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### THE EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS FROM LATIN AMERICA IN THEIR TRANSITION OF GRADUATING AND FINDING A JOB IN THE UNITED STATES

Natalia Hernandez

University of San Francisco, naheca12@gmail.com

Natalia Hernandez

University of San Francisco

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The University of San Francisco

THE EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS FROM LATIN  
AMERICA IN THEIR TRANSITION OF GRADUATING AND FINDING A JOB IN THE  
UNITED STATES

A Thesis  
Presented to the Faculty of the School of Education of the  
University of San Francisco

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS  
In  
Organization and Leadership

By  
Natalia Hernández Castellanos

Spring 2022

This thesis, written by  
Natalia Hernández Castellanos  
The University of San Francisco  
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Under the guidance of the project committee,  
and approved by all its members  
has been accepted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

In

Organization and Leadership



(Instructor and Faculty Advisor)

August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022

(Date)

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the international graduate students from Latin America in the United States that have gone through the limitations of finding a job in the United States after graduating. Second, this study is dedicated to the different Latin American students, no matter their race and sociopolitical situation, who dream big and always want to pursue a better education to make a change, contribute and make better their lives, their communities, and the educational system. This thesis looks to embrace social justice in this community. My experiences as an international student from Latin America have driven me to do this research and hear the voices of other Latin American international graduate students and navigate what phenomena arise among us: Latiné, international graduate students in the United States, and what our opportunities are after graduating. Ultimately, I dedicate this thesis to myself since it has been part of my journey and process to grow as a human being and find and understand my mission in my community.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my family, who, from thousands of miles away, has emotionally supported me as well as has patiently understood and learned from this non-immigrant journey I have taken as an international student in the United States. I want to truly thank the seven participants from this study and my Colombian friend, Jineth, who helped me to practice the interview protocol. To all my classmates from the program who listened to my ideas and my concerns and reminded me that I was not alone on this boat. Thanks to the Writing Center and my classmate and friend, Stacey, who kindly helped me proofread my whole thesis and make the paper cleaner and more precise for the reader. To my partner, Jonathan, my deepest gratitude who has been an unconditional support and has always encouraged me during this process. Thanks for always being there, listening to my concerns and ideas, and reminding me that my contributions are valuable to my community. *¡Millones de gracias!*

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis project is to conduct a qualitative phenomenological study to understand the lived experiences of international graduate students from Latin America in the United States as they transition from their studies to finding a full-time job in the United States. The most common themes mentioned in the different sections of the interviews were: the different dynamics in their identity, the benefits, and limitations of their status in the American context, and how their professional development and economy are impacted while being international graduate students from Latin America. Student service departments such as the Career Service department, the International Student Office, and the academic departments were the resources the participants mentioned most in their transition of graduating and looking for a job.

Supported by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its branch Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit), this research demonstrated that besides their national identity and race, the socio-political situation shapes the opportunities for those students. It is with the hope that the presence and the storytelling of these Latin American international graduate students in the United States become a source of inspiration and education for the educational structures, the American workforce, and the U.S. Citizens and Immigration Services for an inclusive and just American society.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

U.S. higher education has represented for decades a wonderful opportunity for students around the world willing to take their education to the next level. As an international graduate student from South America, for me, U.S. higher education is a chance that represents equality and equity among education and professional lives. As a student from a developing country and working-class, coming to the United States has become a magnificent asset for my professional opportunities. However, multiple complexities during and after a global education are usually part of the experience of being an international student in the United States.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

International undergraduate and graduate students tend to experience a number of concerns in the United States. Barriers exist for international students along with a need to strengthen their graduate school opportunities as well as opportunities after graduating in the United States. For international students in graduate education in the United States, some of those concerns are also related but not limited to language, culture, and employment barriers (Liang, 2015). Likewise, Flournoy (2018) has identified different economic challenges international students face while pursuing their degree. Other reported concerns related to international students include anxiety about socializing and an experience of more academic stress compared to their White counterparts (Kawamoto et al., 2018). The problem aggravates when due to their advanced status, the same international graduate students wrongly assume that they might not need certain foundational academic skills that might be unique in the academic and social culture of their host country (Sharma, 2019). Thus, challenges in universities continue to rise as the number of international students in the United States increases (Kawamoto et al.,

2018). Likewise, immigration complexities develop as more modifications to the status of international students in the United States were made once it was declared higher education would go online due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020). Adding to this, the political climate in the United States is complex while many international graduate students are looking for a path to eventual citizenship since these students are most affected by their inability to find a job (West, 2018). International students find it very difficult to attain access within such a complex migratory and political system even though this is key for professional and personal growth. Thus, there is a need for awareness regarding the different opportunities in the transition of international students from graduating to finding a job. Despite international students being considered a “talent”, not much attention has been given to the international students' experience in the job recruitment process in research and scholarship in the United States (Balin et al., 2016; Sharma, 2019). Although there are several studies about international graduate students' learning and cultural experiences in (and from) foreign countries like Australia (), Korea, and India, there are very few studies regarding Latin American international graduate students, especially about their trajectories once they graduate in the United States (Kim, 2016; Menzies et al., 2019). One of these trajectories that lack attention is the transition of international graduate students from Latin America when finishing their studies to finding a full-time job in the United States.

### **Background and Need**

There is a need to address the transition for international graduate students after graduating and finding a full-time job in the United States. In the past, researchers have claimed that “throughout International Postgraduate Students' degrees, it is important that they have access to good quality career programs that provide opportunities to network with the industry,

and career workshops and internships to give them the necessary experience in, and entrance into, the working world” (Menzies et al., 2019, p.195) since “looking for a job was one of the most stressful experiences for International Postgraduate Students” (Menzies et al., 2019, p.195). Besides, according to Sangganjanavanich et al. (2011), “for more than 20 years, international students continue facing the challenges of language barriers, immigration concerns, and cultural differences that result in their frustration and discomfort” (p.24). In addition, there is not enough research regarding international graduate students from Latin America. Therefore, this research aims to explore how international graduate students from Latin America can be supported and guided in their transition of graduating and finding a job and make it a less stressful experience for them. Likewise, on January 14, 2021, it was reported that “about 1.1 million international students were enrolled in U.S. institutions in the school year (SY) 2019-20” (Israel & Batalova, 2021). A big part of the economy in the United States is and has been supported by international students who, according to NAFSA, “contributed nearly \$39 billion to the U.S. economy and created or supported 416,000 jobs” (Israel, E., & Batalova, J., 2021). Yet, there has been a decrease in international students in the last few years. Some of the causes reported have been due to visa issues and the negative political climate for international students. Yet, there may be other reasons for this decrease and there might be even more reasons to research. Finally, and as it was previously mentioned, despite a lot of research regarding undergraduate international students, very little research has been reported regarding international graduate students, and even more, students coming from Latin America.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this thesis project is to conduct a qualitative study in order to understand the lived experiences of international graduate students from Latin America in the United States

as they transition from their studies to work. This study was conducted among seven Latin American international graduate students in the United States.

### **Research Questions**

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the motivations for international graduate students from Latin America to come and pursue a program in the United States?
- 2) What is the experience of international graduate students from Latin America while living in the United States?
- 3) What is the experience of those students in the transition from graduating to finding a job?
- 4) What role does the university play in the job search for international graduate students from Latin America?

These questions are phenomenological in nature and will be addressed in the methodological section of this research.

### **Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used as a theoretical framework for this thesis. CRT identifies, analyzes, and explains different social inequalities which include the existence of dominant and marginalized racial groups. This theory focuses on the role of race and privilege in (especially) American society. CRT also emerges as a tool to understand and address the discrepancy between race and social class in education (Hiraldo, 2010). This section includes a brief history of CRT which includes Solórzano & Yosso's (2002) original scholarship describing the importance of CRT as a form to create a Critical Race Methodology and part of an analytical education research process, the work of the Hiraldo (2010) that illustrates the role of CRT in

higher education, the ideas developed by Hernandez (1997) that articulate LatCrit as a theory derived from CRT, and Solórzano and Yosso's (2001) explanation on LatCrit in education as a framework and branch from CRT. This progression of thought is important because it describes the reasons for existing social inequalities between predominant and marginalized social groups. In this research, international students are seen as a marginalized group whose experiences can be understood through this theoretical framework.

Hiraldo (2010) describes that CRT exists because in the mid-1970s, two scholars, Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, expressed their discomfort about the slow pace of racial reform in the United States (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998 as cited by Hiraldo, 2010). CRT started from discontent in legal studies as these studies "failed to address the effects of race and racism in U.S. jurisprudence" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004 as cited by Hiraldo, 2010, p. 54). According to Hiraldo (2010), there are five principles from CRT to address the disparities and discrepancies in education, especially in higher education regarding race inclusion and equality. Those five principles are counter-storytelling; the permanence of racism; Whiteness as property; interest conversion; and the critique of liberalism (Ladson-Billings, 1998; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; McCoy, 2006 as cited by Hiraldo, 2010).

The counter-storytelling principle exposes and critiques the dominant ideology (such as being part of White supremacy and being male) that preserves racial stereotypes. This principle of counter-stories is developed by "personal, composite stories or narratives of people of color" (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002 as cited by Hiraldo, 2010, p. 54). These counter-stories can be used to analyze the environment of a college or university campus and foster opportunities for additional research for institutions to truly adopt an inclusive climate and not only a simple and superficial diversity.

The permanence of racism as the second principle is supported by counter-stories. The permanence of racism implies that “racism controls the political, social, and economic realms of U.S. society” (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 54). From CRT, racism is seen as an inherent part of the U.S. society where White people are privileged over individuals of color in most areas of life, such as education (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995 as cited by Hiraldo, 2010). It is critical for higher education to be intentional in addressing the impact of systematic racism in order to have an effective impact on diversity within society. In the same way, it is important to observe and analyze how intentional the institutional processes are at the possibilities of racism when they are working towards a more diverse and inclusive environment.

The third principle of CRT is Whiteness as a property which explains that due to “the embedded racism in American society, Whiteness can be considered a property interest” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004 as cited by Hiraldo, 2010, p. 55). This means that White individuals have the automatic right of possessions, dispositions, the use of amusement, and rejection of their own decisions. This is historically situated from or even before slavery times when Black people were considered a possession of White people. Now, in the educational system, especially in higher education, it is possible to see how race conditions specific roles within it. Research has proved that “the majority of African Americans who earn their Ph.D. in education earn them in education administration, therefore continuing as practitioners and rarely becoming faculty” (Ladson-Billings, 1998 cited by Hiraldo, 2010, p. 55). Therefore, White Americans keep staying in control of the core of higher education which is known as faculty. Since “professors are seen as owners of the curriculum” (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 55), they have the right of deciding what to and what not to teach in the courses.

The fourth principle in CRT is interest convergence. Once again, this principle “acknowledges White individuals as being the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation” (Ladson- Billings, 1998; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; McCoy, 2006 cited by Hiraldo, 2010 p. 56). Civil rights that were meant to benefit African Americans have been used by White people for centuries. Yet, things have not changed. Examples regarding interest convergence are affirmative action and the diversity strategies in higher education where White people are the main beneficiaries of that civil rights legislation. Higher education in the United States has been identified as overpriced, and yet many international students, who are mostly people of color, are not eligible for financial aid based on U.S. regulations. Therefore, for higher educational institutions in the United States. to seem diverse, many of the international students applying are students of color who can afford economically to pay for their education. Consequently, American colleges and universities’ capital is not only highly benefited but also the socio-cultural student bodies, as well as the institutions’ rankings, benefit at the cost of international students.

Ultimately, critique of liberalism is the fifth principle of CRT. This principle stands against “the ideas of colorblindness, the neutrality of the law, and equal opportunity for all” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, cited by Hiraldo, 2010, p. 56) since those actually foster ignoring racist policies that bring inequality. For instance, in education, there would be an absence of an inclusive academic curriculum or support for underrepresented groups.

As it has been explained, the foundational works that articulate CRT are originally from extended research and literature in sociology, history, law, women’s studies, and ethnic studies since the 1970s (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This theory is used to bring attention to and explain the role of race and racism in social contexts and education. It looks to eliminate racism as part

of “a larger goal of opposing or eliminating other forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25). In this way, CRT is used to observe, analyze, identify, and transform those dynamics of exclusion and subordination.

Another progression in CRT is represented by Hernandez (1997) who theorizes LatCrit as a theory born from CRT in order to “permit, facilitate, encourage, reinforce, re/invent, and re/construct travels in our myriad worlds” (Hernandez, 1997, p.920). This is related to the work of Solórzano & Yosso (2001, 2002) because both studies propose an analysis of the inequalities in society based on race. “A LatCrit theory in education is a framework that can be used to theorize and examine the ways in which *race and racism* explicitly and implicitly impact on the educational structures, processes, and discourses that affect People of Color generally and Latinas/os specifically” (Solórzano, D. & Yosso, T., 2001, p. 479). By using the experiences of Latinas/os, the LatCrit in education also analyzes the point where racism *intersects* with other forms of subordination (Solórzano, D. & Yosso, T., 2001). LatCrit helps to address the concerns and experiences of Latiné people as an underrepresented group in their society and in education. LatCrit theory is meant to foster accountability for culture. It is intended to embrace and live the culture. This theory is meant to deconstruct political norms that do not claim a fair and equal social system. This theory seeks to rebuild an inclusive policy model that can be practiced with the contribution of a “globalized, feminist, multi/cross-cultural vision of international human rights norms” (Hernández, 1997, p. 927). With this theory, the education, political, and legal discourses are meant to change. In summary, CRT proposes an opportunity to claim equality of rights for underrepresented groups.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The small sample of this study is a limitation making it impossible to generalize the experiences of this study's participants to other international graduate students in the United States. The period when this study was done is a particular condition since it occurs after the Trump administration in 2020 and the beginning of Biden's administration in 2021. This has been a very dynamic time and a big transition. Data collected from this time might vary significantly from what it might be in the near future.

### **Significance of the Study**

This thesis may be of interest to policymakers so they can create more equitable regulations for international students as they navigate from graduation to finding employment after obtaining their degree. Likewise, this research may interest international students as they learn that their experiences are not in isolation and that it is an actual matter that concerns a group of people. Also, this study may be of interest to universities, administrators, and staff from career services and international offices so that they can support international students in their employment search.

### **Definition of Terms**

In this study, international students are defined as individuals who are in the United States under a nonimmigrant and F-1 visa, which is determined by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services as:

A person who has been admitted to the United States as a full-time academic student at an accredited college, university, seminary, conservatory, academic high school, elementary school, or other academic institution, or in a language training program. The student must be enrolled in a program or course of study that culminates in a degree,

diploma, or certificate, and the school must be authorized by the U.S. government to accept international students.

Also, OPT is the acronym that stands for Optional Practical Training, an opportunity for international students to exercise their knowledge acquired during the academic program in the workforce related to their field study. The OPT is the right for international students to work off-campus in the United States. for 12 months after completing and graduating from their program. STEM Optional Practical Training (STEM OPT) stands for an additional 24 months' work permit off-campus. Besides, the term Curriculum Practical Training (CPT) is used in this study. The CPT refers to off-campus employment as a requirement and part of a program's curriculum that the students must accomplish. The CPT allows international students to have a job, or an unpaid or paid internship off-campus as soon as they are part of a class that requires a CPT<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the International Office's webpage from the University of San Francisco  
<https://myusf.usfca.edu/iss/students/f-1/employment/cpt>

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The literature review examines scholarship on different aspects of the need to address the transition for international graduate students after graduating to finding a full-time job in the United States. The body of scholarship examined includes three sets of literature that demonstrate that: Language, cultural, academic, and economic factors are general concerns for international students at the undergraduate and graduate level; there is a need for career development professionals to help international students in being aware what they want to do and the opportunities they have while pursuing a degree in their host country; and how motivations for international graduate students to find a job in the host country vary greatly. Critical Race Theory is used to frame this body of scholarship.

#### **General Concerns for International Undergraduate and Graduate Students**

Research demonstrates that there are several concerns for international undergraduate and graduate students in the United States. Despite this research being focused on international graduate students, this literature review also includes international undergraduate students since most previous studies have been centered on their experiences. This research consists of a study that states that economic and cultural challenges are some of the main concerns international students reported (Flournoy, 2018), a study that articulates that international students report more anxiety about socializing than African American and Latin American students as well as more stress for their academic achievements compared to White students (Kawamoto et al., 2018), and a study that claims institutions of higher education and national organizations should reflect on their biases regarding international students' matters, as well as international students should also reflect on their situations and speak out for their rights (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020). Related

to these challenges, Liang (2015) suggests that international students must identify the barriers they face in their experience and promptly look for help. Taken together, these studies support the claim that there is a need to address the international graduate students economic, cultural, and social concerns as well as their transition from graduating to looking for employment. In 2018, Flournoy addressed the barriers and the need to strengthen international students' employment opportunities in the United States. Some of these barriers include but are not limited to weak recruitment resources for international students in schools, restricted visas, strict tracking of students' regulation status, and high tuition. Economic challenges were among the most mentioned topics in the experiences of Flournoy's study participants as international students. Those limitations not only had an impact on the structure of the system but also in very personal ways on the international students. Asian and African students tend to face more of those challenges than European and North American international students. Flournoy (2018) concluded by investigating the challenges that four Ghanaian international students faced in American higher education. The findings of this study demonstrate that despite some variations in the interviews conducted, there was a similarity in the students' experiences. One similarity was stress in the acculturation experiences for those students, although not all of them felt a lack of adaptation. The author suggests further investigation on this matter. This is related to the work of Kawamoto et al. (2018), who articulates international students reported more anxiety about socializing than African American and Latin students.

Kawamoto et al. (2018) addressed the challenges in universities due to the rise of more international students in the United States. Kawamoto et al. (2018) claimed those challenges connect to international students' own personal challenges, such as "communication problems, financial pressures, limited social support, academic and career concerns, and racial

discrimination” (Lin & Yi, 1997; Mori, 2000; Olivas & Li, 2006, cited by Kawamoto et al. 2018, p. 187). The purpose of Kawamoto et al.’s (2018) study was to find out existing concerns among international students that were reported at university counseling centers. The study analyzed those concerns through two different groups, the inter-group, and the intra-group. The purpose of the inter-group (study 1) was to compare international students with American students. The intra-group (study 2) goal was to analyze the information gathered from only international students from different continents such as Asia, Africa, North America, South America, and Europe. The participants included two study groups from 47 university counseling centers in the United States.

The first study included 14,421 international, White American, African American, Asian American, and Latina/Latino American students who visited counseling centers. In the second study, international students (n = 607) were further divided according to continents of origin: Asia, Africa, North America, South America, and Europe (p.186). The findings of the first group in this study demonstrate that international students reported more anxiety about socializing than African American and Latin American students. Likewise, international students reported more stress about their academic achievements compared to White students. In the second group, Asian and African students reported more concerns than students from the other continents.

Kawamoto et al. (2018) recommend workshops, resources, and other activities that support international students' academic concerns and social anxiety. Another concern is that if an international student becomes a part-time student due to psychological reasons, this affects their immigration status since it is mandatory for international students to be full-time students to maintain their F-1 status. This is described in the work of Castiello-Gutiérrez and Li (2020).

They point out the anti-immigrant actions as an ongoing issue from the Federal Administration of the United States toward international students.

Castiello-Gutiérrez and Li (2020) addressed the potential modifications to the status of international students in the United States once it was declared that higher education would stay online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department of Homeland Security announced that international students had to leave the country if they intended to take online classes, limiting the arguments of international students for staying *ONLY* to the economic contributions and talent they usually bring. This is considered a nationalistic perspective. Castiello-Gutiérrez and Li (2020) studied the chaos and fear presented during that time among higher education institutions and international students in the United States. They point out that anti-immigrant actions from the Trump Administration were an ongoing issue that must not be ignored. This article suggests that institutions of higher education and national organizations should reflect on their biases regarding international students' matters, and international students should also reflect on their situations and speak out for their rights. Somehow, international students have tolerated and allowed the perception of their presence in the United States as a "business transaction matter" for the country (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020).

In addition to the challenges identified by Flournoy (2018), Kawamoto et al. (2018), and Castiello-Gutiérrez and Li (2020), Liang (2015) pointed out the fast growth of international students pursuing graduate education in the United States and addressed the challenges international students in graduate education face with language, culture, and employment barriers, and the opportunities international students go through in the American context. The study concluded that international students need to identify the obstacles they face in their experience and promptly look for help. The employment opportunities for international students

vary from field to field. Liang (2015) concludes that the purpose of graduate education should not be only completing a degree but also succeeding in the global work market.

In summary, research demonstrates that there are many concerns for international undergraduate and graduate students. Taken together, this body of research justifies there is a need to address the transition for international graduate students after graduating and finding a full-time job in the United States. Related to this is a body of scholarship that demonstrates there is a need for awareness regarding the different opportunities in the transition for international students from graduating to finding a job.

### **Awareness of Opportunities as a Need in the Transition**

Research demonstrates a need for awareness regarding the different opportunities in the transition of international students from graduating to finding a job. This research describes the factors for the existing research gaps in international students in graduate education (Sharma, 2019). It also articulates the need for helping international students to identify and be aware of their opportunities by learning to make decisions on their career future (Balin et al., 2016). Lastly, it claims that more than half of international students in the United States have not used career service advising on campus (West, 2018). These studies and scholarly articles are essential because, taken together, they expose the need for awareness and greater support regarding the different challenges and opportunities international students experience in the transition from graduating to finding a job.

In 2019, Sharma addressed the lack of attention on international graduate students in research and scholarship in the United States. He points out the incoherent relation between the consideration of international students as “top talent” and the lack of support and attention for them. Sharma (2019) claims there are no (or very few) curricular structures to support

international students in United States graduate education (p.ii). International students worsen this problem by believing in the “top talent” (Sharmna, 2019, p.ii) myth and acting (many times) as if they do not need any support. Sharma (2019) explored the issues that need research as the discourse of international students expands and as scholars address this gap between international students and graduate education. The scholarly reflection focused on a half-million international students in U.S. graduate school. Sharma (2019) implies that to improve the attention international graduate students deserve, scholars of international students should acknowledge them as political beings. Sharma (2019) also advocates for changing and strengthening relationships between the host country and the home country of international students. The scholarly reflection also calls for accountability for academic, pedagogic, and curriculum support; accounting for the mobility of students; and fostering agency among international students for the support they need from the educational institutions. This is related to the work of Balin et al. (2016) who articulate the need for helping international students to identify and know their opportunities so that they can make more precise decisions on their career future.

Balin et al. (2016) addressed the lack of attention on the international students' experience in the job recruitment process. They also addressed the concerns of international students, including finding a job, deciding whether to stay in the United States, developing job research skills, dealing with immigration regulations, and questioning the investment in education which is often measured in the United States by finding a job after graduation (p.1054). They report the best practices for supporting international students in their career development and opportunities in the United States. This study included the International Student Services Committee of the National Career Development Association, international

students, career development professionals, and employers. The results of this study demonstrate that at least one-third of the students and two-thirds of the career development body who participated in the survey lack information regarding the OPT and CPT known as work authorizations. Likewise, more than half of the employers who participated in the survey reported that not learning the work authorization process has been what has stopped them from recruiting international students. Yet, less than one of five employers from the survey showed interest in learning more about work authorization for international students. Career services reported concerns regarding cultural differences positively and negatively affecting the hiring process. One of the main concerns in the hiring process for international students reported from the career services is language proficiency (35.4%) and cultural adjustment (39.3%) (p. 1055). Another concern from career services is “the challenges in helping students manage expectations from their families and a need for culturally sensitive career assessment tools appropriate for international students” (Balin et al., 2016, p.1055). Unlike career services, cultural differences are not one of the main concerns for employers; instead, it is the work authorization process. Employers considered the presence of international students as an opportunity for diversity in the workforce and their commitment to inclusion. Yet, employers considered that some of the areas where cultural differences mattered were international students' interview styles and communication skills. By contrast, most international students did not consider their language proficiency and cultural differences as barriers in their job search. The study reports that more than half of career service centers offer special programs for international students, and a quarter of the career centers from the service are dedicated to working with international students. Many international students are unaware of what services the career center offers them. Balin et al. (2016) suggest helping international students identify what employers look at in their hiring

process. This includes choosing a field that allows a more extended working authorization, learning about the extracurricular activities that benefit their network, developing their network in and outside the United States, and staying informed about the work authorization regulations and the paperwork deadlines. Higher educational institutions and career services should expand the services and resources they provide to international students and career services specialists and employers. There is a need for additional professional development for career services professionals on the work authorization process and deadlines to help international students in their career plans. Employers should be encouraged to learn more about the work authorization process to clarify complications of the application process (p.158).

West (2018) also addressed international students' job issues, specifically the political climate in the United States, and urged a door for eventual citizenship as well as emphasized the importance of the role of the career services department in supporting international students in finding a job. West (2018) cites Cheryl Matherly, vice provost for international affairs at Lehigh University, about her experience listening to family members in India expressing their concerns about opportunities and abilities for their children to find a job once they obtain their degrees in the United States. West (2018) analyzed what career services have done at Lehigh University. This scholarly article included international students from the university. The findings of this study demonstrate that career service professionals and international education services recently recognized the need to help international students transition after graduation to the workforce. Based on the National Career Development Association (NCDA) survey done in 2015, more than half of international students have not used the career service advising on campus. Also, close to half the population of international students (43%) are not aware of what the career service department is for (based on the World Education Services -WES- survey in 2017).

In summary, research demonstrates that there is a need for awareness regarding the different opportunities for international students in their transition from graduating to finding a job. Taken together, this body of research justifies the need for more outstanding career service support as international students transition from graduating to finding a job. Related to this are international graduate students' motivations for a full-time job in the United States.

### **International Graduate Students' Experiences Looking for a Full-Time Job in the United States**

Several studies have examined international graduate students' experiences looking for a full-time job in their host country. These studies illustrate the experiences of international postgraduate students in finding a full-time job in Australia as their host country (Menzies et al., 2019) and articulate different factors that influence the choices of international graduate students in the United States to start their professional careers once they finish their studies (Musumba et al., 2011). In addition, they analyze the diverse interaction between global education, transnational job opportunities, and the social inclusion and exclusion in Korea which affects the possibilities of Korean professionals who came to the United States for graduate education (Kim, 2016). This is important because, taken together, these studies give a better understanding of international graduate students' experiences looking for a full-time job in their host country, including the United States.

In 2019, Menzies et al. addressed the lack of studies about international postgraduate students'(ISPs) university-to-work transition (UTWT). "IPSs face significant difficulties securing a full-time job in their host country" (p.186). Menzies et al. (2019) studied literature regarding a three-stage transition from university to work. These stages include prior to finishing the degree, looking for a job, and working in a job. The authors wanted to understand what facilitated and

inhibited the UTWT. Conducted in Australia, this study included eight international students graduating from a postgraduate program in the same university who found a job. The findings of this study demonstrate that transition for IPSs can vary depending on many factors. The first two stages (finishing the degree and finding a job) are the most challenging and stressful for IPSs. Additionally, to the stages of the transition from graduating to work, this study talks about informal and traditional formal means as part of that transition. Informal means such as an internship offered by the school do likely have less impact in securing a job. “Traditional formal means such as a recruitment advertisement on websites was perceived as having a neutral effect rather than being a facilitator of their UTWT” (p.194).

Musumba et al. (2011) addressed that little research has focused on international graduate students that have come to developed countries to pursue higher education and have not returned to their home countries. Musumba et al. (2011) studied different factors that influence the choices of international graduate students in the United States to start their professional careers once they finish their studies - either by staying in the United States, in their home country or unsure of their plans after graduating. This study included data from a survey in 2006 of international graduate students enrolled at Texas A&M University (TAMU), College Station, Texas (Musumba et al., 2011, p. 503). The results of this study demonstrate that students usually make decisions and act based on their preferences. Due to the study’s results on factors influencing career, Musumba et al. (2011) conclude there should be policies designed *ex-ante*, based on forecasts, that encourage graduate students to return to their home countries. The implications of the policies depend on a person's perspective (Musumba et al., 2011). Policies for the students that are not sure of their preferences seem to be more effective. This study suggests that American universities may be contributing to brain drain, “the migration of skilled human

capital, which includes educated and trained persons who migrate from developing countries to join the workforce of developed countries and students who attend universities in developed countries but do not return home,” (Rao, 1979 cited by Musumba et al., 2011, p. 2) in different ways. Another finding is that technology and science-oriented programs, funding for their careers, and the more years students take to complete their careers are factors that contribute to international graduate students starting a professional career in the United States. Also, Musumba et al. (2011) suggested that creating certain programs that help students assimilate to the U.S. lifestyle contributes to brain drain. However, the study claims that “there are unintended consequences of providing the academic services at American universities” (Musumba et al., 2011, p.515). Besides, career opportunities and socioeconomic climate are key factors for the students’ preferences in deciding where they want to start their professional careers. This is also related to the work of Kim (2016) who researched the different factors that affect international graduate students when looking for a full-time job.

Kim (2016) addressed the lack of research about the different factors and the transition of international graduate students when looking for a full-time job. Kim (2016) studied the transition international graduate students from Korea went through to obtain their jobs. This study included Korean professionals that once were international graduate students and received a degree in U.S. universities. Those professionals had already found a job either in the United States or Korea, their home country. The findings of this study demonstrate that various obstacles and opportunities are out there in the transition of international graduate students when they graduate and start looking for a job. Korean students getting a degree in the United States triggers two main consequences: It solidifies their elite (social status) status in Korea and qualifies them to be part of the global job market. Korean multinational companies need U.S.

degree holders because they have the national and international knowledge (global cultural capital) that takes Korean companies to the global business market. U.S. companies need Asian professionals with an American education to fulfill the technical positions that cannot be filled only with American workers. Kim (2016) concludes that if it is true that there is a diverse dynamic between global education, transnational job opportunities, and the social inclusion and exclusion in Korea. Yet, it is by a hierarchy that that dynamic is affected for Korean professionals to find a job (Kim, 2016).

In summary, research demonstrates that international graduate students' experiences looking for a full-time job in their host country should be a matter of further investigation. Taken together, this body of research justifies there is a need to expand scholarship about international graduate students' experiences in finding a full-time job in their host country.

### **Summary**

The literature review examines scholarship on different aspects of the need to address the transition for international graduate students after graduating and finding a full-time job in the United States. The body of scholarship examined that justifies this claim includes three sets of literature that demonstrate that: (a) language, cultural, academic, and economic factors are general concerns for international students at the undergraduate and graduate level, (b) there is a need from career development professionals to help international students in being aware what they want to do and the opportunities they have while pursuing a degree in their host country, and (c) motivation for international graduate students to find a job in the host country varies greatly. The following chapter will describe the methodology of this research regarding the experiences of Latin American international graduate students in the U.S.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

International graduate students face several concerns when pursuing a degree in the United States. Several barriers and needs to strengthen international students' opportunities in the United States. have been identified through different studies (Flournoy, 2018). Some of those challenges are related but not limited to language, culture, and employment barriers (Liang, 2015). And while challenges in universities arise in this country, the number of international students does too (Kawamoto et al., 2018). In the same way, immigration complexities are constantly developing, such as the modifications to the status of international students in the United States once it was declared that higher education would stay online due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020). Besides, there is a lack of awareness as well as research regarding the different opportunities and graduate students' experiences in the transition of international students from graduating to finding a job in their host country. Little attention has been given to international graduate students in research and scholarship in the United States (Sharma, 2019), including their experience in the job recruitment process (Balin et al., 2016).

#### **Methodology Summary and Rationale**

Through a qualitative phenomenological study, this research provides an understanding of the lived experiences of international graduate students in the United States. from Latin America as they transition from their studies to work. According to Creswell (2006), this methodology describes a group of individuals' perceptions of a phenomenon based on their lived experiences. Basically, in a phenomenological study, the narrative of an individual experience is reduced "with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (Creswell, 2006, p. 58).

This study extended research about international students in the United States, looking at a particular group and a particular topic that has been minimally explored. This qualitative phenomenological study focused on understanding the transition of seven Latin American international graduate students after graduating to finding a full-time job in the United States.

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to identify and then describe the common pattern of the experiences of a group of individuals. The description of those experiences was given by the narratives of those students in interviews. Because there is not much previous research, this study provides an opportunity to hear and register what the international Latin American students need to say about their experiences, concerns, and needs as told by the same students.

### **Research Setting and Participants**

#### **Setting**

The research was conducted by interviewing seven international Latin American graduate students from a private, racially diverse university in one of the most progressive and liberal cities with one of the most solid economies on the West Coast in the United States. Interviews were conducted virtually since people worldwide have been recovering from the pandemic of COVID-19. To collect and describe the data, interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then compared to each other to find similarities and differences among these students' responses.

#### **Participants: Recruitment Plan**

The recruitment plan for this study was to approach a small number of international Latin American graduate students in the United States. First, there was a written list of international Latin graduate students that the researcher of this study knew. Then, there was an approach and an inquiry to those students about participating in the study. Likewise, an email was sent to the International Students Department of three different universities in the same city. In the email,

the researcher kindly asked them to spread the word about this research project among the international graduate students from Latin America they had in their database. A copy of the invitation email is provided in Appendix A. The intention of this recruitment strategy was for participants to be completely volunteers and eager to contribute transparently to this research. Out of the three universities, only one successfully replied and shared the information of this study. Three participants were acquaintances of the researcher, and four participants reached out to the researcher after receiving the invitation email promoting the research project. All the participants were from the same university.

### **Policy Context**

International students are individuals that come to pursue an education in the United States. They are under a non-immigrant visa called F-1 visa, which allows them to pursue a degree in the United States and live in the country while completing their program. Their right to work is limited. Based on the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services webpage (2022):

F-1 students may not work off-campus during the first academic year but may accept on-campus employment subject to certain conditions and restrictions. After the first academic year, F-1 students may engage in three types of off-campus employment: Curricular Practical Training (CPT), Optional Practical Training (OPT) (pre-completion or post-completion), and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Optional Practical Training Extension (OPT). (“Students and Employment-Employment”, 2020)

Likewise, international students are conditioned to leave the country once they complete their studies. Suppose the students want to put into practice the knowledge acquired in their program and extend their stay in the country after graduating. In that case, they have the

opportunity of doing an Optional Practical Training (OPT) which, as it was mentioned above, allows them to gain a one-year work experience in their field after graduating. However, once the OPT is over, the student will need to leave the country unless the company for which they are working decides to sponsor the student as an employee. The options to do so are limited as well as hard to accomplish. Based on the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) webpage, there are 85,000 H-1B visas available each fiscal year. Of those 85,000 vacant, 20,000 are for applicants with U.S. advanced degrees (master's or doctoral degrees), and 65,000 for all other degrees. Usually, the companies willing to sponsor their employees must enter a lottery to be allowed to sponsor.

### **Participant Description**

The participants in this study were seven international Latin graduate students. The range of age of these students was between mid-twenties, early, and late thirties. The interviewers were identified as women, men, and non-binary from five Latin American countries (Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Nicaragua, and Mexico). For consistency in the paper, through chapter 4, the pronoun “*she*” will be used for the student whose preferred pronouns are *she/they*. The students’ first language was Spanish and Portuguese. All of them were proficient in English, and some spoke a third language. These students were currently under an F-1 visa in the middle or end of their academic program. The interviewers were from different academic programs such as Immigration Studies master’s, Energy Systems Management, Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Human Rights Education, Doctorate in Catholic Educational Leadership, Master of Law (LLM), and Ed.D. in multicultural education. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants and Table 1 describes the participants’ demographics.

### **Table 1**

*Participant Pseudonym, Country of Origin, Gender/Preferred Pronouns, and Academic Program*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Gender (Preferred Pronouns)</b>	<b>Academic Program</b>
Carolina	Peru	She/her	Immigration Studies master's
Pablo	Brazil	*2	Energy Systems Management
Eduardo	Colombia	He/him/his	Human Rights Education master's
Tania	Nicaragua	She/her/hers	Master of Law (LLM)
Luisa	Mexico	She/her	Entrepreneurship and Innovation
Mariana	Mexico	She/her	Doctorate in Catholic Educational Leadership
Mónica	Mexico	She/They	Ed.D in multicultural education

### **Data Collection**

This research was conducted using a phenomenological qualitative method. Formal virtual one-on-one interviews were conducted in this study to collect the experiences these students have gone through as international Latin students in the United States. The length of the interviews was approximately sixty minutes. In the beginning, a Google form was filled out by participants. This included demographic information such as name, preferred pronouns, and

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<sup>2</sup> Preferred pronouns were an optional field to fill out. Pablo didn't fill this field.

program pursuing, among other details. This was a pre-screening to have a structured interview and learn more about the interviewees ahead of time. Questions for the interview were organized from general to specific regarding the difficulty in finding employment for international Latin graduate students. The researcher divided the question into three main sections. The first and second sets of questions were meant as opening questions to help the interviewer make chronological sense of the participants' habits. While the first section was focused on experiences in their home country, then their experiences in graduate school, and finally, their experiences trying to find employment. The second part of the interview was based on what their experiences have been as international graduate students from Latin America in the United States. Ultimately, the third set of interview questions was focused on learning about what plans these students had for finding a job after graduating. The researcher then asked what steps they had taken to achieve those plans. The interviews were recorded through the Zoom platform with the purpose of transcribing the interviews after the fact. This would allow the researcher to identify and describe the phenomena. The purpose of transcribing the interviews as the tool for this study was to collect from the international Latin students' experiences and give them a voice to speak about their thoughts and feelings based on their experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

The plan for data analysis included transcribing, coding, and organizing the recorded interviews individually to review and analyze the experiences of each student. Each transcript had its own private Word document where, by using the comments tool, general themes (also mentioned as categories) were identified and attributed to what the interviewees had shared. To keep any relevant details for the analysis, an analytic memo document was created where observations from the interviews and the transcripts were combined. Additionally, the general

themes found in each transcript were put together in the analytic memo document. In this way, it was possible to identify which themes were repeated or common among the participants. The researcher read the interviews several times and bracketed the participants' experiences to reduce subjectivity, established the validity of the findings, and maintained the purpose of this study using the phenomenological method. After reviewing each interview and experience, common themes were identified to understand the phenomena from this phenomenological study. Thus, in a second analytic memo, the general themes were grouped by four research questions of the study. The research questions were vital in this analytical process to make sense of the themes found. Relevant quotes from the interviews that would support the phenomena found and answer the research questions were added to each section. From this second analytic memo, the researcher started writing Chapter 4.

### **Plan for the Protection of Human Subjects**

Finally, the plan for the protection of human subjects was based on the Institutional Review Board application (Protocol #1438) which has guided and given permission to the researcher to proceed with the study. To protect the human subjects, an informed consent was given to participants to be signed and approved for this study. The study subjects were informed that their participation involved being interviewed through zoom and that the interview would be recorded. The record was password protected on the laptop of the researcher. Participants of the study were informed that the interview recording would be deleted once the research was completed. To protect the human subjects, the names of the participants were changed, and instead, pseudonyms were used; the university and city where the study is conducted are also protected and will be found throughout the paper as [university] and [the city]. The benefits of being part of this study were also discussed. It was mentioned that their experiences would be

shared and connected to underrepresented groups such as thousands more international students in the United States. Potential risks of the study were also discussed, such as the potential loss of information, as in any research can happen.

### **Researcher Background**

The researcher from this study is an international graduate student from Latin America who has observed, in her experiences as an international student for the last six years, a lack of attention to the opportunities for international students after graduating in the United States. After obtaining a bachelor's degree in Languages in her home country, working for two years over there, and realizing that her professional dreams might be stuck due to the sociopolitical context of her country, this student came to the United States and pursued an associate degree in Business at City College. Afterward, she worked for a year under the Optional Practical Training (OPT). The expectation for this student was to be able to have a full-time job, given that she already held a bachelor's degree from her home country and an associate degree (as it was already mentioned above).

While the student realized the range of advantages studying in America has for professional development, she also realized a lack of guidance and support after obtaining that education. During the OPT, this student applied to several job positions using independent platforms such as LinkedIn, Indeed, and Glassdoor, as well as she joined extensive network events to increase her opportunities to find a job; however, the only job opportunities this student found were part-time and short-term positions. Something interesting the researcher found in her experience of finding a job is that for every application to submit, the last two questions to ask were: 1) Are you eligible to work in the United States? and 2) Will you need in the future a sponsorship visa? After always answering "yes" to both of those questions and not being

successful and obtaining a job, the researcher started to change the answer for her second question to a “no”. Surprisingly, the options to find a job increased, and she finally found a part-time job in a renowned company in [the city]. This experience made her realize that her limitations in finding a job were most likely due to her immigration status, her ethnicity, and the professional field where she is at. Despite her level of education and considering she identifies as a woman and a Latina, key features that claim diversity and inclusion nowadays and in [the city] where she has pursued this education in the United States, barriers were always present for her to achieve a full-time job position.

When her OPT year was about to expire, she was given an opportunity to go back to school and pursue a master’s degree. With the privilege of gaining a higher-level degree, this student expected to increase her professional chances in life as a way of liberation and claiming equity and equality. In her experience as an international graduate student, the researcher found the need to be more informed about the transition to graduating to find a job. As part of her findings in this process, the research found that the International Students office offered informative workshops twice a semester with a specialized immigration lawyer about H-1B visas for the students to learn how the system works, their rights, and what their limitations are. Likewise, she learned about the Career Service department services such as Handshake, a career job fair, and orientation meetings on how to find a job. Those services have been helpful; however, she considers that even though they provide great information, there is a need for more specialized services for international graduate students, especially, when those students seek to continue their career path in a long term in the United States. After being an international student for six years and pursuing two degrees in the United States, it seems there is no clear guidance for those students on what comes next after obtaining a diploma. Besides, she has experienced

the paradox that while gaining a prestigious education, her work experience is stuck due to the federal regulations for international students which only allows them to work on-campus and not more than 20 hours a week. The researcher perceives that there is no awareness regarding what the plans of those international students are once they graduate.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter is organized into four major sections based on the research questions of this study: 1) What are the motivations for international graduate students from Latin America to come and pursue a program in the United States? 2) What is the experience of international graduate students from Latin America while living in the United States? 3) What is the experience of those students in the transition from graduating to finding a job, and 4) What role does the university play in the job search for international graduate students from Latin America? Each of these sections includes the findings identified in the coding process extracted from the interviews, which constituted the responses to the research questions.

#### **What Are the Motivations for International Students from Latin America to Come and Pursue a Program in the United States?**

For the first research question, the researcher found that the abundance of professional opportunities, economic growth, and safety that the United States offers were the main reasons for the interviewed graduate international students to come from Latin America to pursue a degree in the United States. At the same time, most of the participants mentioned how their countries did not offer what they were looking for in terms of professional development, economic growth, and safety.

#### **Professional Opportunities and Economic Growth**

Regardless of having established a professional life in their home countries, the seven participants were clear that the opportunity of pursuing a graduate degree in the United States offered a higher quality of education and opened many more professional and economic doors

than obtaining a degree in their home country. As Eduardo expressed, “para nadie es un secreto que aquí en Estados Unidos hay muy buenos profesores los contenidos académicos y los recursos que son mucho mejores que en cualquier parte del mundo” [“It is no secret to anyone that here in the United States there are very good professors, academic content, and resources that are much better than anywhere in the world’]. The other interviewees shared the same thoughts about a U.S. education being well recognized worldwide.

In addition, Luisa saw that in the United States more professional opportunities. She noticed it was possible to find a wide variety of programs, while in Mexico, her home country, the range of options for similar programs was limited. According to Luisa, having a wide range of programs increased her access to more knowledge and specialization in specific professional fields that also granted more opportunities in the workforce. She maintained:

En Estados Unidos hay mucha variedad y te puedes especializar en cosas muy específicas que te pueden servir mucho también para crecer laboralmente y no solo en conocimiento...hay más variedad de posgrados. En México, todavía están muy limitados a cosas muy comunes. [“In the United States there is a lot of variety, and you can specialize in very specific things that can also help you a lot to grow professionally and not only in knowledge...there is a greater variety of postgraduate courses. In Mexico, they are still very limited to very common things”].

While not all of them explicitly stated this, there was the hope that after obtaining an education in the United States, there would be a solid economy that they considered to be important to the quality of life. One of the participants of this study, Pablo, indicated that his main goal to come and pursue a program in [the city] was for economic growth. Pablo affirmed:

I confess that I came to [the city] because of the salaries here and income and the opportunities, especially because [the city] is a tech hub here in the [Region] and very close to [Area with Many Tech Companies] so, with all the technologies like startups, I would say that I'm, I was pretty accurate that there were more employment opportunities here than in Italy or in the UK.

In summary, for the participants of this study having an education in the United States promised much more quality and resources than any other education in their home country or from any other part of the world (including European education). For them, American education was very renowned and prestigious; plus, it opened the doors to more professional opportunities and economic growth.

### **Safety, Violence, and Social Crises**

Despite having a stable economic life back in their home country, some of the graduate international students interviewed came from countries with complex socio-political and safety issues. These students felt the need to explore opportunities abroad to continue their professional careers. Nevertheless, the participants' perceptions of the socio-political situation in their homelands differed. For example, Tania's turning point came when she felt she had no opportunities to evolve professionally due to her country's sociopolitical crisis. She explained:

En mi país ocurrió una crisis sociopolítica que me incentivó a buscar nuevos horizontes fuera de mi país para desarrollarme profesional y académicamente en un ambiente saludable entonces sí tenía trabajo pero la situación social y política en el país me puso mucho obstáculo para querer quedarme ahí toda mi vida. [A sociopolitical crisis occurred in my country that encouraged me to look for new horizons outside my country to develop professionally and academically in a healthy environment, so I did have a job,

but the social and political situation in the country put a lot of obstacles in my way of wanting to stay there all the time].

For many of the participants in this study, having a stable job was not enough to want to stay in their home countries. It was also the social context in their countries limiting their freedom and opportunities for growth that made them seek abroad what they could not find at home.

Another participant, Mónica, considered the socio-political situation a matter of safety. Mónica confessed how, before leaving, the violence in her country and the kidnapping of two of her relatives caused emotional uncertainty. She said:

En la parte emotiva había mucho mucha incertidumbre con los temas de seguridad en México con narcotráfico como justo antes de venir un par de de familiares fueron secuestrados emm, pues un poco esto. O sea, una situación política-social difícil violenta y cambiante. [In the emotional part, there was a lot of uncertainty with security issues in Mexico with drug trafficking, as just before coming a couple of relatives were kidnapped, well, a little like this. In other words, a difficult political, social, violent, and changing situation].

Like Mónica, many of the participants repeatedly mentioned safety as an issue they had to deal with in their home country. Some participants experienced violence in the streets, potential kidnapping by narcotraffickers, and/or the frustration of finding a safe place for their gender identity. For example, Luisa, who felt relatively safe in the United States, did not feel safe going out and exercising on the streets in Mexico. In her own words she confessed:

Es más fácil tener acceso a lo mejor sí a hacer ejercicio o a áreas abiertas o espacios públicos. En México pues hay mucha inseguridad, entonces pues no hubiera nadie,

ninguna mujer va a salir a correr en la mañana o en la noche. Entonces aquí eso pues no existe y te da muchas posibilidades en cuanto a moverte libremente. O por ejemplo ir a cosas de espacios de naturaleza, igual, en México es muy peligroso o está lejos.

[Probably, it is easier to have access to exercise or to open areas or public spaces. In Mexico, there is a lot of insecurity, so there would be no one, no woman would go running in the morning or at night. So, here that does not exist, and it gives you many possibilities in terms of moving freely. Or for example, going to things in nature spaces, anyway, in Mexico it is very dangerous, or it is far].

Another safety issue for the participants was related to revealing their gender identity.

That was the case of Mónica, who identifies as *she/they*<sup>3</sup>. She stated that she came to the United States since LGTB topics in Latin America were often not addressed or accepted. In her interview, Mónica said that:

Yo soy no-binaria, uso pronombres *ella/elle* y pues también... esa parte LGBT en Latinoamérica especialmente, pues ya llevo un rato ya llevo casi 7 años o sea hace 7 años en Latinoamérica, tal vez esa parte de lo trans de lo nobinario no era muy hablado, muy conocido. Entonces también eso fue una gran parte de la razón por la que vine acá. [I am non-binary, I use pronouns *she/they* and well,...that LGBT part in Latin America, especially since I have been here for a while now, I have been almost 7 years, that is, 7 years ago in Latin America, perhaps that part of the trans of the nonbinary was not very spoken, well known. So, that was also a big part of why I came here.]

To conclude, many of the participants in this study considered migrating for safety concerns. In summary, these Latin international students viewed the United States as providing

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<sup>3</sup> For consistency in this paper, *she* will be the pronoun used when referring to Mónica.

an opportunity for economic and professional growth as well as offering a safer social space than in their home countries.

### **What is the Experience of International Graduate Students from Latin America While Living in the United States?**

The findings show that many of the students interviewed felt they were treated differently in the U.S. For many of the participants, their identity as Latiné became more strongly rooted as well as other aspects that shaped their identities, such as gender and passions. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic made being an international student more difficult emotionally and socially. Likewise, while all obtained a higher education level, some of the participants found it benefitted their professional life while others found obtaining a graduate degree to be a struggle for their professional development and economic life as a student.

On the other hand, most of the participants mentioned and recognized they were privileged from their professional achievements and having access to education abroad. They shared how their professional achievements made up their biggest reason to be proud. For some of them, it was the on-campus job they currently had; for others, it was their academic success, taking classes in English, which is not their native language, and obtaining outstanding grades. For a couple of them, finding an off-campus job was their greatest achievement.

### **International Students Are Treated Differently**

Many of the participants mentioned that they noticed they were somehow treated differently. For some of them, being treated differently was just an observation. For others, this differential treatment was harmful because they felt their opportunities were limited by systemic regulations that did not give international students the same rights as domestic students. Mónica commented:

No esperaba que fuéramos tratados como otra categoría de estudiante. Se esperaba que íbamos a ser estudiantes todos juntos, los locales, los internacionales y un poco dar cuenta que no y que hay muchas trabas institucionales como nacionales o federales pues que realmente afectan lo que podemos ser y hacer como estudiantes internacionales creo que es una gran sorpresa. [I did not expect that we would be treated as another category of students. It was expected that we were all going to be students together, the locals, the internationals, and a little I realized that we were not; and that there are many institutional obstacles such as national or federal that really affect what we can be and do as international students I think it is a big surprise.]

Some of those differences led to fewer options for international students to access to scholarships or economic support. As noted previously, they were only allowed to work on-campus and for a maximum of 20 hours a week; and, they had specific restrictions to reduce their course load. In addition, there was significant paperwork required to request reduce course loads and other requests. Mónica also added:

Tuve una muerte en la familia y en un momento dije, “ok, tal vez no puedo llevar la carga académica que tengo”. Y al final del día era más trabajo navegar la parte de llevar menos materias porque mi estatus me obliga a llevar una carga completa. Lo del trabajo es una una cosa enorme. No podemos trabajar más de 20 horas, el tipo de trabajos que podemos acceder tanto en campus como fuera. Y lo de las becas... O sea mucho de cómo se maneja el sistema de acceso económico a la educación superior en Estados Unidos es un desastre y como todo depende de préstamos y a qué préstamos puedes acceder a cuales no. Las becas...que si son federales que sí son para nacionales... O sea creo que había mucha falta de oportunidades y como trabas de acceso en ese aspecto. [Someone in my

family passed away and at one point I thought, “ok, maybe I can't handle the academic load that I have”. And at the end of the day, it was more work to navigate the part of carrying fewer subjects because my status requires me to carry a full load. Access to work is a huge thing. We can't work more than 20 hours, the kind of jobs we can get both on-campus and off-campus is also a thing. And what about scholarships... In other words, how the system of economic access to higher education is managed in the United States is a disaster since everything depends on loans and the kind of loans you can access and which ones you can't. The scholarships... that if they are federal, they are for nationals... I mean, I think there was a lot of lack of opportunities and access barriers in that aspect.]

To sum up, being treated differently was an observation these international students noticed while the academic support they were looking for was not fulfilled as they need it; likewise, some of them felt they were segregated from other students; and they realized their opportunities to work were limited.

### **Identity Dynamics**

The seven participants of this study shared how their identity was affected. The students interviewed observed shifts and changes from being international students from Latin America. The identity dynamics mentioned in the interview by the participants were about their Latiné identity in the United States, their privileges, their gender identity, and their personal interests. Most of the graduate international students interviewed highlighted the importance of continuing to stay connected to their Latin culture while living in the United States. In general, for most of them, through graduate program abroad, they first noticed being seen differently which led to them realize their identity as Latiné. Eduardo shared:

Yo antes para ser sincero no me preguntaba quién era o a qué grupo yo pertenecía. Por primera vez en mi vida, llegué aquí a los Estados Unidos y me di cuenta que yo tenía un color. Tal vez en Colombia pues como la mayoría el 60% de la población es mestiza y yo estoy dentro de ese grupo mayoritario pues yo nunca me pregunté si era blanco o negro, indígena, hispano, o asiático sino simplemente pues yo era parte. [Before, to be honest, I didn't ask myself who I was or what group I belonged to. For the first time in my life, I arrived here in the United States, and I realized that I had a color, that I was a person of color. Perhaps in Colombia, since the majority, 60% of the population is mestizo and I am within that majority group, I never asked myself if I was white or black, indigenous, Hispanic, or Asian, but simply because I was part of.]

The participants also pointed out they noticed that in the United States, they were not identified by their own home country; rather they were perceived within a wide category as Latiné. Most of the students who mentioned this experience clarified they did not feel discriminated against but simply that they noticed and felt they were seen differently in the United States. However, some of the participants indeed did experience some sort of discrimination based on their skin color, especially upon their arrival in the United States. For instance, Tania described her immigration experience upon coming to the States in this way:

El primer día cuando viajé de Nicaragua a los Estados Unidos me retuvieron en migración, ajá simplemente supongo por no ser una persona blanca y mirarme totalmente Latina. Yo tenía absolutamente todos mis papeles en mano, todos mis papeles en regla que todo indicaba que venía a hacer una maestría en las fechas correctas y siempre tuve las mismas preguntas. O sea, ¿cómo que sos una abogada?, ¿cómo pagaste para venir acá? El realmente tener prueba de que de que vos pagaste para estar acá o estar nadie te

está esperando... entonces si sentís ese prejuicio desde el primer momento. Estuve una hora en retención migratoria. No entiendo por qué. Para mí no tiene mucho sentido. Todas las demás personas blancas pasan sin nada. Es simplemente el hecho de ser una persona de color latinoamericana hispanohablante lo que crea más dudas, es más sospechoso. [The first day when I traveled from Nicaragua, the United States detained me in immigration, aha, I simply suppose because I am not a white person and totally looking Latina. I had absolutely all my papers in hand, all my papers in order that everything indicated that I was coming to do a master's degree, on the correct dates, and I always had the same questions. I mean, how come you're a lawyer? How did you pay to come here? The fact of really having proof that you paid to be here or that nobody is waiting for you... So, you feel that prejudice from the first moment. I spent an hour in immigration detention. I do not understand why. It doesn't make much sense to me. All the other white people get by with nothing. It is simply the fact of being a Spanish-speaking Latin American person of color that creates more doubts and is more suspicious.]

Like Tania, three other students from this study shared similar experiences when entering the United States as international students from Latin America. One of the situations that made them feel very uncomfortable was how the immigration agents at the airport questioned their reasons to come to the country as international students by asking extra and several questions about the *why* they were coming to the United States or going to another different line apart from the rest of the people entering the country because of their nationality, Latin origins or carrying a Latin name created suspicions for the airport authorities.

While one of the seven participants reported challenges in finding professional opportunities due to their Latin nationality, most students reported pride in their nationality. Tania shared how her nationality as Nicaraguan and her skin color was a barrier in the United States to finding a job; however, realizing that barrier only made her feel prouder of her Latin identity. Tania noted:

El simple hecho de ser de Nicaragua crea un prejuicio instantáneo ante la gente. Primero, es respecto a mi educación académica y profesionalmente es como Nicaragua lo ven como no apto suficiente como para tener un trabajo, para enfrentar los obstáculos que enfrentan las personas que están en Law School pero que son ciudadanos norteamericanos, de Estados Unidos. Siento que existe una brecha inmensa simplemente por el hecho de que soy de Nicaragua. De mi entidad, también el hecho de ser una persona de color. Siempre vas a sentir esa diferente esa mirada distinta, pero no son cosas de las que yo me avergüenzo. Son cosas que con mucho orgullo las enfrentó porque es quien soy pero si estoy consciente de los prejuicios y de los bias que existen tanto como en una entrevista profesional o como cuando conozco a alguien nuevo. [The simple fact of being from Nicaragua creates an instant prejudice before people. First, it is regarding my academic and professional education from Nicaragua as not being fit enough to have a job, to face the obstacles faced by people who are in Law School but who are North American citizens of the United States. I feel that there is a huge gap simply because I am from Nicaragua. From my identity, also the fact of being a person of color. You will always feel that different, that different look; but, those are not things that I am ashamed of. Those are things that I face with great pride because it is who I am, but I am aware of

the prejudices and biases that exist as much as in a professional interview or when I meet someone new.]

Even though some of the international students from this study experienced the limitations of finding work opportunities due to their origins, those experiences strengthened their Latin identity pride and made them aware that they needed to stand for themselves as Latiné. The color of their skin, speaking Spanish whenever they could, and eating the food they grew up with were the main features of their cultural identity that they celebrated with pride as international students. Indeed, and despite all the interviewees were competent in English, the interviewees who spoke Spanish preferred to be interviewed in their native language. Carolina affirmed:

Soy reforzadamente Latina y eso es algo de mi identidad que me encanta. El español, le tengo un amor al español le tengo un cariño superior ahora... algo que uno da por sentado que es tu idioma, que cada vez que lo pueda hablar con amigos aquí con con compañeros de trabajo con mi familia es algo que disfruto. [I am strongly Latina and that is something of my identity that I love. I love speaking in Spanish. I have a greater affection for it now... something that one takes for granted is your language, that every time I can speak it with friends here with colleagues working with my family is something I enjoy.]

Luisa added to this idea:

Si voy a hablar en inglés pero voy a pronunciar algo, o sea decir algo que es una palabra en español, pues trato de pronunciarla cómo es en español. No tanto americanizarla o hacerla más hacía que sea amigable al oído salvo que no me entiendan. [If I am going to speak in English, but there's a word in Spanish I need to pronounce, I pronounce it as it

sounds in Spanish. I do not try to make it sound like an American accent unless people definitely don't understand it.]

While their Latin identity is strengthened, the sense of identity shifted in relation to the U.S. and their home country. Five of the seven participants spoke how their experience as international students made them recognize their privilege due to their access to an education abroad. For example, Luisa and Eduardo considered their education a privilege because their educational experience was not typical of people in their countries. They were conscious about this privilege and knew they must use it to help others. At the same time, three of those participants remarked the resources they used to have in their home country and that they (probably) did not have in the United States as international students. Carolina added:

En mi país he sido muy privilegiada en lo que se refiere a dentro de todo económicamente. Entonces si bien veía discriminación dentro de mi país no eran cosas que yo sufría, eran cosas que yo veía, eran cosas que yo estudiaba y estaba consciente de eso pero no de la manera como estoy consciente ahora. Creo que cuando vienes aquí, no importa si en tu país fuiste, hiciste esto, tenías esto o lo otro... ves la vida diferente porque te vuelves una "people of color", una "person of color" y te denominan de esa forma. [In my country I have been very privileged when it comes to everything economically. So, although I saw discrimination within my country, those were not things that I suffered, those were things that I saw, those were things that I studied, and I was aware of that but not in the way I am aware now. I think that when you come here, it doesn't matter who you were in your country, did, had... you see life differently because you become a "people of color", a "person of color" and they call you that.]

Their socioeconomic status was very different in the U.S. They had had a “comfortable” economic life in their home country, while in the U.S., this aspect was harder to manage. In their home countries, the color of their skin was not a factor that constantly defined who they were as it was in the United States and that made them feel part of the privileged group.

Another way the sense of identity shifted was by one of the students who noted the ability to identify with her preferred gender. Mónica remarked:

El nombrarme ya hoy en día como no binaria es algo que en México pues sabía que había algo pero no tenía lenguaje para explicarlo o para decirlo y que pues es algo que sí le debo a estar aquí en Estados Unidos especialmente en [la ciudad]. [Naming myself today as a non-binary is something that in Mexico, I knew there was something, but I had no language to explain it or to say it and that is something that I do owe to being here in the United States especially in [the city].]

Finally, one student out of the seven interviewed considered his likes and dislikes as the features that shaped his identity more than his own culture when coming to the U.S. Pablo acknowledged missing his family and the regular things he used to have in his home country; however, he perceived his passions as what shaped his identity:

I bought three things when it came to [the city] for the first time. First, I bought a bike; second, I bought a tennis racket; and third, I bought a guitar 'cause I play the guitar. And then, I kind of like you need to find your identity -as you said- you need to find your identity wherever you go and I had to reconnect to the things that I like to do you know to feel good to feel better... you know, while you're by yourself in the middle of a pandemic.

For Pablo, realizing what he enjoyed doing the most shaped his identity. He reflected on what he could not live without which defined him. Thinking it from Pablo's point, for him it was his passions while for others was about what they grew up with that they could not live without.

## **COVID-19 Pandemic**

### *Social and Emotional Limitations for International Students During COVID-19*

As graduate international students from Latin America in the United States during COVID-19, their experiences were challenging emotionally, professionally, and economically. Five out of the seven interviewees shared how the pandemic affected them as Latin international students because they were in shelter-in-place far away from their home. There were alone in a different country and culture that they were supposed to explore but which they could not completely do. In addition, the pandemic created potential complications in their immigration status. The participants also expressed increased anxiety due to the uncertainty around their health, social life, and immigration status. As Mariana expressed:

Tenía yo mucho miedo que me diera COVID cuando no sabíamos sea por ejemplo al principio ajá porque no hay manera en que yo pueda pagar un hospital en este país. O sea antes me muero que internarme en en un lugar de estos o sea entonces yo creo que esas limitaciones pues pues generan mucha ansiedad que yo nunca pensé que las iba a vivir así. [I was very afraid I was going to have COVID when everything started because there is no way I can pay a hospital in this country. I mean, first I'll die before being hospitalized. So, I think those are the limitations that generate a lot of anxiety and that I never thought I was going to experience in that way.]

In addition to the epidemic's potential impact on their health, international students faced economic challenges. As international students who came from Latin America countries where

the currency was less valuable than the American dollar, getting sick during a pandemic without income with no guidance on how to navigate this increased their anxiety.

Four of the interviewees expressed how the pandemic affected them emotionally because they did not have the opportunity to immerse fully in the culture. This impacted how they could build community in their host country. For instance, Pablo shared:

Especially coming to [the city] during the pandemic thing was the worst thing 'cause I got here September 2020 and it was very difficult to make new friends. My program has 25 people. 21 (maybe) are all American or all that people had already done here bachelors. Even if they were international students, they have been around here for a while, so they had friends.

Like Pablo, three other international student interviewees felt the same lack of social interaction during the pandemic. Coming from a Latin American as an international student during the pandemic did not allow them to build a community where they could feel they belong to as Latiné. Like Pablo mentioned, the other three participants mentioned that there were very few international students from Latin America in their program. Additionally, those participants mentioned how their professional development was affected since their classes went online. They were not able to interact with their classmates and professors in the same way; usually, other students would have their cameras off and the interaction was limited to the length of the online session. Lastly, there were no network events they could attend and meet people for the workforce.

### ***Potential Immigration Policy Changes for International Students During COVID-19***

During the pandemic, the Trump administration proposed a policy that involved sending international students back to their home countries unless these students had to attend in-person

classes. Two of the participants identified this thread as leading them to experience more anxiety and uncertainty. For instance, for Mariana, she was concerned about what she would do if she had to go back to her country during the pandemic. She felt that going to her parents' home was not an option because it not only risked her health as well as both of her parents' health. All in all, it was clear that besides the uncertainty of risking their own health and their beloveds' health in their home country, the nature of the anxiety the participants acknowledge as international students from Latin America during the pandemic was rooted to the additional expenses they could not afford, the cultural experiences they were missing, the lack of feeling they belonged to a community, and the threats of possible immigration changes.

### **Professional Experience and Economic Situation**

The participants shared how their professional experience was affected while living and pursuing their degrees as international students in the United States. Some students found themselves in a paradox in their professional development; others mentioned two possibilities for their professional development and experience. One of those options was the opportunity to work on-campus, and the second option (mentioned only for two of the participants) was the opportunity of taking a class during their last semester known as Curriculum Practical Training (CPT) that allowed them to work off-campus. Yet, those given possibilities had their limitations. Finally, the participants mentioned how their economic situation was tough trying to make a living and cover their basic expenses in [the city].

### **Working On-Campus and Curriculum Practical Training**

Only some of the participants were able to work. For three of the interviewees, their work experience consisted of an on-campus job, two participants found work through the Curriculum

Practical Training (CPT)<sup>4</sup>, and two of them did not work at all while living in the United States as international students.

For the students who worked, they agreed that it was a meaningful experience. Being able to work allowed them to grow professionally, learn, face new challenges, overcome those challenges, and test their capacities. Eduardo reported how his experience working on-campus benefited his professional experience as an educator and how he was able to learn how the education system works in the United States:

En la universidad uno como estudiante internacional puede trabajar, y de hecho, es el único sitio que como estudiante internacional tú puedes trabajar en Estados Unidos es en la Universidad. Entonces la universidad me ha dado la posibilidad primero de ser graduate assistant y de trabajar en un proyecto que había también con hispanos... en una función para ayudar a latinos. Entonces ahí estuvimos trabajando con un grupo de niños que llegaban recién de albergues etcétera aquí a Estados Unidos inmigrantes. Eso fue muy positivo. Y lo otro es las tutorías... esas tutorías también para mí han sido como muy especiales porque me ha permitido conocer de primera mano el sistema educativo al menos es desde lo católico o el sistema educativo es aquí de [la ciudad] y me ha permitido pues darme cuenta de las cosas. [In the university one, as an international student, can work, and in fact, it is the only place that as an international student you can work in the United States is in the university. So, the university allowed me first to be a graduate assistant and to work on a project with Hispanic people ... to help Latinos. So,

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<sup>4</sup> Based on the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services: F-1 students may not work off-campus during the first academic year but may accept on-campus employment subject to certain conditions and restrictions. After the first academic year, F-1 students may engage in three types of off-campus employment: Curricular Practical Training (CPT), Optional Practical Training (OPT) (pre-completion or post-completion), and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Optional Practical Training Extension (OPT). [Students and Employment | USCIS](#)

there we were working with a group of children who had just arrived from shelters, etc. here in the United States as immigrants. That was very positive. And the other thing is the tutorials... those tutorials have also been very special for me because it has allowed me to learn first-hand about the educational system, at least from the Catholicism, or just how the educational system is here from [the city] and it has allowed me so to realize things.]

Another option a couple of the interviewees mentioned was the Curriculum Practical Training (CPT) which is offered by certain classes where the students can work while taking that class. However, the CPT was not offered in many programs or classes. All in all, those were the only options available to international students to gain work experience and financially support themselves. Even though the work experience of those international students was limited, the participants acknowledged that the work experiences they were given were very beneficial. They were happy with what those experiences brought into their life. Indeed, many of the students expressed that being able to find a job was something they were very proud of while being international students because it had not been an easy path and they felt they had succeeded.

**The Paradox.** Although for all the participants there was no doubt that the education they were gaining was a privilege and very beneficial, there was a paradox in their career development. Their chances of economic growth while being a student and possibilities to obtain experience in their career were limited due to immigration policy<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, Mónica, in her own words, shared this paradox:

La parte económica ha sido lo más difícil. Es tratar de encontrar los fondos con la nula posibilidad de ser autosuficiente en el sentido de que pues no podemos trabajar. Y creo que pues nada es una una conversación interna constante de que tanto vale la pena tener

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<sup>5</sup> Based on the International Office from the [school], international students are limited to only work for the university they are attending and for a maximum of 20 hours a week.

este título cuando me estoy atrasando laboralmente tantísimo. O sea son todos estos años que no puedo tener experiencia laboral. [The economic part has been the hardest one. It is about finding the funds without being yet self-sufficient because we cannot work. I think this is a constant internal conversation I have and wondering how much it is worth to have a degree when I am getting so much behind professionally. I mean, it is all these years I haven't had professional experience.]

Monica clearly described the anxiety and challenges of being an international student. There was an irony that for the participants in this study they were looking for the stability they did not find in their home country, but they did not necessarily find it in the United States.

**Economic Challenges.** Being a Latin American graduate international student in the United States was economically challenging since there were many restrictions on their employment while living in [the city] was expensive, their work opportunities were restricted to jobs on-campus for a maximum of 20 hours per week or by doing a CPT at the last semester.

Mariana confessed:

Para mí ha sido muy fuerte que nuestra visa sólo nos permita, bueno yo tengo la F1 que sólo nos permite trabajar 20 horas a la semana en la universidad. O sea, creo que a mí es algo que me ocasiona ansiedad, frustración, enojo, miedo porque la vida en este lugar es muy cara y con el salario que nos dan qué es una mirruña no puedes ahorrar. O sea y para mí es un terror cada vez que mi perro se enferma porque güey que todavía no puedo pagarlo no. [For me it has been very hard that our visa only allows us, well, I have the F1 that only allows us to work 20 hours a week at the university. In other words, I think it's something that causes me anxiety, frustration, anger, and fear because life in this place is very expensive and with the salary, they give us which is a paltry thing, you can't save

money. I mean, and for me, it's terrifying every time my dog gets sick because, man, I still can't pay for it.]

In addition, some of the students also mentioned and compared their home countries' currency with the American dollar being this last one much more valuable, and therefore, an unbalance in their economy. The participants also shared their economic struggle in finding a place where to live, going out to socialize, and seeing their friends while living in [the city].

### **What is the experience of those students in the transition of graduating and finding a job?**

In the findings, most of the participants revealed interest in finding a job in the United States, the steps taken by the participants to achieve that goal differed from each other, their transition was ambiguous because of their immigration status. These participants had back up second plans in case they did not succeed at finding a job in the States.

### **Interests in Finding a Job in the United States After Graduating**

Most of the participants expressed their interest in finding a job and staying in the United States after graduation. Tania expressed her willingness in finding a job and staying in the United States as she said, “mi plan es buscar todas las maneras para quedarme porque quiero tomar el BAR y convertirme en abogado certificado en California” [“my plan is to find every way to stay because I want to take the BAR and become a certified attorney in California”]. Like Tania, many others of the interviewees stated the same interest in finding a job after graduation in the United States.

On the other hand, some other participants were not very sure about what they wanted. They did not have a preference and they were okay with going back to their home countries but

whatever the path, there was also an interest in working in the United States before leaving this country. For instance, Eduardo confesses:

Cuando comencé yo tenía la firme decisión de que yo me devolvía para Colombia. Ya ahora no sé si esa es la respuesta no no sé si sí efectivamente me vaya a devolver de una vez o me quedé yo sé que por el tema de la Universidad hay una posibilidad que se llama OPT que uno puede tener un año de experiencia aquí y trabajar en lo que uno estudió entonces no sé... en principio así como como real yo tendría como 2 planes uno seguir acá en Estados Unidos uno o 2 o 3 años más después de graduarme conseguir trabajo con con una escuela o sí con la misma Universidad eh pues si eso no resulta me devolvería a Colombia que también pues es una muy buena opción. [When I started, I had the firm decision that I would return to Colombia. Now, I don't know if that's the answer, I don't know if yes, I'm actually going to return at once or if I stay. I know that because of the University there is a possibility called OPT that one can have a year of experience here and work in what one studied so I don't know... in principle, as well as real, I would have like 2 plans, one to continue here in the United States one or 2 or 3 more years after graduating to get a job with a school or yes with the same University. Well, if that doesn't work out, I'd go back to Colombia, which is also a very good option.]

Other participants echoed Eduardo in that they originally thought of going back to their home countries, but currently wanted to explore the American workforce.

### **Steps Latin American International Students Take to Find a Job in the United States**

The steps taken in this transition differed from one participant to another. Some students had a plan and followed it. Two students out of the seven participants reported taking the CPT class in the last semester of their program which allowed them to work off-campus before

graduating. By doing a CPT, the two students enrolled in the CPT were optimistic about continuing their job with the companies they are currently working for. They were hoping that after finishing the CPT, their companies would offer to sponsor them for an H-1B visa which would allow them to legally work in the United States in their fields. Those two students seemed also more confident in their transition as compared to the other study participants.

There was another student that at the time of the interview was about to start the application to the CPT. The other four students, at the moment of the interviews, did not mention the CPT as an option in their program; however, they stated they would apply to the Optional Practical Training (OPT) once they graduated.

### **Steps Taken vs Second Plans (Plan Bs)**

The steps taken to transition from an international student to an employed professional working in the United States depended on whether the person set living in the United States as their main goal or as one option for places of employment. Pablo was very determined in living in the United States and had a plan to make it happen. He stated at the beginning of his interview that his reason for coming to the United States was to find a job. Pablo looked for a program that would be desirable in the job market and made sure his program offered a CPT (Curriculum Practical Training) so that as a student, he would be able to find and possibly secure a job. Additionally, in the process of looking for a job through the CPT, Pablo reached out to the Career Service department at his school to use their services and support. Through the Career Services department, Pablo learned how to set up a LinkedIn account, build his resume, as well as participate in mock interviews. Pablo mentioned:

Career services, definitely, they just have a great team. I use them a lot. There are a lot of people that help you with mock interviews, resume reviews, setting up your LinkedIn page, etc. You know, I use them all I use them.

Pablo took advantage of the Career Services' resources. He used all their resources and found them very useful. He moved things around to ensure a full-time job position which he felt would increase his chances in requesting a sponsorship from the company afterward. During his semester of CPT, Pablo was able to secure this commitment from his company. Pablo and his company entered the lottery with immigration to obtain the H-1B visa which allows individuals to legally work in the United States. Pablo stated that if he was not selected through the lottery, he would use then the OPT option and apply again to the lottery the next year.

On the other hand, other participants, like Mónica and Tania, their perception was different. While they wanted to continue their career development in the United States, they were aware that it might not happen. While it was not the ideal scenario, they had other options in mind in case their plan did not go as expected. Mónica shared that she would love to stay in the United States; however, she was aware and mindful that might not be possible. To protect herself emotionally, she imagined being disappointed and visualized alternative plans about what she would do, and be ready to go back to Mexico if she needed to. Like this participant, most of the interviewees stated their preference after graduating was to work and stay longer in the United States and in [the city]. Their plan B was not ideal, but they also had backup plans to return to their home country, going back to school, and pursuing another degree as students in the United States, or going to other countries.

Half of the participants mentioned having used some resources in their job search, such as the Career Service department, the international office from their school, and their academic

department. Most of the participants indicated having used and found useful independent platforms such as Linked-In and Indeed. One of the students stated that she has contacted recruiters and used their advice.

### **Uncertainty, an Ambiguous Transition, and Second Options**

For most of the interviewees, their plans after graduating were ambiguous. Despite being clear that they wanted to find a job in the States, they knew their political status as international students made the achievement of those plans uncertain. This led to more challenges. Carolina shared her thoughts and feelings:

Quando termine el Master creo que eso va a hacerlo desafiante más que nada por la incertidumbre que tengo respecto de qué es lo que quiero hacer, si quedarme o irme. ¿Qué pasa si es que no quieres ser un visitante pasajero? ¿qué pasa si es que te das cuenta que las oportunidades laborales que te dan aquí son mejores? o qué pasa si te quieres ir pero no sepas a dónde? entonces creo que las incertidumbres se vuelven distintas eso es lo desafiante. [When I finish my master's, I think that will make it challenging, more than anything because of the uncertainty I have about what I want to do if staying or leaving. What if you don't want to be a passing visitor? What if you realize that the job opportunities, they give you here are better? Or what if you want to leave, but don't know where? so I think the uncertainties become different, that's what's challenging.]

For most of the participants, the uncertainty they experienced, the feeling of not being able to have control of their plans in finding a job in the United States, was mostly due to the immigration status they held.

These graduate international students from Latin America experienced a high level of uncertainty in their transition between graduating and finding a job. Among that uncertainty,

some of the students even considered the option of going back to school in the United States to pursue another master's degree or doctorate program. Another option some of the participants mentioned was to look for a living in another country such as Canada or a European country where they could continue their professional development or go back to their home country. As a last resource, one of them considered using the benefit of their partner who already held an H-1B visa. This student considered this was not the best option but given that there were plans for them to be together, it would be a resource to use if needed.

### **What Role Does the University They Attend Play in the Job Search?**

The main university departments discussed by participants were the student services offices such as the career service department, the international office department, and the academic department where students were obtaining their graduate degrees. Overall, most of the participants felt they were treated differently by the school and the career department. When the participants talked about the Career Service department, their answers and perception ranged from being useful to not being useful at all. Some participants mentioned the support from their professors and their career department as something useful and valuable for their professional development and finding a job because they sent out emails with job postings. Others mentioned that their professors were indeed great resources and mentors in the process of finding a job.

### **Student Services Offices**

#### ***The Career Service Department***

There was a range of experiences with the Career Services department. For Pablo, the Career Service department offered the support the students need. Pablo observed that:

Career Service already has a great guide. There's a career guide they have with thank you notes, with like...how to set up LinkedIn pages, how to approach someone that you

admire you know...like resume templates. It has everything there. It's like a book that people should read it if they're applying for jobs. It's very useful. They're already doing a great job.

Other students, such as Luisa who had used some of the Career Services, found some use in their resources such as Handshake to apply to different jobs, cover letter templates, and their network events. She identified several issues such as the resources being targeted to undergraduate students, workshops being usually offered during the time she had classes, or there being other limited options. Luisa said, “creo que algo que sí les hace falta es tener como a alguien que esté exclusivo para posgrado”, [“I think that something that they do need is to have someone who is exclusively for postgraduate studies. I don't know if they all have it”]. Also, she believed their availability was limited and they were very busy since she tried to unsuccessfully book an appointment, “no hay muchos horarios. Por ejemplo, yo traté en algún punto de agendar con Career Service, creo que es como una cita de que bueno no sirve o nunca tienen disponibilidad entonces supongo que también están super saturados”. [“There is not much availability. For example, I tried at some point to schedule with Career Service, I think it's like an appointment that well it doesn't work, or they never have availability, so I guess they're also super saturated”].

Similarly, to Luisa, some of the participants thought that Career Service should have staff members specialized in graduate students and should provide more services for graduate international students. Mónica, who was finishing her doctoral degree and had completed their master's program, had used the Career Service in the past. She noted how the staff did not know how to support her and nor was knowledgeable about the employment requirements for international students such as the F-1 visa or the OPT option:

Traté de usar en la maestría y creo que ninguno estaba preparado para el tema de las visas. O sea, no sé cómo decirlo...era como o solo OPT pero...hijoles... no nos encanta cuando hay personas con OPT especialmente las empresas pues mhm y creo que cuando lo vi en su momento como que no tenían opciones claras para estudiantes internacionales que estuvieran con la F1 o con OPT. [I tried to use it in the master's degree, and I think that none of them was prepared for the issue of visas. I mean, I don't know how to say it...it was like or just OPT but...boy... we don't love it when there are people with OPT. Especially companies, well mhm and I think that is when I saw it... at the time they didn't have clear options for international students who were with F1 or with OPT.]

Other participants concurred that the Career Service department did not provide what international students need. Finally, Carolina and Eduardo had never used their service before they were interviewed so they did not have an opinion about this department.

### ***The International Students Office***

As compared to experiences with the Career Services department, only a couple of the participants mentioned that International Student Office supported them in their job search process. More than supporting the participants in finding a job, those students mentioned the help this office provided regarding immigration matters and paperwork when they found a job. For those participants, the international student office had been very helpful in navigating immigration matters the international students faced. For Mónica, it was great to have their support for proceeding with the job she found under the CPT. The International Students Office made sure to help Mónica in having her paperwork completed to do her CPT. Other students such as Pablo and Carolina did not mention this office or any resources nor did not have an opinion about it.

### *Academic Departments*

Most of the students agreed on how valuable the support from their academic department had been in the process of finding a job. When interviewed, Mónica noted that the job she had was found through a job posting put out by their department, “creo que mi departamento postea muchos trabajos entonces tienen como una bolsa de trabajo interna y digo ahí fue uno de las formas que me enteré por ejemplo del trabajo” [“I think my department posts a lot of jobs, so they have an internal job bank. For example, I say that was one of the ways I found out about the job I have”]. Similarly, Luisa noted in her professors’ unconditional support as critical to her professional development:

Yo he estado muy en contacto con los profesores y siento que es algo que ayuda mucho. Todos tienen muchos contactos y además tienen muchas ganas de ayudarte a crecer si tú estás como dispuesto a hacer el trabajo y también hay profesores que son internacionales entonces como que entienden es que necesito ahorita hacer. [I have been in close contact with the teachers, and I feel that it is something that helps a lot. They all have many contacts, and they also really want to help you grow if you are willing to do the work and there are also professors who are international, so they understand what I need to do right now.]

Luisa had been fortunate enough to have professors from different international backgrounds, so for her, they had not only been a support, but also a way to strengthen her identity as an international individual in the States. Other students mentioned how beneficial it had been to have mentors from their program.

## **Conclusion**

The most common themes mentioned along the different sections of the interviews was how their professional development and economy were impacted while being international graduate students from Latin America. Likewise, identity dynamics through their experiences as international graduate students from Latin America was a constant topic for all the participants from this study as well as the benefits and limitations their status represented in the American context. One of the findings the participants also commonly mentioned was their privilege for having access to an education. Ultimately, student service departments such as the Career Service department and the International Student office, and the academic departments were the resources the participants mentioned the most in their transition of graduating and looking for a job.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the findings of this study about the common experiences of seven international graduate students from Latin America about their transition after graduation. This is followed by a presentation of recommendations based on the data collected from the literature review and the findings in chapter four. Ultimately, a connection between the findings and the theoretical framework will be provided to conclude this research project.

#### **Discussion**

My findings suggest that achieving an education in the United States is a motivation for international graduate students because they perceive it offers much better professional opportunities due to the diverse academic programs provided and it increases the chances to secure a better income after finishing their studies. These findings align with the findings from Kim's (2016) study about how international students can position themselves professionally better at the global job market when acquiring a degree in the United States. While her study focused on Korean students as international students, my study finds that students from Latin America share these perceptions as well.

My findings build on Kim's study because the participants of my study were motivated by both academic reasons and for personal motivations, such as experiencing a safer place to live than their home countries and better professional opportunities. The findings of the study suggest that, despite having a job and a stable economic situation in their home country, the sociopolitical situation of their home countries was one of the reasons to migrate and pursue an education in the United States where they did not feel threatened by violence on the streets, and

they were able to freely choose their gender identity. Besides, my findings suggest that those students found the United States as a place where they could openly talk about their gender identity more than they could in their home countries. These findings suggest that addressing the motivations for graduate international students from Latin America to pursue a degree in the United States may also help us to understand how these students navigate the transition of graduating and finding a job and the reasons why they choose specific opportunities after graduating.

The findings on how those international students from Latin America felt treated differently in the U.S. adds to Sharma's (2019) arguments about the incoherent relation between the consideration of international students as "top talent" and the lack of support and attention for them. Despite international students expecting to be treated equally when they enroll in an academic program at an American institution, they found out that their rights were not the same and they were perceived as a different category of students. Indeed, access to scholarships for international students was really limited. Federal scholarships do not apply to international students, those scholarships are meant for citizens. Likewise, international students do not have the same rights to work as a local or citizen student does since the permit to do so is for only 20 hours per week and on-campus which limits their professional experience. Besides, the given options for when an international student is in need of balancing the academic workload due to an emergency are indeed more barriers than supportive alternatives since the petition and the paperwork to be done to claim that balance is very hectic. Based on my findings and reflecting on Sharma's point, I would argue that it is due to institutional policies that those students are treated differently. For instance, while both national and international students are not allowed to be full-time employees of the institution, the national student is allowed to work 25 hours a week

for the institution while international students can work only 20 hours. The opportunities to work and gain experience while pursuing a degree as an international student are minimal.

Likewise, my findings support Castiello-Gutiérrez and Li's (2020) argument that international students are just a transactional matter for the country. My participants expressed how they struggled because of limited access to scholarships to support their education and living costs. They had specific restrictions to reduce their course load and all the paperwork required to request reduced course loads because otherwise, their immigration status was threatened. This point adds to the finding on the existing paradox between their professional development and economic situation. Given the results of my research and the findings of the investigation by Kawamoto et al. (2018) and Flournoy (2018), it is possible to say that economic challenges are a pattern international students go through and that depending on the countries those students are coming from the situation can be more challenging. For my participants from Latin American countries, their challenges were aggravated since their home country's currency is less valuable than the American dollar. Given the limits on the hours they are allowed to work, they to make a living in the meantime.

One of the most compelling findings in this research was that identity dynamics was key to the experience of being international graduate students from Latin America. Many participants of this study rooted their Latin identity in the intersection of their language, skin color, and gender. This happened naturally, as an emerging strategy to claim and honor who they are, their values, where they come from, and where they will go. This investigation demonstrates that that listening to their storytelling is critical to supporting ng the Latin community in establishing their presence in U.S. society. Also, it builds a sense of familiarity with people from other cultures and continents and awakens an awareness of Latin culture. While interviewing the participants, the

researcher could sense a feeling of pride in each of them about their identity as Latiné and their achievement of pursuing an American education as Latiné. That pride and excitement about the Latin identity are valuable the different environments those students live in. It responds to calls for diversity and equality in different cultures, workforce, and educational institutions, among others. Likewise, it allows the same Latin community to learn, reflect, and be aware of their culture and how their way of thinking and values are shaped.

One of the topics that emerged as a reflecting point among six participants was the concept of race as a fundamental feature of their identity. Based on my findings, race was not something the participants were aware of or at least was one of the main characteristics of their identity until they came to the United States. In their home countries, the participants' skin color was not a physical feature that marked a difference in the society to which they belong. Quite possibly, in their home countries, they were part of the privileged group, not a minority, and therefore they overlooked the standards of their culture that shape their identities as Latiné. This finding is seen through the Critical Race Theory lens. A lack of understanding race might have led to color blindness among Latin American students. It is not until they left their country and came to a more racially diverse nation that the awareness of their own race emerged. In their home country, it seems their skin color was a privilege and put them in a bubble where the discrepancy between race and social class in education was not usually addressed. Whereas, in their experience as international students from Latin America in the United States, the participants were very aware of their race and how differently they could be treated. An interesting observation is that some of them noticed they were not even identified by their nationality but by a more generic group race of "Latina/o". This resulted in a monolithic identity, losing some of their authentic identity. Should they be categorized broadly as Latiné? Or should

they be recognized from the specific country each of them is from? This observation raises questions about how people from Latin American countries might be globally defined. An intersection of being Latiné plus their specific country of origin marks a uniqueness in their identity that must not be ignored. It is not the same to say a Mexican is the same as a Brazilian or an Argentinian because all of those are different countries despite they fall in the category of Latin countries. All in all, their identity as Latiné and the derivation of its intersectionality is a phenomenon that marked the experiences of the participants of this research.

The results and the pride those participants shared about their identity and where they are coming from connecting with Balin et al. (2016) research result that for (the majority) international students, their language proficiency and cultural differences are not a barrier in their job search. Latin American students are proud of their culture, native language, and capacity to pursue a degree in a second language. Based on their lived experiences, they are aware that their nationality and identity as Latiné might sometimes impact their opportunities in this country.

The potential immigration policy changes for international students during COVID-19 and the anxiety and the uncertainty arising among some of the participants due to their immigration status is a finding that aligned with Castiello-Gutiérrez and Li's (2020) statement about how anti-immigrant actions from the Trump Administration during that time were an ongoing issue that must not be ignored since for Latin American students the immigration process in the United States is generally complicated due to the history of violence and lack of economic resources their countries are internationally known for. For the participants who shared their feelings about the anti-immigratory action during the pandemic, the conflict was not only the risk to their health and their beloveds by having to return to their home countries but also the economic and immigration challenges along with covering flight tickets and being questions

about their legitimacy when arriving at the United States. As some of the participants mentioned, they were always taken aside to ask irrelevant questions about their intentions to enter the country. Lastly, the personal experience of the researcher of this study who held the status of an international student but did not have the stamp of an F-1 visa in her passport, adds to Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li's (2020) urgency for stopping those anti-migratory actions. For her, going back to her home country would have been the end of her career since embassies were closed around the world. Even if she held the status of an international student, there was no guarantee she would be given the stamp of the F-1 visa in her passport.

The steps Latin American international students take to find a job in the United States differed. Based on the interviews' results, most participants knew they had an option to work after graduating, the OPT; however, they shared they had not started that process at the time of the interview (four to three months before finishing their program). For the students in that situation, it remained an open question to how long it would take them to be prepared and find a job. As a result, it seems their career development was not defined as they were not clear on their steps after graduating. At the same time, the students who previously had enrolled on a CPT course (Curriculum Practice Training) seemed to be a step ahead in securing a job in the United States. It is confusing that four of the students interviewed did not mention the CPT as an option in their program. It makes this research wonder if those students are not informed about this opportunity or if it is that their programs do not even offer them. Likewise, an observation from the researcher is that two of the participants pursuing a STEM program were the most confident in their plans towards securing a job in the States after graduating. Despite Pablo, one of those two STEM students, constantly mentioning that the job hunting was tough and that something he was very proud of was finding a job. The researcher perceived Pablo was more confident than

the other students when sharing his experiences in the job searching process. For the researcher, one of the reasons for Pablo's confidence might be that he pursued a STEM career which is more demanding in the job market, and that even though he was born and raised in Brazil, Pablo also held a European passport since his mom is from Italy and that probably gives him another perspective of his situation as an international student.

For the researcher, there was a feeling of uncertainty, an ambiguous transition, and resignation among half of the participants regarding the limited options which led them to accept whatever the system decided they should do. Additionally, they always had a second option for their lives, even though those options were not what they really wanted. This reflection from the findings connects with Balin et al. (2016) research which identified finding a job, deciding whether to stay in the United States, developing job research skills, dealing with immigration regulations, and questioning the investment in education as common concerns for international students. All in all, after listening to the experiences already lived and different strategies of the participants to carry on with their professional and personal lives, this study acknowledges that international students from Latin America are very adaptable.

The finding in this research about some participants not having used any of the career services aligns with West's (2018) findings about international research students not using the resources from the career service department. Based on the National Career Development Association (NCDA) survey in 2015, more than half of international students have not used the career service advising on campus. Even though there is an aspiration for entering the American job market, graduate Latin American international students do not seem to use the different student service departments. Those results raise questions such as what needs to be done for those students to increase their use of the career service department.

Given that only one of the seven participants took advantage and used the career student services, the data from this study highlights a lack of guidance from the student office services for international students from Latin America. These findings support Balin et al.'s (2016) research that found that at least one-third of the students and two-thirds of the career development body lack information regarding the OPT and CPT. This raises questions about the efficacy of the departments that are meant to support those students in that process. Surprisingly, the participants mentioned that their academic departments have offered a positive and probably, better support than the student office services. This is an unexpected result that should be highlighted since academic departments tend to be more focused on supporting students in their academic program and do not usually know how the migratory regulations work for those students.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for Practice**

International graduate students must know how to navigate their transition of graduating and finding a job, even if it is to work in the United States, returning to their home country, or around the world. Thus, the career service and international office departments must offer a more informative guide and support not only to international students but to international graduate students as well. Create a specialized team that focuses only on this group of students and their needs would be useful.

Since some participants mentioned their academic departments as a resource in their journey to finding a job, it would be useful for the careers service and the international students departments to work with the different academic departments on how to work with and support international students. These departments could also provide information about opportunities in

and out (abroad) of the host country for international students. Since international students have direct contact with professors and their academic department staff, they should be educated on the basic needs international students face due to their immigration status. Moreover, it is recommended that higher education institutions and the USCIS collaborate with companies and educate those last ones about how the hiring and the immigrant processes work with international students.

Lastly, it seems this research and the testimony of those international students speaking up from their experiences is a good start for the suggestions of Castiello-Gutiérrez and Li's (2020) on how international students should reflect on their situations and speak out for their rights. International students should not have to tolerate being treated as a "business transaction matter" for the United States.

### **Recommendations for Policy**

There should be a policy reform for international students so they are able to work off-campus and more hours than they currently can, so they can put into practice and real-life the knowledge they are already acquiring. In this way, they will not only share their knowledge and be productive, but also, they will accumulate experience, which will give them more opportunities to find a job after graduating. It is suggested that international students are allowed to work the same number of hours national students are able to on-campus. Then, if a national student is allowed to work 25 hours a week, international students should have the same right to foster and ensure an inclusive, equal professional development and the same treatment as international students.

This study also suggests that CPT classes should be offered for more academic programs and not only for a few. This will allow more international students to have the opportunity of

working off-campus before graduating; thus, they can grow their network, their professional experience, learn more about the American culture and job market, and have a better economic situation while being a student. The support of universities and the host country's government are considered fundamental. As it was mentioned in one of the literature reviews, the home country and host country of the international students should strengthen their relationships and communication to prepare them for their experience of being international students and in their transition from graduating and finding a job. Ultimately, given the motivations and security the international students' investment of energy, time, economically, and emotionally those students, guaranteeing an excellent starting place in the job market is the least that can be done for international students from Latin America.

### **Conclusion**

After the interviews and the answers given to the research questions, this study concludes that the participants' experiences as international graduate students from Latin America are shaped remarkably due to their identity as Latin people, their gender, and their skin. This finding is inspired by the LatCrit framework in education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) mentioned in Chapter I. It supports the importance of listening to the experiences of international graduate students from Latin America to understand, learn and make a difference in the possible forms of subordination due to the intersectionality of their nationalities, race, gender, and previous education. Supported by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its branch LatCrit, this research was able to identify that in addition to their national identity and race, the socio-political situation shapes the opportunities for those students. It is with the hope that the presence and the storytelling of these Latin American international graduate students in the United States become a source of inspiration and education for the educational structures, the American workforce, and

the U.S. Citizens and Immigration Services for an inclusive, equitable, and just American society. Ultimately, my research as a Latin American international student is just a small step, an initiative, and, as Sharma (2019) suggested, it fosters agency among international students for the support they need from academic institutions.

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## APPENDIX A

### INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY

I am Natalia Hernandez; I am a candidate for a master's in Organization & Leadership.

Currently, I am working on the second part of my research project which is focused on the lived experiences of international graduate students from Latin America in the U.S. as they transition from their studies to work.

One of the needs for this research is based on the very little research that has been reported regarding international graduate students, and even more, students coming from Latin America.

Then, the purpose of this project is to interview and listen to the experiences of all Latiné international graduate students from [university] that are in the process of finishing their program. The interview will happen in the last week of February and first week of March (February 27th - March 5th).

The students interested can get in touch with Natalia Hernandez by sending an email to [nhernandez13@dons.usfca.edu](mailto:nhernandez13@dons.usfca.edu) or send a text to xxx-xxx-xxxx by February 17th, 2022.

I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you so much in advance for the support.

Best,

Natalia.

**APPENDIX B**  
**CONSENT FORM**

**Consent Form for Adults**

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research phenomenological study entitled the **lived experiences of international graduate students from Latin America in the U.S. as they transition from their studies to work** conducted by **Natalia Hernandez Castellanos**, a master's student in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco.

This faculty supervisor for this study is Professor Seenae Chong, a professor in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco.

**WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:**

The purpose of this research study is to **interview and listen to the experiences of all Latinx international graduate students that are finishing their program and in the transition of finding a job.**

**WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:**

During this study, the following will happen: I will be asking some questions regarding what your experience has been as an international graduate student from Latin America in the U.S.

and the transition you are going through to find a job once you graduate.

With your permission, we will audiotape and take notes during the interview. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide, and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audiotaped, we will take notes instead. If you agree to being audiotaped but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, we can turn off the recorder at your request. Or if you don't wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time. Any documents or material that you might want to share will not contain names or personal identifiers.

**DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:**

Your participation in this study will involve a 45–60-minute interview. The study will take place via Zoom.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:**

The risks and benefits associated with this study are a loss of your time and the risks associated with regular activities. The benefit of the study is that it may add to the research on the field of education and international/multicultural issues. This information, once collected, might be read by policymakers, educational experts, educators, and scholars and could affect the educational practice. If you do not want to participate in the study, you will not be mentioned in any documents of the study, and your decision to not participate will not be told to anyone. You may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty. If you are upset by any of the questions asked, the researcher will refer you to

counseling services available publicly or at the university if you are a member of the academic community (student, staff, or professor).

**BENEFITS:**

You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study; however, the possible benefits to others include the contribution to the little research that has been reported regarding international graduate students, and even more, students coming from Latin America. Ultimately, this study may benefit international students, American universities, and companies to have knowledge and an approach on how to address the transition for international graduate students after graduating and finding a full-time job in the United States.

**PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report published, no information will be included that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. To minimize the risks to confidentiality, real names will be replaced by pseudonyms on all interview and observation transcripts, and all audio files, observation notes, or other documents that contain personal identifiers will be stored in a password-protected computer or hard-drive that we will keep in a locked file cabinet until the research has been completed. Original audio-files will be destroyed at the completion of the study. Specifically, all information will be stored on a password-protected computer and any printouts in a locked file cabinet. Consent forms and any other identifiable data will be destroyed in 3 years from the date of data collection.

**COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:**

There is no payment or other form of compensation for your participation in this study.

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

**OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:**

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: **Natalia Hernández Castellanos** at xxx-xxx-xxxx or nhernandez13@dons.usfca.edu or the faculty supervisor, **Seenae Chong** at xxx-xxx-xxxx or srchong@usfca.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

**I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED  
HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH  
PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.**

*PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE DATE*

## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Questions from Google Form previously to the interview - International Student General Information Guide

International Student General Information guide

Hola!

First of all, thank YOU so much for taking the time and collaborating in this research project focused on the lived experiences of international graduate students from Latin America in the U.S. as they transition from their studies to work. This phenomenological study looks to make an impact and a difference in higher education and in the experiences of international students from Latin America in the United States.

The questions below are based on general information to use in the analysis for the current phenomenological study. Feel free to answer them the best way you can. If there is a question that does not apply, please type N/A. If you have any questions or issues submitting the answers, reach out to Natalia Hernandez [nhernandez13@mail.edu](mailto:nhernandez13@mail.edu)

Thanks again!

Best,

Natalia.

Fields to fill:

- Email
- Full name
- What are your preferred pronouns?
- What is your country of origin?

- How old are you?
- What is your visa status?
- What did you major in before coming to the U.S.?
- What is your current program of study?
- Are you currently employed? If so, who is your employer?
- When are you graduating?
- How long have you been in the U.S.?

**Main and follow up questions for the interview:**

**First part- Student's background (Warm up questions)**

- 1) What was life like for you in your hometown before migrating to the U.S.? [¿Cómo era tu vida en tu país/tu ciudad antes de migrar a los Estados Unidos?]
- 2) What was/were the main reason(s) you decided to pursue a graduate program in the U.S.? [¿Cuál o cuáles fueron las razones principales para decidir hacer un posgrado en los Estados Unidos?]

**Second part- Student's experience in graduate school and their experience trying to find employment:**

- 3) What aspects of your identity do you see differently living in the U.S.? Can you give me a specific example or incident? [¿Qué aspectos de tu identidad ves diferente viviendo en los Estados Unidos que antes no notabas? ¿Puedes darme un ejemplo?]
- 4) What aspects of your identity have changed while living in the U.S.? Can you give me a specific example? [¿Qué aspectos crees que han cambiado? ¿Puedes darme un ejemplo?]

- 5) What aspects of your identity you feel have not changed while living in the U.S.? Can you give me a specific example? [¿Qué aspectos de tu identidad sientes que no han cambiado mientras has estado viviendo en los Estados Unidos? ¿Puedes darme un ejemplo?]
- 6) As an international graduate student from Latin America, what was surprising or unexpected about being a graduate student in the U.S.? [Como estudiante internacional, ¿qué ha sido sorprendente o inesperado de esta experiencia de ser un estudiante de postgrado en los Estados Unidos?]
- 7) As an international graduate student from Latin America, can you tell me about an experience that has been particularly beneficial to you in graduate school? [Como estudiante internacional, ¿puedes mencionar una experiencia que ha sido particularmente beneficiosa para ti en tu proceso de hacer tu postgrado?]
- a) Is there a specific experience in graduate school that you are proud of? [¿Tienes alguna experiencia en específico de la cual estas orgullosa/o?]
- 8) As an international graduate student from Latin America, can you share about an experience that was particularly challenging for you in graduate school? [Como estudiante internacional, ¿puedes compartir una experiencia en particular que ha sido particularmente desafiante para ti en tu proceso de hacer tu postgrado?]
- a) What aspects of your life were you balancing in addition to being a student? (Probe around social life, job, community work, etc). [¿Cuáles otros aspectos de tu vida has estado balanceando adicional al de ser un estudiante? (vida social, trabajo, trabajo comunitario).]

- b) If the student shares that he/she is working: How do you navigate work vs study?  
[¿Cómo manejas esta situación entre trabajo y estudio?]
- i) Is it manageable? [¿Es manejable?]
- c) What is it like working at \_\_\_\_\_ ? [¿Cómo es tu trabajo en \_\_\_\_\_?]
- 9) How do you think this job contributes to your career development, your experience, and the career you are pursuing? [¿Cómo consideras que este trabajo está contribuyendo a tu desarrollo profesional, tu experiencia y los estudios que estás realizando?]

**Third part- Student's experience and plan in the transition of graduating and finding a job**

- 10) What are your plans once you graduate from school? [¿Cuáles son tus planes una vez termines y te gradúes de tu posgrado?]
- a) Can you share what has motivated you to achieve these plans? [¿Puedes compartir que te ha motivado a alcanzar estos planes?]
- 11) What steps have you taken to or will you take to achieve your plan? [¿Qué pasos has ya tomado o vas a tomar para lograr tu plan?]
- 12) What resources have you used to look for a job at [university]? [¿Qué recursos has usado de la [universidad] para buscar por un trabajo?]
- a) What career service resources at your school have you used? [¿Cuáles recursos del departamento de profesiones de tu universidad has usado?]
- i) Can you describe a helpful experience you had with a campus employment resource? [¿Puedes describir una experiencia útil que hayas tenido con algún recurso de búsqueda de empleo de la universidad?]
- ii) Can you describe an experience that was unhelpful or not useful with a campus employment resource? [¿Puedes describir una experiencia que no

haya sido útil con algún recurso de búsqueda de empleo de la universidad?]

13) What other resources besides the ones offered by career services at [university] have you used? [¿Qué recursos adicionales a los de la universidad has usado para buscar por un trabajo?]

a) Can you describe a helpful experience you had with an outside resource from campus? [¿Puedes describir una experiencia útil que hayas tenido con algún recurso de búsqueda de empleo fuera de la universidad?]

b) Can you describe an experience that was unhelpful or not useful with an independent resource from campus? [¿Puedes describir una experiencia útil no haya sido útil con algún recurso de búsqueda de empleo fuera de la universidad?]

14) What other plans do you have in consideration if your plan #1 does not go as expected? [¿Qué otros planes tienes en consideración si tu plan #1 no sale como lo esperas? -

Hypothetical question

a) What leads you to these alternatives? [¿Qué te hace pensar en estas alternativas?]

15) Are there any recommendations you would like career service, the international students office departments, or the [university] to consider for supporting international graduate students from Latin America in their transition of graduating and finding a job? [Hay alguna recomendación que quisieras que el departamento de búsqueda de empleo, la oficina de estudiantes internacionales, o la misma universidad tengan presente para apoyar a los estudiantes internacionales de Latinoamérica en la transición de encontrar un trabajo después de graduarse?]

16) Is there anything else you would like to share with me that probably was not mentioned today? [Hay algo más que quisieras mencionar o compartir el día de hoy y que no se haya mencionado en la entrevista?]