi, 1997; Luzio-Lockett, 1998; McClure, 2007; Myburgh et al. 2006; Selvadurai, 1991; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Zhou et al. 2005). These Sub-Saharan African immigrant students reported that they have faced some of these challenges, including financial, cultural, social, discrimination, academic and health. While these findings did not deter the participants’ academic ambitions, the findings might help bring about policies and/or provide discernment that can guide institutions to formulating policies that can be inclusive and beneficial to all. School administrators and policy makers are encouraged to devote resources to addressing these challenges, which will help enhance the success and the wellbeing of these immigrants while they study and stay in the U.S.

The participants noted that they relied on and took advantage of resources provided by institutions like the church, family and the school to cope with their challenges while in the United States. Even so, Sub-Saharan African immigrant students are encouraged to take a proactive approach and study the cultural, educational, social and linguistic set up of their host country in advance. Having an understanding of the historical, socio-economic, political and cultural background of the host country will be helpful in mitigating some of the challenges these students will face in their host country. Also an advanced knowledge of the U.S. educational system will be critical to the success of these sojourners. Establishing or enhancing existing collaborative or partnerships endeavors between host governments and supplier nations can be beneficial to both the sojourners and the host country.
U.S. campuses should encourage diversity programs that can elevate and sensitize the campus environment on the importance and benefits of diversity. Having diversity awareness programs and/or multicultural training programs can be a good starting point. A conducive campus environment that encourages diversity, openness, understanding and respect for others will be beneficial to both immigrant students and the university as a whole compared to one that fails to create such an environment. Designating an office specifically tailored to the needs of foreign-born students (international students and immigrants) will be both beneficial to the university and the sojourners alike. Assigning many student advisors who have at least the working knowledge of a foreign language and foreign culture to this office and charging them with mentoring and coaching foreign born students with academic and cultural issues will be an added plus. Universities can employ programs like workshops, seminars, tours and extracurricular activities through which immigrant students can gain some advance knowledge of the workings of the system. Also, campuses can encourage peer-to-peer mentoring programs between domestic students and Sub-Saharan African immigrant students. Finally, schools can have different orientation programs that specifically target students from various regions of the globe as opposed to the general orientation that often take place on most campuses. While I am fully aware of the financial limitations this can have, especially given the dwindling financial resources from the government in the wake of the recent financial crises, the amplified competition for scarce financial resources by various social agencies and the heightened accountability placed by government’s accounting agencies, schools can look beyond the traditional funding sources to begin raising funds for these programs. Schools can also partner with entities that offer some of these social programs on pro bono basis to take on this critical role of working with foreign born students.
Policy makers and politicians also have a major role to play in easing the adjustment challenges Sub-Saharan African immigrant students can face across U.S. campuses. Policy makers are encouraged to note not only the importance Sub-Saharan African immigrant students bring to U.S. campuses but also the benefits they bring to the social and economic wellbeing of the country as a whole, especially in post-college life. The host government and policy makers are encouraged to set up bicultural or multicultural relationships with some of these African feeder nations through which programs to mitigate the challenges faced by Sub-Saharan African immigrant students can be put in place. Policy makers are also encouraged to protect the rights of these Sub-Saharan African immigrant students ensuring that these students are not subject of discrimination and bully on grounds of their accents, nationality, language, race or ethnicity.

**Implications for Further Research**

At the conclusion of this study, I realized many avenues abound for further and/or future research. First, this study involved 20 participants only. Its findings may therefore be further validated through a much larger sample size.

Secondly, conducting a similar study under different conditions can yield a richer data or it can help to see if my findings will hold at different colleges and/or over time. For example, the conceptual frameworks can be modified, different sites can be chosen, different institutional types can be recruited or a longitudinal study involving a reasonable amount of time can be employed; all of which may yield diverse, rich and better results.

Third, given that Bronfenbrenner asserts that human development is greatly influenced by different types of environmental systems in which the participant has a direct or indirect relationship, it would be interesting to know how different environments and/or regions of the
country could affect learning among Sub-Saharan African immigrant students. Also, one could undertake a further study of the multiple systems, for example peers, faculty, administration, and parents within the ecological or environmental systems and compare their discernments or insights of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students’ education in the U.S.

Fourth, comparing and contrasting the academic and cultural experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students with other international students, native-born blacks or blacks from other non-Sub-Saharan African regions could be a worthy area of research to pursue. A study comparing and contrasting the experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students with that of immigrant students from non-Sub-Saharan African regions (Western Saharan Africa, Northern Saharan Africa aka North Africa) could be a rich and interesting data providing research to undertake. Also, one could undertake a further study to find out if such a study’s findings are similar or differ across different regions of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Fifth, Sub-Saharan Africans, while in Sub-Sahara Africa, may have little or may not have been exposed to or subjected to contend with race-related issues. It will therefore be interesting to carry out a study on their perceptions of race and if any, the role of race in their perceived discriminations that some of them were exposed to. How they relate to faculty and administrators who see themselves as minorities compared to the majority White race can be of great interest or a fascinating study too.

Sixth, even in John Ogbu’s class of voluntary immigrants, it could be said that some of these students did not immigrate here (U.S.) voluntarily especially given that some immigrated because they were fleeing from persecution or they had to be with their loved ones. Their experiences could yield interesting data compared to those who came here “willingly” through the
Diversity Visa lottery. It would be interesting to know the experiences of this class of immigrant student given that they may have experienced some form of disruption in their education.

Finally, some participants of this study have never experienced forms of racial or class discrimination by virtue of the fact that they come from majority or privileged class in their home countries. It would therefore be very interesting to study their experiences especially their coping strategies as they find themselves in a minority or less privileged status in the United States.

Conclusion:

The primary purpose of this study was to study and understand the cultural and academic experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrants enrolled at a 4-year public university located in the Northeastern region of the U.S. As the number of Sub-Saharan African immigrants who are in the U.S continue to grow and make a significant contribution to the U.S higher education and society, it became imperative to study this group.

In all, 20 participants took part in this study and their stories detailing their lived experiences resulted to 6 major themes consisting of 22 sub themes that contributed to a rich and diverse description of the phenomenon. Understanding how Sub-Saharan African immigrants experience U.S. higher education has implications for U.S. higher education and its various stakeholders. Through this study, it was clear that Sub-Saharan African immigrant students have unique needs and challenges. Faculty and administrators are encouraged to not only recognize these needs and challenges but to accommodate them so as to help ease these immigrants’ experiences. While these Sub-Saharan African immigrant students face challenges at the social, cultural and academic levels, they had not come to this institution completely unprepared and as such, they do not see these challenges as stumbling blocks out to derail their dreams of achieving
their academic pursuit and American dream. They see the system as a “Promised Land” filled with milk and honey and are determined to make the best of every given opportunity so as to achieve their dreams; dreams they may otherwise not achieve in their native countries. In order to achieve their academic and American dream, they must therefore make every effort to overcome these challenges while setting their eyes on the priced crown that lies ahead.

Recent events (changes in U.S. immigration policies, internationalization of U.S. higher education, promotion of diversity) in the broader U.S. society point to the fact that the Sub-Saharan African immigrants will continue to grow and make significant impact in the U.S. Developing a deeper understanding of this population through future research is therefore paramount. Our understanding of their lived experiences is a complex puzzle that we must not relent to continuously solve. Because of the broad diversity that this population presents, we are encouraged to constantly answer questions like the “who, how, when, where, why” surrounding these Sub-Saharan African immigrant students.
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REQUEST FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH, DEMONSTRATION OR
RELATED ACTIVITIES INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

All material must be typed.

PROJECT TITLE: “Understanding how Sub-Saharan Africans Experience Higher Education in the United States”

CERTIFICATION STATEMENT:

In making this application, I (we) certify that I (we) have read and understand the University’s policies and procedures governing research, development, and related activities involving human subjects. I (we) shall comply with the letter and spirit of those policies. I(we) further acknowledge my(our) obligation to (1) obtain written approval of significant deviations from the originally-approved protocol BEFORE making those deviations, and (2) report immediately all adverse effects of the study on the subjects to the Director of the Institutional Review Board, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ 07079.

02/24/16
Reuel Mebuk; RESEARCHER(S)

**Please print or type out names of all researchers below signature. Use separate sheet of paper, if necessary**

My signature indicates that I have reviewed the attached materials of my student advisee and consider them to meet IRB standards.

Joseph Stestar, PhD 02/24/16
RESEARCHER’S FACULTY ADVISOR [for student researchers only] DATE

**Please print or type out name below signature**

The request for approval submitted by the above researcher(s) was considered by the IRB for Research Involving Human Subjects Research at the April 2016 meeting.

The application was approved ✓ not approved ___ by the Committee. Special conditions were ____ were not ✓ set by the IRB. (Any special conditions are described on the reverse side.)

Mary F. Ranjela, Ph.D. 5/10/16
DIRECTOR,
SETON HALL UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH

Seton Hall University
3/2006
Dear Mr. Mebuin,

The Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board has reviewed the information you have submitted addressing the concerns for your proposal entitled “Understanding how Sub-Saharan Africans Experience Higher Education in the United States.” Your research protocol is hereby approved as revised through expedited review. The IRB reserves the right to recall the proposal at any time for full review.

Enclosed for your records are the signed Request for Approval form, the stamped Recruitment Flyer, and the stamped original Consent Form. Make copies only of these stamped forms.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

According to federal regulations, continuing review of already approved research is mandated to take place at least 12 months after this initial approval. You will receive communication from the IRB Office for this several months before the anniversary date of your initial approval.

Thank you for your cooperation.

In harmony with federal regulations, none of the investigators or research staff involved in the study took part in the final decision.

Sincerely,

Mary F. Ruzicka, Ph.D.
Professor
Director, Institutional Review Board

cc: Dr. Joseph Stetar
Appendix B: Unsigned Consent Form

Consent Form

Title of Research Study
Understanding how Sub-Saharan Africans Experience Higher Education in the United States

Project Researcher
Reuel N. Mebuin, Doctoral Student, Department of Higher Education Leadership, Management and Policy, Seton Hall University, 400 South Orange, NJ 07079. Contact information: E-Mail: reuel.mebuin@student.shu.edu

This research project is in partial fulfillment of course requirements and under the direct supervision and leadership of Dr. Joseph Stetar, Professor, Department of Higher Education Leadership, Management and Policy, Seton Hall University, 400 South Orange, NJ 07079. Contact information: Telephone (973) 275-2730; E-Mail: joseph.stetar@shu.edu

Purpose for this Research
The purpose of this study is to understand the academic and cultural experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students and how they impact their college transition, persistence and degree attainment via a case study of a 4-year public U.S. higher education institution. Although, Sub-Saharan African immigrants are said to have attained the highest level of education in the U.S., there has been limited research on their academic and cultural experiences and challenges in the U.S. and the pressure to succeed on American universities and colleges. The data gathered by me for this study will be used in partial fulfillment of the Ph.D. in Higher Education Leadership, Management and Policy Degree for Seton Hall University.
Procedures for Research

Participants for this study will be selected by the Project Researcher in conjunction with the gatekeeper from the African Students Association and the institution. Each participant will be chosen based upon the student having lived for at least 10 years in one of the 49 countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and having lived for at least 3 months in the United States and attends a postsecondary institution of education in the United States at the time of the study. Each participant will be given an introductory letter and a consent form. All students electing to participate in this survey will be asked to sign and return the consent form to the Project Researcher. Upon receiving the consent form, the participant will be interviewed according to the interview protocol. The consent form and all data generated from this study will be kept in a secured location until this study has been successfully completed. Upon the successful completion of the study, all the collected data will be destroyed.

Potential Risks or Discomforts

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project. However, students may experience discomfort when reflecting upon instances of experiences and challenges. You have the option of terminating the interview in the event that the reflection becomes emotionally painful, if you feel you want to discontinue or opt out from the interview.

Potential Benefits to You or Others

The significance of this study will be the addition of new data and literature not currently available on the cultural and academic experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrants in the U.S. postsecondary institution of education. The purpose of this data and its use is intended to
bring to light the phenomenon of Sub-Saharan African immigrants’ academic and cultural experiences, to bring to light some of the challenges Sub-Saharan African immigrant face as they adjust and adapt to their new environment and also to attempt to recommend some strategies that would help mitigate these challenges. This study will also attempt to aid school authorities in developing strategies for advocating and aiding Sub-Saharan African immigrant students as they seek to further their postsecondary education in the United States.

**Protection of Confidentiality**

Participant’s personal information will be kept strictly confidential. No identifying information will be used on any materials or reports generated by this study including transcribed materials. All materials, including this consent, form will be kept in strictest confidence and secured and will only be accessed by the Project Researcher. Upon the successful completion of the degree program, all collected materials will be immediately destroyed.

**Signatures and Consent to Participate**

I have been briefed on all procedures and aspects of this research study and I hereby willingly agree to participate in this study. I have been made aware that as a participant, I may, at my discretion, terminate my participation from this study at any time, without any negative repercussions or penalty.

________________________  ____________________________   __________________
Participant’s Signature       Printed Name       Date

________________________   ____________________________   __________________
Project Researcher’s Signature  Printed Name  Date
VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH STUDY.

"Understanding how Sub-Saharan Africans Experience Higher Education in the U.S."

Types of Participants Needed

Adult Sub-Saharan African immigrants pursuing an undergraduate degree at a 4-year public institution

Purpose of the study: I am conducting research to understand the academic and cultural experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrant students and how they impact their college transition, persistence and degree attainment via a case study of a 4-year public U.S higher education institution.

- Semi-structured and in-depth face to face interviews
- Audio Taped interviews will be about 60 minutes long
- No identifying information will be used or asked for
- Information will be securely stored for confidentiality
- Participation is Voluntary

Researcher’s Contact: reuel.mebuin@student.shu.edu and/ or 8888888 (Text and/or Call)
Recruitment Letter

Dear Reader:

I am writing to you to solicit your participation in a research study that I am undertaking as partial requirement to enable me obtain a doctorate degree in Higher Education Leadership, Management and Policy from the School of Education and Human Services here at Seton Hall University. My Advisor / Mentor with whom I am working is Dr. Joseph Stetar, Professor in the Department of Higher Education Leadership, Management and Policy.

This research project seeks to gain an understanding of the academic and cultural experiences and challenges you may have experienced as a result of immigrating to the U.S. and pursuing a postsecondary education. I also hope to learn how this experience has affected your overall educational experience in the U.S.

If you would like to participate in this research or if you have a questions and wants further information, please feel free to contact me. I will be glad to give you any additional information, answer your questions or give you a consent form to sign in order to take part in this project. Thanks so very much for taking time off your busy schedule to read this note and responding to me.

Sincerely;

Reuel Mebuin; Researcher.
Appendix E: Background Questions and Interview Protocol

Background and/or Demographic Questions

1) When did you come in the U.S. and how?

2) How long have you been in the U.S.?

3) How long have you been enrolled at this University?

4) What part or region of Sub-Saharan Africa do you come from?

5) When your friends / peers / professors / school administrators ask you about your race and ethnicity, what do you tell them?

Interview Protocol

(1) How did you end up in this College / University?

(2) Before you enrolled in this university / college, what were your impressions of the U.S. higher education system?

3) What were those ideas and impressions of U.S. higher education based on?

4) What are some of the things you like the most about this College / University?

5) What are some of the things you like the least about this College / University?

6) Can you tell me about your living situation while you study? (Do you live on campus or off campus? How far away do you live off campus? Who do you live with?)

7) Can you tell me about some of your friends on campus? (Can you name some of your friends? What is the race / ethnicity of these friends? Can you describe your relationships with these friends? How often do you interact with your friends?)
8) Can you tell me about your relationships with your professors and school administrators? (How often do you meet with your professors and school administrators? Can you tell me about these meetings?)

9) What kinds of activities do you engage in on campus? (Can you describe these activities? What is your relationship like with these activities?)

10) What has been the most challenging aspects of attending college in the United States?

11) What have you done to try to respond to / mitigate / resolve these challenges? (What are some of your academic support system? What are some of your social support system? Tell me more about these systems?)

12) What, if any, support exists on campus to help with adjustment? How much have you used these services?

13) How has your experience as an undergraduate student at a U.S. College / University compared to what your impressions or expectations were before starting?
Appendix F: Letter of Introduction

Letter of Introduction

Dear African Immigrant,

It is with great joy and excitement that I express my sincere gratitude and thanks for the interest you have expressed in taking part in this research study which seeks to understand the academic and cultural experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrants in a U.S. postsecondary institution of education.

I am seeking to bring to light the experiences of students such as you, to gain an understanding of the academic and cultural experiences and challenges you may have experienced as a result of immigrating to the U.S. and pursuing a postsecondary education. I also hope to learn how this experience has affected your overall educational experience in the U.S.

I hope to use this data to develop strategies to help Sub-Saharan African immigrants mitigate the challenges in studying in the United States. I also hope that this information will help the school administrators at your institution better understand your challenges and experiences and how these might affect your educational aspirations.

I will be conducting an individual face to face interview with you as well as a possible observation exercise at some later date. I will digitally record these interviews in audio format for documentation. Be rest assured that all data collected by me for this study will remain strictly confidential and that provisions will be provided to ensure your comfort and control of the interview process.

I am looking forward with great excitement to meeting with you and am looking forward to hearing your story. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to give me a call at any time.
Yours Sincerely,

Reuel Mebuin

Doctoral Student

Department of Higher Education Leadership, Management and Policy

Dr. Joseph Stetar: Advisor / Mentor

Professor

Higher Ed Leadership Management & Policy Faculty

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