

Navigating the Legal Constraints of Being a Nonimmigrant: A Study of the Technical
Communication Challenges for International Graduate Students in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation, *Navigating the Legal Constraints of Being a Nonimmigrant: A Study of the Technical Communication Challenges for International Graduate Students in the United States*, explores the issues that can occur for international graduate students when navigating situations involving technical communication before, and during, their stay as nonimmigrants in the U.S. while they attend graduate school. In this project, I analyze rhetoric as situational, expanding on our understandings of communicative constraints that occur in specific instances of intercultural communication. To begin this analysis, I conducted semi-structured interviews with current international graduate students at a R1 university in Virginia to discuss specific instances in which they felt constrained by their status as nonimmigrants. I then used initial coding and pattern coding to deconstruct specific themes of constraints from my data. There were two emergent themes to the constraints: technical, legal, and financial constraints, and ideological constraints. Within these two themes I found more specific codes which were: misperception, information access, incorrect information, time, linguistic, cultural, and institutional constraints. By coding these constraints, and analyzing how my participants navigated them, I demystify the issues faced by international graduate students in our institutions. One of the main findings of this project showcases that there is a gap between the social-justice oriented scholarship being produced in the fields of technical communication, rhetoric, and composition, and the lived experiences of international graduate students. I conclude that building scaffolded support structures that target instances where constraints are most likely to occur will better support international graduate students during their time at U.S. institutions.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This dissertation, *Navigating the Legal Constraints of Being a Nonimmigrant: A Study of the Technical Communication Challenges for International Graduate Students in the United States*, explores the issues that can occur for international graduate students when navigating situations involving technical communication before, and during, their time attending graduate school in the U.S. In this project, I analyze the rhetorical situations (moments where we see how rhetoric is happening in specific instances) in which international graduate students found themselves constrained in ways they feared would impede their success at school. I conducted semi-structured interviews with current international graduate students at a R1 university in Virginia to discuss specific instances in which they felt constrained by their international status. In coding the data from these interviews, I found two main themes of constraints they impacted my participants: technical, legal, and financial constraints, and ideological constraints. These two main themes, and the resulting sub-themes, highlight two target areas where international graduate students feel constrained in technical communication situations. One of the main findings of this project showcases that there is a gap between the social-justice oriented scholarship being produced in the fields of technical communication, rhetoric, and composition, and the lived experiences of international graduate students. I conclude that building scaffolded support structures that target instances where constraints are most likely to occur will better support international graduate students during their time at U.S. institutions.

DEDICATION

To my parents, who supported me in my dream and to my participants, without whom this would not have been possible.

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A running theme throughout this research project was that community matters; without a strong community, we can often feel isolated or lost. I am thankful that I was part of such a strong and supportive community in the past five years as, without that support, I likely would have faltered along the way.

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Chapter One: Introduction

It is common for the U.S. student who fails college work to leave for a time and return at some later date to resume studies. Unsuccessful college students, however, face a far different future. When admitted, they assume - usually confirmed by college catalogues - that only well-qualified students are admitted and that comprehensive student services are available to all students. Often forgotten in these reassuring terms are the students who, at great financial sacrifice and with the hopes and dreams of families and friends, have traveled thousands of miles, only to be met with frustration and serious learning barriers... it can mean wasted talent and energy, damaged dreams and expectations, loss of face, and possible severe psychological and other health problems

—Stanley E. Henderson & Claire C. Swann, *Handbook for college admission*, 1998, pp. 188-189.

In the 2022-2023 academic year, the United States hosted 1,057,188 international students from more than 210 countries around the world (Institute of International Education, 2023). This is a record number of international students, with the uptick surpassing pre-pandemic numbers and showcasing that international student growth in the United States is on the rise. The Covid-19 pandemic had, naturally, halted the entry for many international students hoping to study in the U.S. Due to border controls and a fear that mobility across countries would hasten the spread of the disease, student enrollment dropped 15.0 in the 2020-2021 academic year, with only a 3.8% increase in the year following when the borders reopened (Institute of International Education, 2023). Perhaps, in part, the increase in international student enrollment is due to the federal government's renewed commitment to international education. The Department of State and the Department of Education released a joint statement (2021) stating that it was paramount for the U.S. to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic by supporting and promoting international student scholar enrollment and retention nationally (p.2). This statement marks a key point in time for scholars to interrogate how international scholars

are supported in the United States. When crises occur, we often find that key issues felt by communities can become exacerbated, as they are now dealing with additional stressors.

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated issues that international graduate students dealt with and many international students felt stranded in the United States with some students noting that the ability to go home to their support systems (family, community, etc) was “expensive, tiring, and time-consuming” (Alkhamees, 2021, 2:20-2:28), not to mention impossible for some students whose countries closed their borders. These feelings of isolation, while exacerbated by the pandemic, are not uncommon for international students. As well as feelings of social isolation, events such as the pandemic threw into sharp relief the fear some international students have of outside forces “interfering with the legality” (Alkhamees, 2021, 4:30-4:37) of their stay in the United States.

While Covid-19 brought such issues as feelings of isolation and legal uncertainty into light, these issues are systemic and have been occurring far before this recent iteration of a crisis moment. On July 6th 2020, during the pandemic, the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) announced that nonimmigrant F-1 and M-1 students taking fully online would not be permitted reentry into the United States. Further, nonimmigrant students living in the US and taking classes fully online would have to return to their home country (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) with the justification being that the students did not have to be in the United States to take classes. For many international students, this was concerning given that many universities were opting to hold classes online to stymie the spread of the virus. The Trump administration

withdrew the order, but international students were made acutely aware that their stay in the United States was provisional on the goodwill of the federal government and not on the student's own merits. While this was an extreme case—typically, laws enforcing and/or amending visas do not get adjusted or made so quickly—it highlights the tenuous position international students occupy in the United States. Moments of crisis such as the pandemic highlight the structural issues faced by international students which, then, presents an opportunity to turn a lens onto said issues in order to identify, address, and work to ameliorate them.

International graduate students face various challenges that are not always visible or well understood by peers and mentors in US higher education. Prior to studying in the United States, potential students must undergo a lengthy legal process that requires interfacing with a number of technical documents and technical communications (see Appendix A). Additionally, a problem is that international graduate students are often at a structural disadvantage *during* their studies in the United States in regard to both working and living conditions (Johnson et al., 2018; Martínez & Plough, 2018; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008). For example, Johnson et al. found in their study that international students were discriminated against in the intersection of race, culture, religion, and language (pp. 1870 - 1872). Intersectional oppressions that aren't accounted for, and combatted, in the support systems provided by universities can swiftly become systemic problems.

Project Overview

Ahead of starting this research project, I was already an international graduate student at my second American institution. This, thankfully, meant that many of the

teething issues faced by international graduate students were somewhat known to me; I had navigated many technical communication issues during my Master's program which made the transition to an international Ph.D. student much easier. However, as I spoke to peers in my community, I was consistently struck by not only the wide array of technical communication issues they faced in situations linked to their technical and legal paperwork, but also by the ideological assumptions placed on them by those they were communicating with. Namely, that international graduate students were somehow deficient or lacking the "appropriate" amount of knowledge to participate in said communication.

This, seemingly, stands at odds with the global turn in scholarship that asks scholars to respect the expertise brought in by international students and scholars. Therefore, I began to wonder why it was that international graduate students were experiencing issues. In situations such as these, where there seems to be a disconnect between scholarship and lived experience(s), Ahmed (2021) calls for scholars to "mind the gap," where the gap is "what is supposed to happen, in accordance with policy and procedure, and what does happen" (p. 30). The gap in my research is reconciling the lived experiences of international graduate students with the best practices touted in literature and scholarship.

Historically, scholarship regarding improving academic conditions for international students was often focused on improving their English language proficiency in the classroom (Barret, 1990; Hughey, 1990; Chiesi, 1992; Fishman, 2001) as English language proficiency was seen as having clear correlations with academic success. However, some scholars argued that focusing on the supposed deficiency of international

students in U.S. classrooms led to a deficient view of the community as a whole. In a grounded theory study at Michigan State University, scholars José Martínez and India Plough (2018) found that a recently piloted culture and language initiative in the university's Arts and Humanities department had given international student-scholars an opportunity to connect their myriad cultures and languages with their classroom practices (pp. 1823-1824). Indeed, the first-hand quotes from those in the pilot program showcased that the participants were excited to be in an environment that supported their cultural and linguistic background. Reading between the lines, Martínez and Plough (2018) surmised that the participants were grateful for the program because this supportive mindset was lacking elsewhere at the university (p. 1824). Perhaps more concerningly, these scholars attribute the lack of embracing multicultural expertise to what they call a "deficit" view entrenched in university programs and institutions, where this deficient view of the international student community intentionally detracts from an international student's agency by seeing multilingualism as an "obstacle to connecting with members of the academic community" (p. 1824). Indeed, Martinez and Plough call for scholars to turn away from this deficit lens in future scholarship. However, despite this call for a different paradigmatic lens, there has already been scholarship published that tackles the presupposition of international student deficiency. Hesford (2006) argued that the myth of linguistic homogeneity needed to be addressed in scholarship (p. 789) and Donahue (2016) argued that only by addressing these issues can the field of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies have a future (p. 147).

With this scholarship having been published in the fields of technical communication, intercultural communication, and rhetoric and composition, we could

logically presume that the fields have shifted towards a generous view of the international student community. However, recent studies have shown this is not the case (Allen & Bista, 2021; Alhamees, 2021) with international students still feeling as if they are deemed lacking while attending universities in the United States. The issue then, as I see it, is that there is a disconnect between contemporary literature and the lived experience of international students. This gap –to borrow Sara Ahmed’s language– poses a problem for academics and university communities at large. Ahmed (2021) posits that a gap exists when there is a disconnect between “what is supposed to happen, in accordance with policy and procedure, and what does happen” (p. 30). Indeed, at the start of this research project I saw the deficit lens as the sum total of the research problem, with my scholarship seeking to dismantle the reasoning behind the paradigm. However, as this project continued, I instead saw that the research problem was not that there is a deficient view of international graduate students purported in scholarship, but that the goals of scholarship and the lived experience(s) of the international graduate student community did not align. Therefore, my initial research problem shifted from interrogating the deficit lens to interrogating why international graduate students still found themselves at a deficiency in certain situations. With universities priding themselves on their diverse international communities and scholarship in the field promoting international student expertise, the disconnected experiences of international students poses a problem. How can we, as scholars, reconcile what we want to do with the realization that those intentions don’t translate to our intended communities?

Scholarship calling for celebrating international student expertise has often responded to prior publications and beliefs that a focus on English language proficiency

was paramount to social justice initiatives (Hesford, 2006; Donahue, 2016; Jones & Williams, 2018). However, in following this trend, scholars have perhaps paid less attention to the issues that constellate the classroom experience. Of course, a wide swathe of research is dedicated to exposing, and arguing against, discriminatory values towards certain communities. However, the specific instances in which international graduate students may face and navigate tense situations could stand to have more scholarship. It is with this in mind that I turn to proposing research that interrogates the specific instances in which international graduate students face barriers to success that occur outside the classroom. In order to conduct this research, I turned to rhetorical theory in order to better disentangle and demystify the moments in which international graduate students faced challenges, and the wider context in which those challenges occurred. I wanted to interrogate how these students tackled difficult situations that could have unintended effects on their performance as members of the U.S. academic community. For example,

When faced with these situations, how do international students navigate them? What resources (cultural, linguistic, or other) do they draw from? Asking questions such as these could highlight the international graduate student experience while providing us with new information on the problems these students face and overcome. Further, demystifying the international student experience constellating the classroom can help build on prior scholarship both interrogating the apparent deficit lens and also promoting acceptance of international expertise in the field. Instead, my scholarship works from the assumption that international graduate students are resourceful, as opposed to deficient in some way. With this foundation in place, I aim to shed light on why there is a gap

between scholarship and the lived experiences of our international graduate student communities.

In this study, I investigate how international graduate students navigate technical communication challenges related to their visa when studying in the United States. Drawing from methods and theories primarily in the field of technical communication—specifically the subfield of int(er/ra)cultural communication—this study aligns with work such as Jones’ (2016) call for technical communicators to take a critical stance towards sociopolitical exigencies and Shelton’s (2020) call for technical communication scholars to recognize and celebrate intellectual contributions by those labeled as “different.” Building on the definition of social justice work and the 3 P’s framework from Walton et al. in *Technical communication after the social justice turn*, this study critically interrogates the way international graduate students exhibit resourceful intercultural technical communication techniques and skills as they apply to, and undertake, their graduate study in the United States. My project involves a situated case study using semi-structured interviews with international graduate students at an R1 university in the US. The interviews will focus on students’ visa application processes, as well as the challenges these students face when interpreting the legal system, completing visa documentation, and translating expectations of US higher education institutions. Through this study I will highlight the diversity of the international graduate student experience and pay careful attention to how differing levels of privilege affect the experience of international students. Significantly, this research will contribute a new perspective to the field by shifting away from a ‘deficit lens’ to an understanding of international graduate students as intercultural communicators who draw from a wealth of situated knowledge,

cultural values, and other resources to maintain their legal status and meet their educational goals.

As my project straddles the fields of technical communication and int(er/ra)cultural communication, when crafting my research questions I wanted to follow Rude's (2009) framework for research in the field that responds to a central question, "how do texts (print, digital, multimedia; visual, verbal) and related communication practices mediate knowledge, values, and action in a variety of social and professional contexts?" (p. 176). Specifically, I wanted to focus on how a thorough examination of international graduate student experiences could shine a light on future best practices and social change goals for the field. With this in mind, I sought to answer the following questions:

- What types of rhetorical situations must international graduate students navigate?
 - What exigencies do international graduate students respond to when navigating these situations?
 - What audiences must be addressed?
 - What constraints (institutional rules, policies, legalities, etc.) must international graduate students consider during this navigation?
- What forms of oppression(s) do international graduate students face?
 - What rhetorical strategies do international graduate students devise and use to overcome these oppressions?
 - What rhetorical strategies do international graduate students devise and use that have failed to overcome these oppressions?

- What can U.S. universities and graduate programs do to provide better support for their international graduate students when navigating these technical and legal processes?

Significance

My project is significant to both scholarship in the field and to universities as a whole. In the field of technical communication, scholars want to move the field towards a more socially just and inclusive space and have therefore called for work that addresses power structures and systemic oppressions (Walton et al, 2019, p. 158). My project will address how systems of power (technical, legal, and academic) affect the international graduate student experience and then will analyze the support implementations that international graduate students ask for, and what these supports suggest is currently lacking. In the course of doing so, I hope that my work shines a light on the difficulties faced by international graduate students and, therefore, illuminates new avenues of scholarship that aim to improve the international graduate student experience. Similarly, the field of critical internationalization studies is concerned with identifying, disrupting, and overcoming traditional practices in the field that have “contributed to the reproduction of systemic harm in the field and beyond” (*Critical internationalization studies masterclass*, n.d., para 1). As explained by Martínez and Plough (2018), deficient views of international students are often entrenched into university systems and programs (p. 1824), so my project aimed to move beyond the classroom to see how programmatic and institutional systems can cause unintended harms to this population. In doing so, my work contributes to research dismantling systems that reproduce systemically damaging results. Work such as Shelton’s (2019) dissertation on the techné of marginality - which

highlights how people historically structured into the margins of society understand their position then engage rhetorically with their surroundings (p. 19) - showcase that this work is being done in the field of rhetoric and conversations regarding marginalized groups are occurring. Thus, my project builds upon the swell of scholarship already occurring in the field. This project is also significant for U.S. universities more broadly and the administrative offices and faculty mentors who work closely with international graduate students. International graduate students are an important group within the wider graduate student community in the US. Not only do they make up 32.28% of the overall graduate population, but they make significant research contributions to universities, bring valuable global perspectives to classrooms, and they also make economic contributions to universities and the US more broadly. Universities thus have pedagogical, ethical, and economic reasons for recruiting, supporting, and retaining international graduate students. By conducting research that builds on prior scholarship refuting the traditional deficit lens, I interrogated the efficacy of programmatic and institutional support systems and identified key areas where international graduate students saw a lack of support. This research, therefore, gathered a dataset from a community important to the university. By including their voices in the academic conversation, and by demystifying the struggles they face outside the classroom I provide a more robust understanding of their time in the U.S. that aligns with prior scholarship discussing their classroom experiences. The findings of this study thus have the potential to help create better graduate programs within departments, better support systems for international graduate students to use as they need, and to help graduate mentors better understand the myriad constraints their students face.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter Two: Understanding the Historical and Academic Influences That Shape the Contemporary Mental Environment for International Graduate Students in the United States

In Chapter Two, I review the history of international student policy in the United States alongside scholarship from the fields of critical internationalization studies and rhetoric, writing, and technical communication scholarship. Putting these fields in concert with one another builds a picture of the contemporary mental environment for international graduate students.

Chapter Three: Theory and Methods

In Chapter Three, I review how my chosen theory and methods align with the research problem that prompted my research and reviewed the literature that constellates my research problem.

Chapter Four: The Unique Legal, Technical, and Financial Constraints faced by International Graduate Students

In Chapter Four I use Lloyd Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation to analyze the specific *legal, technical, and financial constraints* faced by international graduate students before and during their time studying in the United States. In doing so, I outline the unique exigence international graduate students respond to when entering the rhetorical situation of being a foreign student in the United States.

Chapter Five: The Unique Cultural and Ideological Constraints faced by International Graduate Students

In Chapter Five, I continue using Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation to analyze the *ideological constraints* faced by my participants. These constraints, while not specific to technical documents, constellate the technical communication situations my participants navigated.

Chapter Six: Conclusions, Implications, and Future Work

Finally, in Chapter Six, I look at how the findings of my research impact both the fields of rhetoric and international student studies, but also perceptions of international graduate students as a community in the United States educational system. Then, I move to considering how this preliminary research project can pave the way for future studies in the field of rhetoric.

Conclusion

In my conclusion I summarize the main findings from my research and outline how they contribute to prior scholarship regarding international graduate students. These findings lay the groundwork for my suggestions for future scholarship that wants to address the gap between international graduate student experiences and the goals of scholarship.

Chapter Two: Understanding the Historical and Academic Influences That Shape the Contemporary Mental Environment for International Graduate Students in the United States

As Walton et al. argue in *Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn* (2019), in order to understand how institutions and organizations influence and structure communication, we must first understand the social, historical, and cultural contexts at play (p. 33). Therefore, in order to better understand the contemporary context in which international graduate students navigate technical communication situations, we must first historicize the landscape of international student study. This will, in turn, demystify the context in which international graduate students apply to, then study in, the United States. Traditionally, research projects such as mine review the relevant literature in the field to establish a gap that must be addressed. However, my research posits that we must attend to contexts international graduate students face outside the classroom to better understand the issues they face during their time in the U.S. Therefore, in this chapter, my review honors this research positionality by situating scholarship alongside social and legal trends, thereby painting a comprehensive picture of U.S. trends and attitudes towards international graduate students. In this chapter, I conduct this review of literature, but I also draw links between scholarship and the social and legal context of varying time periods. My research posits that we must attend to contexts international graduate students face outside the classroom to better understand the issues they face during their time in the U.S. Therefore, my review honors this research positionality by situating scholarship in social issues, thereby painting a comprehensive picture of U.S. trends and attitudes towards international graduate students.

For foreigners, the U.S. is an institution of cultural commonalities, ideologies, and ways of speaking that they must learn. Therefore, by historicizing the landscape of international students in the United States, and seeing what academic lenses have been privileged in scholarship discussing this community, we can build a better understanding of the contemporary mental environment faced by today's international graduate students. Therefore, I will first analyze U.S. sentiment towards international students pre- and post-9/11 before looking at how the Covid-19 pandemic shifted the discourse surrounding international students more generally. Second, I will be asking how the events surrounding international students have changed the rhetorical situation they found themselves in which will better allow us to analyze the rhetorical situation they find themselves in today. Throughout this chapter, I will highlight how universities, cultural differences, public opinion, and politics all coalesce to shape the way contemporary international graduates move and act during their stay in the United States. It is important to note that much of this chapter will discuss international students on a broader scale, as laws pertaining to international students typically don't distinguish between undergraduate and graduate; this comes later when we discuss the specific legal paperwork current international graduates have to complete. Instead, this chapter aims to map key turning points that changed the rhetorical landscape for all contemporary international students, which also includes the international graduate student population. In order to name and describe the types of rhetorical situations that international graduate students navigate during their time in graduate school, we must first attend to the wider social environment regarding international students in the United States. While rhetorical situations are named and analyzed moments of time, these moments are still occurring in

what Bitzer (1980) called the *mental environment* which is the environment with which people interact on a daily basis. Whereas a physical environment can be seen and interacted with physically, the mental environment includes, “ideas, images, meanings, symbols, laws, rules, conventions, attitudes, feelings, interests, and aspirations that constitute the mental world” (p. 22). Therefore, the mental environment is important to studies of the rhetorical situation, as it affects any situation in which we hope to conduct analysis. For example, an American student and an international student may face different constraints in similar rhetorical situations depending on the rules and conventions that affect them in society.

The United States is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world, yet retains a firm sense of patriotism, with school children learning to pledge allegiance to their flag and American ideals from a young age. This contributes to the American ideology of a strong and united nation-state. The nation-state centers its notions of self on language, race, religion, blood, and soil (Appadurai, 2013, p. 85) that coalesce to create a sense of what one is and, therefore, what one isn't. This understanding of “us versus them” can lead to prejudiced views that see people discriminating against individuals because of their membership to a group or nation-state that is part of the “other” (Kibbee, 2016, p. 3), especially with globalization causing more people to cross borders and, therefore, disrupt the unity of domestic citizens of a nation-state (Appadurai, 2013, p. 91). The modern ideal for nation-states, it seems, is to have boundaries of citizenry and territory that are the sole province of domestic citizens (Jung, 2009, p. 390), which does not align with an influx of foreigners. Therefore, scholarship seeking to interrogate contemporary assumptions about international students must attend to the complex

dynamic at play here; foreigners are welcomed by the government, but a strong sense of what it means to be “American” is still prevalent in society, thereby marking foreigners as “other.”

International students flock to U.S. universities and enter into this complex dynamic. The international student industry as a whole contributed roughly \$40.1 billion dollars to the American economy in the 2022-2023 academic year, with those students also supporting 368,333 jobs (NAFSA, n.d., para. 1). With these sorts of figures, it may come as little surprise that many higher education institutes want to encourage international student admissions. Further, a new coalition of 11 international student focused organizations was created in November 2023 to work alongside the U.S. government in a bid to bolster international student admissions moving forward (U.S. Coalition, 2023, para 1). However, this new coalition - the U.S. for Success Coalition - is responding, in part, to the issue that other countries have seen a growth in their international student population due to visa and immigration policies being more favorable (U.S. Coalition, 2023, para 4). Despite the growing figures of international graduates choosing countries other than the United States, there is still a strong presence of international graduate students in the U.S. due, in large part, to the wealth of opportunities presented by the staggering amount of universities in America.

In this chapter, therefore, my goal is to review scholarship alongside social and legal trends to paint a wider picture of the historical landscape both in literature and in U.S. society. In detailing these conversations constellating the international student experience, I showcase the social, historical, and cultural contexts that have shaped contemporary organizations and institutions, thereby affecting the contemporary *mental*

environment for international graduate students. . In doing so, I analyze and name a gap in which future research, including my own, can bolster conversations in the field. By situating this gap in a wider context outside of the academic classroom, we can see where new research can make inroads into understanding, and improving, the international graduate student experience. Conducting this historicization and analysis will not only allow us to better understand the *mental environment* navigated by international graduate students but also bolster our ability to analyze the exigence they're responding to when entering into the rhetorical situation of undertaking graduate study.

This chapter will first briefly map a history of U.S. immigration policies that will serve as a cultural context for the rest of the review. Then, I move to reviewing literature regarding international students in two scholarly areas of study: critical studies of international education and the field of rhetoric, writing, and technical communication.

A Brief History of International Student Immigration Policy

In mapping shifting U.S. immigration policy that pertained to international students, I name three perceptions of international students during three time periods in history, with those being: international students as vehicles of diplomacy, international students as potential threats, and international students as surplus. This brief rhetorical history helps to contextualize the scholarship that was being produced around the same time. The complexity of academic publication produced in the context of its social environs is key, as there are moments during periods of history where social and legal issues sometimes aligned with scholarship and, at other times, stood at odds with one another. This relationality is key to my study, as it highlights how we must look beyond

scholarship if we want to tackle the deficit felt by our international graduate student communities.

The first perception of international graduate students, which I name as international students as a vehicle for diplomacy, ran from the conclusion of WWI to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The conclusion of WWI served to catalyze a desire for people to travel across the world and immerse themselves in other cultures. In 1919, the Institute of National Education (INE) was founded with the belief that “international education could build a more secure and equitable world” (INE, n.d., para. 1). International students were invited from countries across the world and, in turn, the United States sent their own students abroad. However, a scant two years later, the United States passed the Emergency Quota Act of 1921. This act was fueled in large part by a fear that the U.S. was receiving too many immigrants and this flow needed to be stemmed. Notably absent from this restrictive bill were international students. Despite a general fear that immigrants were beginning to overwhelm U.S. society; a fear almost certainly exacerbated by the initial wave of the fear that communism beliefs were growing in the public, and which would later escalate into full-blown McCarthyism, the international student population was divorced from these criticisms. Of course, a student’s country of origin could have potentially placed them in the crosshairs of anti-immigrant sentiment, but, federally speaking, the wider international student population remained a privileged subsection of immigrants more generally.

The sentiment that international students should be a privileged class of nonimmigrant due to education’s ability to enhance democratic ideals was further cemented at the close of WWII. Whereas the climax of WWI brought about the INE, and

the conclusion of WWII inspired two more programs to be created: the Fulbright Program and the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE). The Fulbright Program was created in 1946 following a bill called the Fulbright Act being signed into effect by then president Harry S. Truman (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, n.d., para. 3). William Fulbright (1961), the senator who introduced the bill, noted that the program would be a “means of promoting in the United States a wider interest and deeper comprehension of other societies and of creating a climate of public opinion in which the actions, motives, and policies of the United States would be fairly interpreted abroad” (p. 21). The CIEE (which was formerly known as the Council on Student Travel) was created in 1947 and primarily focused on sending American students for schooling in Europe, but by the 1950’s they were facilitating student travel from, and to, the U.S. (CIEE, n.d., paras. 4-5). William Fulbright noted that there had been a surge of isolationist thinking in the U.S. following WWII, but the creation of these programs, as well as the governmental support they receive, showcased that the U.S. government was invested in promoting international education despite the anti-immigration sentiment sweeping through society. Education and immersion in other cultures would, they hoped, combat the prejudice and misrepresentation of “other” culture that had become prevalent in American society (Fulbright, 1961, p. 24). Thus, we can see that despite the growing isolationist and nationalistic sentiment in the U.S., exacerbated by two successive world wars, the future for international students looked bright, whether those were American students traveling elsewhere, or students visiting the U.S.

The attitude towards international students, shifting from them being vehicles of diplomacy to potential threats, took a marked turn with the terrorist attack of September

11, 2001, which shocked the world and left an enduring mark on the political and social landscape regarding safety, terrorism, and governmental responses to disaster. The ensuing wave of political and legal reform in the United States aimed to reinforce safety measures against terrorist threats and, in doing so, protect the public. These reforms cast a wide net in regard to security changes, but international laws, regulations, and systems were among the most affected by reform. Following 9/11, there was a collective anger amongst American citizens and this anger was “significantly associated with support for military intervention, anti-immigration policy, and restricting civil liberties” (Kim, 2016, p. 464). The key phrase here is “anti-immigration policy,” as many began to conflate the idea of immigration with the threat of terrorism. As such, the landscape for all immigrants in the United States. Iyer and Rathod (2011) outlined some of these changes: over 20 federal agencies were moved to work under the ‘newly created U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)’ (para. 3); noncitizens were now allowed to be detained for 48 or more hours (para. 5); biometric data collection became mandatory for foreign nationals (para. 8); and the United States focused on enhancing their land borders (para. 10). These security measures were put in place to protect citizens from attacks, but the reforms affected all immigrants who already lived, or planned to live and/or enter the United States. While these measures were put into place to, as mentioned earlier, tighten security, the social effect of these reforms further legitimized anti-immigrant sentiments. Therefore, the security measures did respond to a pressing need for tightened security on American borders, but the outcome affected the mental and social environment for immigrants in the United States.

The first major piece of public law responding to this security issue was the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001. Later, it would commonly be referred to simply as the USA Patriot Act. Title IV of the act, named ‘Protecting the Border’ noted that ‘The Attorney General, in consultation with the Secretary of State, shall fully implement and expand the program established by section 641(a) of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996’ (USA Patriot Act, 2001). The program here is the, aforementioned, ‘program to collect information relating to nonimmigrant foreign students and other exchange program participants’. While tightening security following a terrorist attack is not necessarily ‘damaging’ and many would applaud the action, for international students specifically we see a prevailing context in which they are being cast as potential threats to American security. The controlling exigence, to borrow Bitzer’s language, is one of crisis and threat response, with citizens being the audience and international students being constrained by the decisions of lawmakers. It may seem inconsequential that international student surveillance is mentioned in a small section of a much larger public law, but linking the international community to a law specifically aimed at intercepting and obstructing terrorism only serves to reinforce the public notion of foreigners as potentially threatening to the American way of life and their security.

Following the USA Patriot Act, federal lawmakers implemented the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) designed to keep track of international students and scholars during their stay in the U.S. in a bid to ensure that those staying in the country on a visa are not only students, but remain in good standing with the

government and their school. Hung (2015) noted that the implementation of such laws highlighted an American pattern of “rounding up immigrants during national security crises” (p. 288). SEVIS was designed to keep citizens safe from potential threats, but universities were, subsequently, given the role of inputting international student information into this system. In 2003 staff at Southeastern University made an error putting in an international student’s information into SEVIS; the student was arrested (Farnam, 2005, p. 119). This highlighted the stark reality that linking the term “international” with the term “security risk” undoubtedly will lead to international students being placed in situations where arrests happen first, and questions happen later.

The USA Patriot Act didn’t only affect security measures in regard to new systems such as SEVIS being created, but it also affected laws and security systems already in place. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) had previously protected all student information since its inception in 1974. However, section 507 of the USA Patriot Act, titled ‘Disclosure of Educational Records’ introduced a new subsection called ‘Investigation and Prosecution of Terrorism’. This subsection wrote into law that student information could be accessed *ex parte* from schools if a student was being investigated in regard to a terrorist threat (J, 1) and that the schools could not be held liable for releasing that information (J, 3). As Farnam (2005) explains, the information being available *ex parte* not only means that government officials can access international student information, but those students need not be informed that their records are being examined nor accessed (p. 125). It should be noted that, as evidenced by the subpart’s title, the requests of information should only happen in regard to investigations regarding terrorism. However, writing this subpart into law highlights that

student surveillance through SEVIS was not enough, and that the federal government wanted stronger legal policy in place to surveil a community rife with potential threats. This circumnavigation of FERPA applies to all students, not only international ones but, coupled with SEVIS, the international student community was suddenly placed under heavy scrutiny. In sum, colleges across the country shifted from not only being places of learning, but now places of militaristic surveillance.

The SEVIS system remains in place today and students remain surveilled as potential threats. However, with the onset of the COVID-19, students also became, what I name, surplus to requirements. In December, 2019, the World Health Organization was informed of a “pneumonia-like illness” in the Chinese city of Wuhan (CDC, 2023). By March, 2020, a nationwide emergency was declared and schools across the United States closed their doors. During the pandemic, the Trump administration announced it would refuse reentry to international students whose universities were only offering online classes with the justification being that the students did not have to be in the United States to take classes. The language used in the announcement threatened legal action for those international students already living in the U.S.

Active students currently in the United States enrolled in such programs must depart the country or take other measures, such as transferring to a school with in-person instruction to remain in lawful status or potentially face immigration consequences including, but not limited to, the initiation of removal proceedings (NAFSA, 2020, p.1).

For many international students, this was concerning given that many universities were opting to hold classes online to stymie the spread of the virus. While the word

“deportation” is more commonly known, legally, it’s an outdated term which has been replaced with “removal” (Richard Jurisik, para 2, 2024). However, removal is only invoked when a visa holder has, in some way, deviated from the allowances of their visa. Therefore, with this announcement, international students were being told that failing to attend in-person classes would result in them being in violation of their visa. Further, the language of “including, but not limited to” had students wondering what other legal action, aside from removal, could be taken against them. Further, the language used in the announcement makes it clear that failing to leave the country, or transfer schools, would mean students were breaking their lawful status and, therefore, right to remain in the United States. Arranging overseas travel or transferring schools can be potentially daunting tasks at any time, let alone during a pandemic and with the threat of potential removal looming. However, failing to follow these rules would have put international students in direct opposition to the law. The Trump administration withdrew the order before any action was taken against those who didn’t transfer schools or take in-person classes, but international students were made acutely aware that their stay in the United States was provisional on the goodwill of the federal government and not on the student’s own merits. While this was an extreme case - typically, laws enforcing and/or amending visas do not get adjusted or made so quickly - it highlighted the tenuous legal position international students occupy in the United States.

In reviewing what I name as three key periods in which international students were perceived differently in regards to federal policy and legality, I showcase the cultural context in which international students entered the United States. Despite the three turns, echoes of each period remain for contemporary international students. They

are clearly a desirable population, as U.S. universities are still working to recruit students from overseas; the post-WWI and WWII notion that they enrich U.S. academia still stands. However, this student population remains surveilled by SEVIS and they are still subject to potential policy changes instigated by moments of crisis. Therefore, the contemporary cultural context entered into by international students is complex, and studies conducted in this space need to attend to the complexity of their social positionality in regard to federal policy as well as their positions as students. With this in mind, I now move to reviewing scholarship conducted about international students. In doing so, I aim to build a more robust picture of the academic trends regarding priority issues in the scholarly literature.

International Students in Critical Studies of International Education

A rhetorical study of international graduate students will benefit from drawing attention to the field of critical internationalization studies. While the fields differ, they coalesce when it comes to studies of international student populations. The focus of critical internationalization studies is to critically analyze internationalization at U.S. institutes of higher education in an increasingly globalized world (Critical Internationalization Studies, n.d., para 3). Therefore, scholars in this field are primarily interested in educational and institutional infrastructure that affects international students.

Scholars of international education generally find that the international graduate student experience is heavily affected by the political landscape of immigration and U.S. foreign relations. For example, linking international students to security threats is not new, and the Trump presidency merely added to prior concerns; scholars in the field of

international students studies have long been aware of this. In 2015, the Critical Internationalization Studies Network (CISN) was created (Stein & McCartney, 2021, p. 2) to “brings together scholars, practitioners, educators, students, and community organizations interested in reimagining dominant patterns of relationship, representation, and resource distribution in the internationalization of education” (CISN, ‘home’, para 1). And in 2017 Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood called for international studies scholars to assess the research agenda in the field and respond to how political climates affect international students (p. II). In 2021, Allen and Bista published an article responding to this call to action in which they historicize political affect on international students and how this fits into contemporary international student studies discourse. During the course of their research, Allen and Bista (2021) found that while there are more bipartisan efforts to regard international students in contemporary discourse, international students are still often ‘scapegoated as potential terrorists’ and the understanding that they should undergo security scrutiny is ‘normalized’ (p. 189). Research such as this, I argue, showcases how normalizing deficit mindsets regarding international students as potential security threats feed into a discriminatory attitude that pervades the international experience in more ways than one.

Research in the field of International Student Studies tends to focus primarily on discrimination faced by international students in the United States, whether that discrimination is focused on security measures, race, and/or academic aptitude. This focus stems from concerns brought forward by international graduates. For example, a survey conducted by Keystone Education Group (2022) found that international students' top concerns when attending school in the United States was the potential for racial

discrimination (22.22%) and the potential for physical violence (16.67%) (p. 5). This fear is legitimated through past actions in the United States such as the 2017 ‘Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States’ which became known colloquially as simply “the travel ban.” This ban, and its next two iterations struggled to find purchase in the U.S. courts, but the third ban eventually found a foothold and restricted travel for six Muslim countries, North Korea, and Venezuela under the legitimation that such bans would protect the safety of Americans by cracking down on terrorism and crime (Stein, 2018, p. 894). In restricting access from certain countries only, the travel ban fed into the trope of racial profiling that was seen during the post-9/11 terrorism paranoia era. The outcome of federally legitimized racial profiling is that international students became “the targets of violence and discrimination based on race, religion, ethnicity, and national origin” (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017, p. II). International students not only had to navigate racial profiling but also the “paradoxical policy agendas of neoliberalism in higher education and the securitization of migration” (Pottie-Sherman, 2018, p. 33). This navigation is an integral experience for international students that affects them not only before they apply to a university, but also throughout their stay in the United States. Vieira (2016) notes that migration-driven literacy is heavily affected by economic trends and materiality (p. 423) and these factors are also present in this discussion. In other words, Pottie-Sherman’s description of the paradox is not all that uncommon for those who migrate across borders, regardless of their reason for doing so. International graduates are aware that they are both employed on behalf of the university that sponsors them but, while employed, they are constantly aware that their employment places them under scrutiny from the US government; the

government (and academies) wants international graduates to work for them but treat those same graduates as if they are all potential security risks. The materiality of the situation is ever-present, and all international graduate students are aware of the duality of their experience(s).

Other researchers have found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that such discrimination has a negative impact on international students' academic socialization in higher education. Racial discrimination, and discrimination more generally directed at international students, is a topic discussed in International Student Studies. Seithers, Amankulova, and Johnstone (2022) found that domestic students often had a deficit mindset towards their international peers' ability to write, speak, and generally complete work in classroom settings; their study also found that domestic students often didn't want to work with international students (p. 392). Further, Mittelmeier, Lomer, and Unkule (2022) wrote a blog post on the CISN website discussing their latest edited volume on international student studies. In this post, they state that "intrinsic inequalities and epistemic injustices" are still not addressed in the field of international student studies (para. 6) and future research needs to focus on researching with, and not just about, international students (para. 5). These epistemic injustices, argue the authors, stem from scholars not recognizing international students as "epistemic *equals*" (para. 5). The authors make the argument that current research focuses on international graduate student assimilation to host countries (Mittelmeier et al., 2022, para. 5) and, when suggestions to 'improve' international graduate experiences are made from this research, the results further entrench discriminatory opinions regarding the abilities of said students during

their stay in the United States by assuming that assimilation - at the cost of erasing cultural knowledge(s) and identities - is the ideal goal.

Indeed, other scholars in international student studies were taking notice of the stress levels of international students and noting that there still seemed to be a disconnect between international student experiences and the academy's overarching goal of producing knowledgeable and competent scholars. Johnson et al. (2018) noted in their study that it was difficult to distinguish between international student concerns, as they were so imbricated in one another (p. 1873). Indeed, they found that acculturation levels affected stress, as well as individual, cultural, and language differences (p. 1873) and, of course, a student's stress levels can affect their academic performance in a multitude of ways. Similarly, Chavajay and Skownerek (2008) had found, in their study of international students at the University of Utah, that 78% of students felt lonely in the United States (p. 831), which was caused by a variety of factors such as homesickness, an insubstantial friend group, and disrespect for their cultural values (p. 832). Therefore, it seems that scholarship hoping to improve the international graduate student experience in the United States must move beyond the classroom and also take into account the impact of forces affecting student stress outside of class. These forces, as aforementioned, were exacerbated by a return to nationalism among the U.S. public post 9/11. Despite scholarship calling for a more equitable purview of international student capabilities and positionalities, it seemed as if international students were still experiencing the same levels of stress and discrimination that stemmed from the traditional deficit view during their time in U.S. universities.

It seems, then, that the field of critical internationalization studies recognizes, and speaks against, what scholars see as epistemic and ingrained discrimination against the international student community. This scholarship frames out a context in which rhetoricians can conduct their analysis of how language operates about, and amongst, international students.

International Students in Studies of Rhetoric, Writing, and Tech Comm

Rhetorical Theory and Criticism

When international students began to come to the U.S., scholars in the field of rhetoric, writing, and tech comm began to take up scholarship that analyzed the presence of international students at U.S. institutions. Within studios of rhetorical theory and criticism, issues related to international students appear in studies of immigration policy and social movements. For example, in Ann Sinsheimer's dissertation, she examines the way that the 9/11 terrorist attacks changed the discourse regarding international students in the United States. In large part, noted Sinsheimer (2011) a shift in attitudes regarding international students was caused by the fact that the hijackers entered the United States on student visas and attended flight school in the U.S. (p. 27). Articles were published noting that the INS had not been adequately monitoring the influx of international students and vetting whether they were entering the U.S. with genuine intention to study (Sinsheimer, 2011, p. 27). As such, an overhaul of the international student system was initiated by the federal government. The first major piece of public law responding to this security issue was the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001. Later, it would commonly be referred to simply as the USA Patriot Act. Title IV of the

act, named 'Protecting the Border' noted that 'The Attorney General, in consultation with the Secretary of State, shall fully implement and expand the program established by section 641(a) of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996' (USA Patriot Act, 2001). The program here is the aforementioned, "program to collect information relating to nonimmigrant foreign students and other exchange program participants." While tightening security following a terrorist attack is not necessarily 'damaging' and many would applaud the action, for international students specifically we see a prevailing context in which they are being cast as potential threats to American security. The controlling exigence, to borrow Bitzer's language, is one of crisis and threat response, with citizens being the audience and international students being constrained by the decisions of lawmakers. It may seem inconsequential that international student surveillance is mentioned in a small section of a much larger public law, but linking the international community to a law specifically aimed at intercepting and obstructing terrorism only serves to reinforce the public notion of foreigners as potentially threatening to the American way of life and their security. Indeed, Sinsheimer (2011) noted that 9/11 catalyzed a shift in public thinking that saw the term "international student" becoming implicitly linked with the term "terrorist" (p. 192). We see this rhetorical analysis, then, adhering closely to the idea that research on international student populations benefits from taking legal and political context into account.

Similarly, Josue Cisneros noted the through line between federal policy and the way it impacted immigrant communities. Cisneros (2011) conducted a rhetorical analysis of the 2006 immigration protests that were sparked, he argued, by immigrant communities in the U.S. feeling alienated and disenfranchised by increasingly restrictive

immigration policy (p. 27). The stringent policies started to emerge in response to fears over what it meant to be a citizen in the United States and how the “other,” in this case immigrants and immigrant communities, might pose a threat to that understanding of an American citizen. Cisneros looked at the way protestors in *La Gran Marcha* used verbal rhetoric to redraw the borders of what it means to enact citizenship and, in doing so, created a hybrid identity for themselves; neither solely American nor part of a potentially threatening “other.” This, Cisneros (2011) argued, was a demonstration of how “American” and “alien” discourses can be fused to re-imagine what a U.S. citizen looks like in a global world (p. 41). In pushing back against the ethnocentric formations of national identity, the immigrant community studied by Cisneros enacted a space for themselves where they could celebrate their cultural identity and heritage while also carving a space of belonging for themselves in the United States. Cisneros’ work highlights the way immigrant communities can use rhetoric to push back against the oppressive labels and presumptions placed on them.

Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies

Within studies of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies, the issue of international students has mainly focused on issues of second-language acquisition, multilingual writing, and basic English proficiency. In promoting integration of international students into U.S. universities, there were questions of how best to handle this new student population. A report on international students from the University of Illinois (1964) had the following to say regarding the new international student population.

foreign students are different. While American students are not [all] alike... they all have the advantage of attending an institution which has traditionally been oriented toward those facts of their backgrounds which, as Americans, they share in common. One illustration of this, so basic that it is often overlooked, is the fact that English is their common language. Not so the foreign students (emphasis in original, p. 5)

While the report did note a number of specific areas that the university needed to target when it came to integrating their international student population, this preamble was given to introduce said areas. As we can see, there is acknowledgement of cultural differences setting international students apart, but, seemingly, the main topic of concern was that domestic students shared a common mother tongue, whereas the presumption was that international students would not be able to speak English proficiently. This is reinforced with a later suggestion given in the report that states that, “[a]fter admission, special classes in English staffed by competent teachers, must be provided if the student is to learn in an institution where this is the language of instruction” (University of Illinois, 1964, p. 7). Here, we can see that English language proficiency is a central concern and, in the case of this university, they recommended a need for specialized classes to ensure students were competent English speakers.

Indeed, NAFSA published *English testing in U.S. colleges and universities*, in which Barret (1990) noted that many international students submission to American universities were predicated on their ability to score 500 or higher on a TOEFL exam (p. 3) lest they be denied a placement, or admitted as a student that was not considered full-time until they passed “remedial ESL program[s]” (p. 4). The focus on ensuring students

have English language proficiency was considered important to the universities, as waiving a standard of English for certain students would “compromise the institution’s professional credibility” (Haas, 1990, p. 12). Indeed, the issue of language proficiency was so great that Angelis (1990) recommended a “critical” guideline that universities have separate guidelines for international student admissions and international student English proficiency placement testing (p. 25). Thus, we can see that, while international students were promoted as enhancing diplomatic ties with other countries post-WWII, there were concerns regarding their English language proficiency and how that would reflect on the universities they chose to study at.

However, while setting a normative standard for English language proficiency was, presumably, seen as a hallmark of a university’s rigor, that is not to say that international students were not considered in this scholarship. Indeed, the focus of putting English language proficiency tests in place was seen by many as a kind and supportive move from institutions. Chiesi (1992) noted that international students were often “disabled by the lack of polished, oral skills” (p. 140) during their time in American academia. Similarly, Hughey (1990) noted that robust systems to teach and evaluate English proficiency would benefit both the students as well the universities they attend (p. 66). On the other hand, Henderson and Sweeney (1998) noted that bilingual and bicultural students were viewed negatively for these skills, leading to negative stereotypes of this community (p. 175). If bilingualism and biculturalism sometimes led to students being viewed negatively, it stands to reason that a focus on improving their English language proficiency could well become tangled up in these stereotypes. Indeed, international students straddled a line where they were being welcomed into U.S.

academies, but views of immigrants more generally were not positive, as noted by the creation of the IIRAIRA. With stereotypes of bilingualism and biculturalism affecting these students, it may come as little surprise that universities were making conscious efforts to improve their English language proficiency. However well-intentioned, this push for English language proficiency may have been, there was still an undercurrent of belief that their language skills were a deficiency that needed to be addressed, should they hope to compete with domestic students.

Academic conversations regarding international student needs did not immediately change following 9/11, despite the academy's relationship to their international students undergoing a dramatic shift. Indeed, a lot of scholarship continued to focus on international student's English language proficiency. As Fishman (2001) noted in his co-written article, he struggled with an international student who was writing "poorly" because,

[I did not] take these writing problems as a sign she was not highly intelligent, diligent in her work, and serious about her education. However, as sympathetic as I was to Neha's situation, I could not just ignore her reading and writing difficulties... it was my job to certify that students who passed [my class] were reading and writing Standard American English at the college level (p. 194)

Here, we gain insight into the crux of the problem that lay at the heart of discussions regarding international students; how can we reconcile their inherent capabilities in some areas, while ensuring they meet the standards of a class and, indeed, a university? This question echoed through much scholarship in the fields of writing and rhetoric. The answer, perhaps, was given by Wendy Hesford (2006) who, in responding to the effects

of 9/11 on rhetoric and composition, noted that scholars in the field had begun to critique “the myth of linguistic homogeneity and the tacit policy of unidirectional English monolingualism” (p. 789). The critique stemmed, in Hesford’s view, from scholars’ concerns regarding the post-9/11 nationalism and ideologies that had swept through the U.S. As aforementioned, public sentiment post-9/11 had taken a turn towards closed borders and anti-immigrant policies. Instead of concerning themselves with the sole “concern” of English proficiency, scholars began to question their best practices and pedagogies when it came to globalization in the classroom and international students.

Hesford’s work caused a groundswell in later scholarship, with the *Composition Studies* journal releasing a special edition in 2016 which focused on the global turn in the field. In this issue, scholars came together to discuss different facets of “global” writing. Hesford (2006) had noted that the field of rhetoric and composition may have closer ties to “transnational-social movement studies” than scholars had previously thought (p. 793) and we can see this mindset being taken up by the scholars in the *Composition Studies* special edition. Horner and Tetrault (2016) studied how translation offers a rich framework for neoliberal and monolingual critique in the composition classroom (p. 17). The friction caused by translation, they argued, offered valuable insights into the intricacies of communicative practices more generally (Horner & Tetrault, 2016, p. 26). This, inherently, celebrates the idea of embracing different languages, which seems to stand at odds with the field’s previous focus on inculcating international students into a mindset that English language proficiency should be their primary goal. Similarly, in the same issue, Shapiro et al. (2016) argued that appreciation of linguistic diversity helped promote agency among their international students (p. 48). In sharing successful different

pedagogical frameworks for celebrating linguistic diversity among their own classes, these authors highlighted how opening the door for linguistic diversity in class helped their students move with more agency when it came to writing. These frameworks for diversity can be hard to master, as they require scholars and teachers to think outside of their own cultural and national frames of thinking (Leonard, 2016, p. 128). However, international scholar, Christiane Donahue (2016) argued that the effects of globalization on the field of rhetoric and composition have ensured that only by constantly questioning our traditional understandings of “language, rhetoric, teaching and learning” can the field have a future (p. 147). Thus, it seemed as if the field of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies was working to envision what scholarship looked like as a whole; previously, international students had been sectioned off as needing a different set of rules but, now, the field was the one being influenced by globalization.

Technical Communication

Within studies of technical communication, the issue of international students tends to come up more indirectly as it relates to issues of intercultural communication. Recent scholarship in the field examines how technical documents may function as tools of exclusion and discrimination.

While not directly addressing international populations, Jones and Williams conducted a study on how technologies can be built to disenfranchise users. They studied election technologies to see how these might have been built to intentionally reduce certain groups' power to vote. They draw from Katz's assertion that “technical writing, perhaps even more than other kinds of rhetorical discourse, always leads to action, and thus always impacts human life” (Katz qtd. in Jones and Williams, 2018, p. 373).

Therefore, Jones and Williams were concerned with the material effects that technical writing and systems can have on people's lived experiences and ways of moving in the world. In this study, they historicized election technologies in regard to certain voting groups then moved to rhetorically analyzing the language used in voting applications in the 1890s through to 1965. This analysis focused on textual and visual elements of the form to see how Black voters were intentionally disenfranchised and barred from voting as they had to disclose more information than white voters and the language used to elicit that information was often confusing (Jones & Williams, 2018, p. 380). Because giving Black voters different forms than white voters was allowed, it was easier to present different forms with different agendas that aligned with the goals of the state. In conducting this study, Jones and Williams (2018) urge scholars to understand that forms and applications have historically infringed on civil rights and people's freedoms in a way that does not seem "out of the ordinary". (p. 384). In other words, we may be so used to seeing these forms that we would not be able to distinguish what is, and is not, oppressive.

In an article focused on international populations, Walwema and Carmichael (2021) acknowledge the turn towards inclusive practices and scholarship in the field of technical and professional communication but suggest that the turn towards inclusivity has not translated into inclusive practices in academic job descriptions (p. 107). Indeed, these scholars posit that academic job descriptions still fell into the same mold of including "exclusionary barriers" that barred international scholars from competing for the same academic jobs their American colleagues could (p. 119). By using critical discourse analysis, Walwema and Carmichael found that many job applications were

exclusionary, even if they did not mean to be, as the language in the adverts may preclude international candidates for selection. An example of this, the scholars found, was the use of the term “eligible” as opposed to “authorized” in job applications. Many applications asked if candidates were “authorized” to work in the U.S. and recently graduated international scholars would, legally, have to answer “no” which would likely exclude them from the hiring pool (Walwema & Carmichael, 2021, p. 117). This is because international scholars who need sponsorship are *eligible* to work in the U.S., as authorization to work comes after they have been accepted into a job and sponsored for it. Given the weighty legal ramifications of these terms, they cannot be used interchangeably and, yet, they often are. Walwema and Carmichael (2021) argue that, because the term “authorized” is often used over the term “eligible,” job advertisers are indirectly saying they value work authorization as either equal to, or more important than, the applicant’s qualifications (p. 117). While the legal ability to work in a role is, of course, of paramount importance, the choice to use the word “authorized” projects a belief that an applicant should already be authorized to work, as if their qualifications and eligibility are not enough. While this discussion does not directly impact international graduate students, as they have not yet graduated to the point of going onto the job market as aspiring international scholars, the impact of this discussion runs parallel to that of discussing international graduate student paperwork. Knowing the legal ramifications of certain words is important when it comes to providing equitable conditions for international students and scholars, as a lack of understanding can lead to unintentionally reproducing harms.

Conclusion

This review of history and scholarship showcases the way federal policy, cultural issues, and rhetorical analysis can intersect to paint a clearer picture of the ways in which scholars can conceptualize research in international student spaces. Historically, scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition focused on creating safe spaces for international students in their classrooms, but this could not extend into students' spaces outside of class. This was exacerbated by the move to online teaching, as many faculty members felt as if the shift from in-person to online classrooms were "pedagogical triage" as opposed to the carefully scaffolded best practices using employed in the field (Sheppard, 2021, p. 77). The shift to online classes was certainly felt in the international student community. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many international students felt stranded in the United States with some students noting that the ability to go home to their support systems (family, community, etc.) was "expensive, tiring, and time-consuming" (Alkhamees, 2021, 2:20-2:28), not to mention impossible for some students whose countries closed their borders. These feelings of isolation, while exacerbated by the pandemic, are not uncommon for international students. As well as feelings of social isolation, events such as the pandemic threw into sharp relief the fear some international students have of outside forces "interfering with the legality" (Alkhamees, 2021, 4:30-4:37) of their stay in the United States. Thus, the feelings of isolation among international students previously found by scholars were now exacerbated by students' legal concerns about the legitimacy of their stay in the U.S.

In order to overcome this new tenuous position during the Covid-19 pandemic, international students turned to showcasing new avenues for resilience. Historically, international students most commonly showcased resilience in regard to academic

adaptability and their navigation of cultural discrimination such as race, gender, and class (Gomes et al., 2021, p. 23). But, during the pandemic, Gomes et al. (2021) found that international students showcased a capacity for resilience by using their social networks of other international students in order to overcome challenges or problems they faced (p. 31) and, therefore, showcasing their resilience outside of the normative academic adaptability. This finding impacts not only the field of critical internationalization studies, but also the fields of rhetoric and composition, which still look at students in the context of the global knowledge(s) they bring to the classroom.

This introspective scholarship has been contested in the field of technical and professional communication. Shelton and Warren-Riley (2022) noted that, in order to conduct ethical social-justice oriented work, scholars must look outward from their disciplinary desires for legitimacy as well as detach their scholarship from the traditions of their respective fields (p. 314). This aligns with previous commentary on the field of English Studies that noted a reliance on over-specialization among disciplines housed in English departments closed avenues of generative conversation (McComiskey, 2006, p. 33). With this in mind, scholarship that seeks to improve perceptions of international graduate students in an ethical manner must critically examine the traditional lenses, such as those rooted in a deficit mindset, while also looking for new ways to tackle old problems. For international graduate students, their struggles have historically been tied to a lack of perceived power in the academy due to a deficient view of their skill sets. Academia, inherently, is built on “access and influence as exclusionary practices that raise status and increase value” (Shelton & Warren-Riley, 2022, p. 322). Therefore, I posit that highlighting the skills born from resilience in the international graduate student

community can help move us towards socially just scholarship regarding this population. While scholarship has consistently looked at the academic and cultural struggles international students face and how we should rethink our paradigmatic lenses regarding them, there appears to have been less scholarship focusing on the strength of their skillsets in other areas. By focusing on the strengths they display in traditionally “valuable” areas, we can better understand how discussions of their intelligence and knowledge(s) have been predicated either on a belief in the traditional “deficit” model or on refuting the basis of that deficiency. In order to better understand the contemporary situation international graduate students enter into, and demystify the issues they face during their time as a student in the U.S., I argue that we must work to dismantle those situations with an eye to looking outside of the classroom.

Chapter Three: Theory, Methods, and Research Design

In this chapter, I will first situate how my work is informed by, and contributes to, the field of technical communication. Second, I move to reviewing the theoretical foundation and methods I used for my research and explicate on how they align with the goals of my project as well as best practices in the field. Third, I explain the issues I encountered when recruiting participants for my study. Finally, I walk through both my coding and analysis methods for my data.

International Graduate Students as Technical Communicators

With such a complex history of social, federal, and academic trends affecting the way the international community is seen in the U.S., it may come as little surprise that contemporary international graduate students are contending with a complicated climate and mental environment when they apply to, and arrive at, American universities. Indeed, Martínez and Plough (2018) note that the presence of a deficit mindset entrenched in U.S. institutions adds to the complexity of viewing international graduate students as capable individuals (p. 1824). Attending issues of historically damaging practices is a sentiment echoed in the field of technical communication. Angela Haas and Michelle Eble (2018) argued that scholars need to “clean up the mess of injustice in our own backyards before pointing to the messes of others” (p. 11). This, perhaps, sums up the need for a research project such as mine; instead of scholarship debating the pros and cons of international graduate student proficiency in the classroom, we could better understand the wider experiences of this community if we look at the way they are, or aren’t, supported in or by the university. In essence, we should look at the potential deficiencies in our own systems before debating potential deficiencies in that population. Of course, scholarship

rooted in classroom performance should not be discounted as additive or ineffective, but over-specializing in that area of study could lead us to discount new avenues of discussion that would better aid the international graduate student population. To better understand the international graduate student experience, I posit, we should turn to the field of technical communication.

Technical communication, as a field, underwent a social justice turn as named by Walton et al. (2019) in their monograph, *Technical communication after the social justice turn*. This book surmised conversations in the field and showcased how technical communication scholars were becoming more proactively aware of the potentially damaging effects of supposedly “unbiased” or “factual” scholarship. These damages are not restricted to scholarship as the technical documents and moments of communication are often happening in situ with people’s lived experiences. Jones and Williams (2018) highlighted this fact in their historical analysis of literacy tests and voter registration applications which, they argued, proved that “laws, regulations, and technical and legal documents do support and enforce civil rights infringements and human rights atrocities” (p. 384). Similarly, Dorpenyo and Agboka (2018) argued that technical communication scholars should attend to the racial issues at play in election technologies in order to promote social justice work in that specific arena (p. 350). While these scholars focused on electoral systems, their findings map onto the international graduate student community; we can see there is a community of people trying to navigate a system which was not designed for them. Further, international graduate students are tasked with communicating with, and within, these systems in order to retain their legal status as nonimmigrants in the United States. This navigation of technical systems ensures that

issues faced by international graduate students are, at their heart, technical communication issues.

Given that scholars in the field of technical communication have already begun to propose more social-justice oriented work, there is a roadmap for scholars to follow when undertaking work in areas where potential discrimination is taking place. Technical communication scholar, Godwin Agboka (2013,) drew from prior scholarship to name social justice as advocacy work that helps under-resourced people and communities by focusing on “communication, cooperation... liberation... inclusiveness, dialogue, and passion” (Frey et al., 1996; Crabtree, 1998; Artz, 1998; qtd. in Agboka, p. 28). Advocacy work notices where communities have been silenced and then seeks to either speak up on behalf of those silenced (Peterson, 2018, p. 3) or works to uplift those marginalized voices. My scholarship, then, attends to listening in the gap of silenced voices to better understand what issues are affecting those communities. This “ground up” scholarly paradigm seeks to empower the international student community by amplifying the concerns they raise, based on the issues they have encountered during their time communicating in technical situations. While the students I speak to may not name themselves as technical communicators, their need to interact with legal and academic policy necessitates that they step into the role. Further, their ability to maintain their legal status in the U.S. requires that they successfully navigate these situations.

Given that my research goal is to dismantle situations so we, as scholars, faculty, and staff, can better understand the nature of being an international graduate student, I turned to Lloyd Bitzer’s theory of the rhetorical situation as a framework for my study. This theory, as outlined by Bitzer, views rhetoric as situational then works to name and

study key moments in situations to see where rhetoric can help interlocutors navigate constraints. In the following chapter, I will dive deeper into how this theory aligns with the goals of my work and the methods I used to conduct my study. With international graduate students needing to act as technical communicators at various points during the course of their studies, scholars must attend to the situations that arise outside of the classroom to better understand the experiences of international graduate students as a whole. With this pressing necessity in mind, my work turns to demystifying the ways in which international graduate students both perceive, and navigate, issues that arise in situations where intercultural communication competency is key. In conducting this research, I align with scholarship both in technical communication and in composition studies. With so much research having been conducted on international student experiences in the classroom, yet fewer publications linking the potential issues raised in classrooms to the wider international graduate student experience, my work seeks to address the gap and bolster scholarship regarding international graduate student experiences.

The Rhetorical Situation

Rhetorical intervention and theory can help us begin to dismantle and analyze the apparent disconnect between scholarship calling for social justice and globalization goals, and the lived experiences of international graduate students in the United States. In this study, I utilized Lloyd Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation to break down participant experiences into constituent parts so I could map, then analyze, the constituent aspects of the situations that international graduate students find themselves in prior to, and during, their studies in the United States. Lloyd Bitzer wrote his article 'The Rhetorical Situation'

in 1968, which raised the question of whether rhetoric was situational in the field of rhetoric. While his work has been used, discussed, and sometimes refuted in the years since, it provides a solid foundation through which to analyze how rhetoric appears, or is used, in specific situations. Bitzer named the theory of the rhetorical situation, which consists of the exigence, audience, and constraints of a given rhetorical act. Per Bitzer (1968), a situation calls rhetoric or discourse into being and necessitates oratory to initiate change. Rhetoric, by Bitzer's standards, is situational, embedded in its historical and social context, and pragmatic, coming into existence for the sake of something beyond itself. This understanding of rhetoric as situational is important to my study, as it foregrounds how rhetoric can make inroads into better understanding contemporary issues faced by international students. By studying specific instances in which international graduate students are affected by, or employ, rhetoric in technical communication, we can demystify their experiences during their time in the United States. Given that rhetoric comes into existence for something beyond the sake of itself, rhetoric functions, ultimately, to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task. In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes the mediator of change. In this sense rhetoric is always persuasive. To see how rhetoric persuades people in certain situations, Bitzer argued that exigence, audience, and constraints can be named and analyzed in a given situation and, in doing so, we can name that situation as rhetorical. Exigence is an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect,

an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be. The audience consists of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and being mediators of change. Finally, the constraints consist of persons, events, objects, and relations which are part of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence.

In a follow up to his 1968 article, 'The rhetorical situation,' Bitzer (1980) reiterated his position that rhetoric is a pragmatic, functional method of communication where the “chief interacting grounds are persons on the one hand and the environment on the other” (p. 21). This view, of rhetoric as situational, is predicated on the belief that people interact with their environment in a functional manner. This environment, Bitzer argued, is both physical and mental, with people striving to achieve harmony with both (p. 23) by engaging in pragmatic communication that understands both audience and environment as important constituents (p. 23). This understanding of environment as constituent is particularly important for the study of international graduate students because they are not only contending with the complex dynamic of their ascribed community in the mental environment, but they are also learning to navigate the physical environment for a different country. Rhetoric, to use Bitzer’s definition, is “a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action” (p. 4). In this case, the reality being changed is that of the *exigence*, which as an “imperfection marked by urgency” (p. 6) to use Bitzer’s words. Bitzer’s theory of the rhetorical situation, with its prioritization of exigence, constraints, and environmental concerns, makes it fitting for studies of international graduate students and technical

communication because their ability to succeed as students hinge on their ability to understand the new environments and barriers, both implicit and explicit, that could hinder their success.

Indeed, Bitzer's theory has been used before to study multicultural situations. In their article, 'The rhetorical situation revisited,' scholars Mary Garret and Xiaosui Xiao (1993) wanted to gauge the applicability of the rhetorical situation to the study of cultural artifacts and, in concluding their study, they posited that cultural discourse was a key factor. Indeed, Garret and Xiao (1993) argued that whether or not a situation is instigated by rhetor or exigence, the *audience* is the pivotal element for rhetorical response, as the audience's perception of a fitting response influences the rhetor so heavily, it changes the way the situation unfolds (pp. 38-39). This finding makes a strong case for the use of the rhetorical situation in my study as it outlines how constraints are heavily influenced by the cultural normativities in which the constraints are occurring. Arguably, the influence of culture on a rhetor's ability to successfully navigate a constraint is heightened when the rhetor is operating in a culture they are unfamiliar with; it is not their own. Kathleen Jamieson (1973) said that rhetors must know the contexts in which they navigate constraints because '[a]n institutional genre perpetuates and insulates the institution. Existence of standard forms of address guarantees a sense of continuity' (p. 165). So, rhetors must have a sense of the context, or genre, they are trying to navigate constraints in, because an understanding of antecedent forms of address that successfully navigated constraints will help them form their own responses. However, for international graduate students, the institutional and policy-based genres they're working in may be incoherent or unfamiliar. By utilizing Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation in concert with the

findings of Jamieson, and Garret and Xiao, scholars can gain a better sense of how cultural normativities and antecedent genres can affect international populations, thereby worsening the constraints they face. In analyzing these constraints, I argue we can better understand why there may be a disconnect between the lived experiences of international graduate students and the scholarship that champions their capabilities.

Method of Inquiry

To gather the data I need to answer my research questions, I conducted six semi-structured interviews with international graduate students at Virginia Tech, which is a R-1 university and also where I was enrolled as a Ph.D. student. The criteria for selection was simple; they had to be an international graduate student currently enrolled at the university and they had to be willing to discuss their experiences with technical communication in the United States. To canvas for interviewees, I reached out to friends and colleagues across the university asking if they would like to participate in the project. I had a lot of interest from friends who wanted to talk about their experiences, but when asked to do so in a formal setting, they politely declined or simply avoided the topic. This could certainly be attributed to the amount of work any graduate student has in their schedule on a given day but given that they were willing to talk to me at length “off the record,” their hesitation to participate could also be due to the way this community is tired giving feedback on perceived issues with little change occurring afterwards.

In order to generate more interest past my personal connections, I used the graduate student weekly email sent out by the Virginia Tech Graduate Life Center to canvas for participants (see Appendix A). I also personally visited the international student organizations on campus with flyers and asked them to circulate the flier for

participants (see Appendix B). As a result of my varied canvassing methods, my participants were a mix of friends, colleagues, and interested international graduate students who'd seen my advertisements. Participants were emailed a script when they agreed to set up an interview (see Appendix C), then were sent a follow up email once we had arranged a date and time (see Appendix D) which was accompanied by a copy of the interview questions (see Appendix E).

I conducted each of the interviews via Zoom and they lasted approximately 50 minutes each. At the beginning of each interview I walked my participants through an information sheet (see Appendix F) and got their verbal consent to begin recording the interview. I then emailed my participants this information sheet for their records after the interview was concluded. The amount my participants spoke in the interviews varied, but my transcripts from the interviews averaged at 44,348 words. Despite being on Zoom, I did not utilize Zoom's recording capabilities as my Zoom account is given to me through my affiliation to Virginia Tech, and I did not want to risk my participant's confidentiality by having any Zoom recordings being under the purview of the university. As such, I recorded audio using a personal device and transcribed that audio at a later date.

I emailed my participants the questions at least two days before the interview so my participants were able to ruminate on the questions ahead of the interview if they chose to. Given that I was asking questions that could potentially cause distress, I wanted to ensure they were not surprised during the interview. The questions were designed using Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) assertion that asking broader questions allows an interviewer to actively listen to participant's experiences, which allows interviewers to better follow avenues of inquiry when transcribing and coding the data from the

interviews (p. 126). By keeping my questions on track, but with enough room for participants to consider their own experiences, I was able to gain rich data that was grounded from my participant’s life experiences.

In Table 1 I have listed the demographic information of my participants including their nationality, country of origin, and the university college they are a part of. In the ‘Name’ column, I have listed both the pseudonym of each participant as well as their gender identifier. It should be noted that I gave the option to each participant to choose their own pseudonym. Luna, Augustus, and Kwesi chose their own pseudonyms whereas Chiagozie, Intan, and Aparna asked me to choose on their behalf.

Table 1

Participant demographic information

Name	Country of Origin	University College
Luna (F)	Indonesia	College of Natural Resources and Environment
Chiagozie (F)	Nigeria	College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences
Intan (F)	Indonesia	Pamplin College of Business
Aparna (F)	India	College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences
Augustus (M)	Bangladesh	College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences
Kwesi (M)	Ghana	College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences

For a project of this size and scope, a larger pool of participants would have yielded results that would a) be more generalizable, and b) could be argued as having higher validity. However, I encountered difficulties when recruiting participants. Despite this issue, I was committed to conducting interviews, as opposed to collecting data via surveys, as, as per Mittelmeier, Lomer, and Unkule (2022) any work that hopes to address potential injustices regarding international graduate students needs to actively

research alongside them (para. 5). The disconnect between a participant and their collected data inherent in the survey format felt antithetical to the ethical parameters I wanted to uphold in this study. When analyzing the data from my interviews, I also analyzed websites and materials mentioned by my participants in a bid to better understand, and explain, the issues they discuss when explicating on specific constraints.

Participant Compensation and Legal Constraints

When I submitted my initial IRB protocol, I noted that I would not be giving my participants any compensation for their time due to personal financial constraints. However, after receiving little interest from my friends and community members, I applied for a small research grant through Virginia Tech's Graduate and Professional Student Senate 'Graduate Research Development Program' (GRDP). Prior to applying for a protocol revision that allowed participant compensation, I had contacted the IRB administrator responsible for my research project and they had said I would be allowed to pay my participants pending the protocol revision acceptance. Once it was accepted, I applied for the grant. My hope, pending a successful grant acceptance, was to give my participants a small sum of money or gift card to thank and compensate them for their time. I was awarded \$500 in grant funds through the GRDP but, as I wanted to ensure I was compliant with legal requirements, I reached out to Virginia Tech's international tax specialist to double check that I was allowed to compensate my participants. The response was both disheartening, and also exemplified the technical communication issues and miscommunication that international graduate students have to navigate. In Figure 1, I have included a screen grab of my email.

Figure 1

A screen grab of the email I sent on August 16th, 2023 to Virginia Tech's International Tax Specialist

Procedure 23715c Query: Fiscal Compensation for Nonresident Research Participants Inbox x ✕ 🖨 📧

Chloe Jade Robertson <chloerobertson@vt.edu>
to fnisadmin ▾

Aug 16, 2023, 5:26 PM ☆ ↶ ⋮

Good afternoon,

I am reaching out regarding Virginia Tech's [procedure 23715c](#) regarding Selecting and Paying Human Subjects.

I am conducting **IRB** research here at VT for my dissertation and I was planning on offering \$20 for each interview participant who takes part in my research. However, my interview population consists only of international graduate students, who qualify as nonresidents.

As \$20 is not a taxable amount, I am hoping that there would be no violation of immigration regulations. However, I would appreciate it if someone in your office could let me know if there could potentially be issues for my interviewees if I went ahead with this.

All my best,
Chloe

(C. Robertson, personal communication, August 16, 2023).

As seen in the email, I employed several technical communication best practices to expedite a concise response. I cited the university's procedure on paying human subjects in the email subject line, specified that my participants were legally designated as 'nonresidents' and hyperlinked the procedure in question in the body of the email. In the procedure itself, section A.2.a specifies that, "If the participants are not US Citizens or Resident Aliens, please use caution to ensure that immigration regulations are not violated. Please contact the International Tax Specialist [*contact information omitted*] if you have questions regarding participation of a non-resident" (Virginia Tech Controller's Office, 2023, p. 1). Hence, I followed these instructions to contact the international tax specialist.

The response I got was that there was no threshold on withholding tax for nonresidents, so any and all payments would be taxable at 30%. Further, participants would have to submit the following documents to the Virginia Tech payroll department: a Foreign National Data Form, W8 or W9, a copy of their foreign passport, and a copy of

their I94 or admittance stamp. In particular, the Foreign National Data Form asked for the participant's social security number, their visa number, their American address, their foreign residence address, as well as a host of demographic and professional information. While asking for this information is standard practice when submitting tax forms for any person residing in the United States, whether a citizen or not, I could not in good conscience ask my participants to jump through the hoops in this paperwork for the sake of \$14. Further, asking my participants to submit this information to the payroll office would inherently violate any confidentiality or anonymity fail safes promised through my IRB protocol, so I could not compensate them without also revealing that they participated in my research.

While the response to my inquiry was swift - I only had to wait one business day to receive a response email - this situation highlights several issues when working with international graduate students. Firstly, if I wasn't an international graduate student myself I likely would not have known to double check whether my participants had certain legal regulations. Secondly, even as an international graduate student, I wouldn't have known the best place to search for the correct procedure had I not previously worked in and with university governance during my service roles. Thirdly, I followed best practices by contacting my IRB administrator prior to applying for the grant and was told I would be able to pay my participants who, as noted in my protocol, would all be nonresidents, but the information I received was incorrect. Had I not known through personal and professional experience to double check my information from various knowledgeable sources, I could have potentially put my participants in a situation where they were in violation of federal tax regulations, all for the sake of \$14.

Coding my Data

Despite the importance of culture for my interview data, I moved away from an ethnographic lens when it came to coding my data. This is because I did not want to learn more about my participant's specific cultures but about how they tackled issues in a culture unfamiliar to them. Originally, I had planned to code the interview data using MAXQDA but found, given the smaller volume of data I gathered, it was appropriate to shift my coding scheme to better suit the data set I had collected. I chose to use initial coding during the first pass of coding, which is often used for coding ethnographic studies, despite the different direction my goals took. However, the benefits of using initial coding with my data set was that it allowed me to take a deep dive into the nuances of my data given that I had fewer interviews. This "line-by-line" approach helped me see co-occurrences between participant statements to see where their experiences aligned (Saldaña, 2016, p. 115). During this pass of coding, I stuck closely to the interview data to see what themes emerged, trying to separate the data from the theoretical framework I later used.

Table 2

A representative example of interview passages and how I grouped them according to the emerging themes.

Representative Excerpts	Code	Definition
"you have to call and then when you call there's also this language barrier, accent barriers, and sometimes you can't even really understand clearly because they speak very fast"	Difficulties	Difficulties encountered by participants when they were trying to manage their visa requirements or paperwork.
"no one was there to uh answer my calls <laugh> from USCIS"		

“when I actually asked my department if they could help me, they said they don’t have any idea”		
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In the second coding cycle I employed pattern coding. Pattern coding pulls emergent themes into more definitive codes that look for causes (Saldaña, 2016, p. 236). This worked well for the data I was trying to gather, as I was trying to find possible causes behind the specific constraints faced by my participants. Using the example above, I could tell my participants felt tension, but I wanted to canvas potential reasons for what could be causing that tension, so as to understand the specific constraints that had the potential to cause them issues.

Table 3

A representative example of interview passages and how I coded them into causal patterns.

Representative Excerpts	Code
“you have to call and then when you call there’s also this language barrier, accent barriers, and sometimes you can’t even really understand clearly because they speak very fast”	Linguistic constraints
“no one was there to uh answer my calls <laugh> from USCIS”	Access to information
“when I actually asked my department if they could help me, they said they don’t have any idea”	Misperception of roles and responsibilities

After conducting this second round of coding, I began to see two distinct constraint themes emerging; technical, legal, and financial constraints, and ideological constraints. While there were various constraint codes, they fell under these two topics. This was unexpected, as I had presumed the constraints would all be of a similar, interconnected nature, but the way my participants navigated, and were affected by, these two main categories separated them distinctly.

Table 4

A representative example of interview passages and how I coded them into causal patterns.

	Specific Constraint
Technical, legal, and financial constraints	Misperception constraints
	Information access constraints
	Incorrect information constraints
	Time constraints
	Financial constraints
Ideological constraints	Linguistic constraints
	Cultural constraints
	Institutional constraints

These delineated categories do not mean to suggest that technical, legal, and financial constraints are not ideological in nature. Indeed, all the constraints I coded from the interview data could, arguably, have ideological basis. However, as I will show later in my analysis chapters, the two are distinct based on the way these constraints can be navigated and overcome. Bitzer (1980) noted that communication between humans and the mental environment is constantly occurring, with humans adapting to their mental environment as often as they contribute and shape it (pp. 22-23). This mental environment, which affects a rhetorical situation by providing context, enforces certain constraints such as ideas, ideologies, and cultures (p. 22). In the case of my study, the constraints my participants were facing were both grounded in material structures but

also in mental ones, both shaped by ideology. To use Marx's understanding of ideology, it is a pejorative term that uncovers the structure of a society and the "misshapen nature of social reality" (McLellan, 1995, p. 11) that tries to pass itself off as fact or objectivity. In short, ideology is a tacit undercurrent that shapes people, and the societies they live in. In my study, technical, legal, and financial constraints deal with rigid structures that my participants had to overcome with fitting responses using technical communication skills. In essence, they could be "solved" with rhetorical strategies because they were constraints grounded in federal and societal constructs. Naturally, then, these are ideological in nature. Despite being put in seemingly powerless situations, however, my participants were able to navigate these constraints by employing technical communication skills. It did not matter what gender, race, or religion my participants were, they all were able to navigate the constraints by showcasing a level of technical expertise. Therefore, I chose to code these constraints into a category that foregrounded the specific structures they navigated as opposed to the potential ideological foundations of those structures. However, the second category, that I name ideological constraints, dealt with insidious issues that my participants perceived as being discriminatory. Indeed, my participants were still placed into situations where they felt powerless, or as if they didn't fit the "ideal" of U.S. society, and this reflected in how they navigated the constraints at hand. There were no specific structures they had to overcome or navigate but, instead, they had to mediate their behavior in ways they perceived as being better suited to "overcome" the negative connotations placed on them as foreigners in the United States. Therefore, their navigation was rooted in intercultural communication skills, which is predicated on an understanding of ideology the perceptions of others. In

essence, while both categories are ideological in nature, I chose to separate the two by foregrounding what particular issues had to be overcome to navigate the constraint at hand. With the interview data coded and delineated into these two types of constraints, I began to analyze how each of these constraint categories affected my participants and what those results meant in the context of the gap between scholarship and international graduate student experiences.

Conclusion

Despite the small sample size of interviewees, the semi-structured interviews gave me a wealth of data with which to analyze the disconnect between student experiences and the globally conscious goals espoused in scholarship. With two distinct categories of constraints discovered, and the emergent patterns in each distinguished, it became clear that Bitzer's conception of constraints present in a rhetorical situation would need to be mediated slightly for my research project. Bitzer asserted that constraints are ideological in nature but can be resolved through rhetorical response. The first category of constraints, the technical, legal, and financial constraints, were not necessarily ideological in nature but they were able to be resolved with fitting responses employed by my participants. The second category, the ideological constraints, adhered more closely to Bitzer's original definition, but they could not be overcome with fitting responses, merely navigated to the extent that they were not insurmountable constraints for my participants. In the following chapters, I move to delving more deeply into demystifying the constraints faced by my international graduate student participants.

Chapter Four: The Unique Legal, Technical, and Financial Constraints faced by International Graduate Students

As mentioned in previous chapters, there has been a deficit model applied to perceptions of international student capabilities both socially and academically. Further, scholarship regarding the push for internationalization has often deemed internationalization as a whole as an inevitable and neutral process, sidestepping the way that a lack of interrogative scholarship will further perpetuate inequities already inherent in both the field and the process of internationalization (Stein & McCartney, 2021, p. 1). Therefore, future scholarship is called to take an interrogative lens to internationalization efforts, processes, and outcomes. In this study, I ask whether or not the traditional deficit lens is a problem in the field of rhetoric and technical communication. To answer this question, we must first gain a deeper understanding of how international graduate students move and act during their time in academia in the United States; in short, is there a basis to the traditionally used deficit lens? Once we map how international graduate students navigate certain situations, not only can we begin to understand the issues they face, but we can also begin to unpack whether or not they are showcasing resilience and expertise when it comes to navigating these problems. In particular, my study looks at the way international graduate students navigate technical communication constraints before, and during, their time in the U.S.

In pursuing this goal, this chapter uses Lloyd Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation, with specific regard to the constraints of a rhetorical situation, to name and analyze constraints faced by international students as they pursue a degree in the United States. Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation breaks situations down into components and constituent parts that allow researchers to study each aspect of a situation before

coming to a conclusion about the situation as a whole, so the theory aligns well with strategic contemplation and a desire to understand the nuances of something previously deemed commonplace. Specifically, in this chapter, I first analyze the unique exigence that my participants were responding to when they choose to enter into the rhetorical situation of being an international graduate student. Second, I review the types of technical documents international students must navigate to provide context for the technical constraints they are facing. Third, I move to analyzing data from six interviews with international graduate students who are currently studying at an R-1 university in the United States. I choose to tackle this research problem from a student-led perspective, because the lived experience of international students remains an understudied topic in the field (Crumley-Effinger, 2024, p. 79). From this data, I name and define specific constraints faced by my participants, before ascertaining how they navigated the constraints they faced and whether they were able to craft fitting responses and showcase intercultural competency when faced with constraints and barriers present in said situations.

In identifying the specific constraints faced by international graduate students, I interrogate how they are navigating university campuses as a marginalized population. In this analysis, I use Walton et al.'s (2019) definition of marginalized, which explains that there are central communities in society that benefit from having their experiences being centralized, while those marginalized find that their experiences aren't factored into the designs of society or organizations (p. 19). Indeed, Walton et al. (2019) note that universities have, historically, been designed to cater to certain groups of students while excluding others (p. 19). The benefit of a rhetorical analysis in regard to legal, technical,

and financial constraints then, is to interrogate how language is used to navigate marginalizing constraints in “non artistic” situations. By this I mean, my participants were navigating situations where heuristics of invention were used to puzzle through inarticulate scenarios and genres, but where the bounds of the genre are fixed; no level of persuasion could change the factors of the constraints, merely the way my participants navigated them.

Ultimately, this chapter provides a detailed look into the lived experiences of international graduate students with specific regard to legal, technical, and financial constraints. This chapter will not only demystify what these processes look like from the purview of international students, but also work towards understanding why international graduate students feel as if they are experiencing the effects of a deficit lens, despite scholarship disavowing this traditionally used paradigm.

International Graduate Students Responding to an Exigence

With this brief history accounted for and the contemporary mental environment contextualized, we can now turn to seeing why an aspiring international graduate student may move to the United States; what is their exigence for entering into the rhetorical situation of being an international graduate student? As per Bitzer’s (1968) theory of the rhetorical situation, the exigence is situated in reality and is an imperfection that instigates rhetorical discourse (p. 11). For the participants of my study, there was a shared exigence of wanting to come to the United States to complete a graduate degree. What makes the exigence unique for international graduate students, as opposed to domestic students who also want to complete a graduate degree, is that they are moving to another country in order to obtain a degree due to a wider variety of opportunities in the U.S. My

participants came from various countries, but they all shared a common problem; getting a graduate degree in their desired field would have been difficult, or impossible, if they had stayed in their home countries.

Table 5

A list of figures comparing the amount of degree options for my participants in their home country versus the United States.

Respondent	Home country	No. of university colleges offering the participant's desired course in the their home country	No. of university colleges offering the participant's desired course in the U.S.
Augustus	Bangladesh	0	156
Kwesi	Ghana	0	156
Intan	Indonesia	2	126
Aparna	India	0	156
Chiagozie	Nigeria	0	156
Luna	Indonesia	9	3145

Note: The numbers on this table are taken from universities.com for the American university course figures, and university-directory.eu for the international figures.

So, the impetus for my respondents to enter into this shared rhetorical situation was not only the desire for a graduate degree, but a need to travel overseas for more opportunities to do so. Another aspect of analyzing a rhetorical situation, however, is seeing whether an aspect of the rhetorical situation is that the exigence - the imperfection in reality - can be overcome or “fixed” by employing rhetorical strategies and discourse (Bitzer, 1968, p. 4). Which brings about the question, is the exigence of wanting to obtain a graduate degree something that can be solved with rhetorical discourse? Arguably, for all students, international or domestic, the answer is yes. While degree requirements

differ in departments and programs, all students need to complete paperwork to apply for, maintain, and, eventually, complete their degree. However, the unique problem posed by a dearth of universities offering graduate programs in a prospective students' field of study in their home countries makes the exigence of the rhetorical situation unique for international graduates. With a unique exigence comes a unique set of constraints requiring specific responses. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the question is whether the unique exigence for international graduate students can be resolved with rhetorical discourse.

As per Bitzer, constraints present in a rhetorical situation must be navigated in order for the goal of the rhetor to be achieved. Therefore, to see how international graduate students navigate rhetorical situations and the unique exigencies present there, we must also attend to how they navigate the constraints of the situation. As I will discuss in the next section, the constraints on international graduate students in their rhetorical situations are of a technical nature, asking the students to step into the role of technical communicators to navigate them. As technical communicators, the students would have to create versions of reality that is accepted by an audience as valid (Rutter, 1991, p. 144) in order to be considered successful. Before we dive into the constraints present in my respondent's rhetorical situation, however, we must first attend to the specificities of their goals when entering into their rhetorical situations. While I have covered how my respondents have a shared exigence to an extent, this shared exigence can be parsed out into finer details when we delve into *why* my participants wanted to receive a degree in America; what was their eventual goal?

Expanding Academic Knowledge at a Foreign University

For four of my participants, they shared a goal of wanting to expand their academic knowledge at a foreign university. Augustus noted that he “wanted to explore... academia in America... because anti-racism, mandatory anti-racism and anti-racist pedagogies are some of my research interests.” In Augustus’ case, he specifically wanted to come to the United States to complete his graduate degree due to the breadth of scholars specializing in his desired research area. Similarly, Kwesi wanted to come to the United States to study because it has “having interracial and multicultural scholars from all angle [so] I decided to experience that level of international grad education outside my country.” For both these scholars, they saw the U.S. as providing an opportunity to study specific research areas because of the large amounts of scholars doing work in that field. Indeed, the groundswell of anti-racist scholarship written by interracial and multicultural scholars has grown considerably in the past decade. Further, large journals and conferences in the field of rhetoric and composition have written position statements supporting anti-racist work. In 2021, the Conference on College Composition and Communication published a co-written statement affirming that,

Contextualized within present exigencies, antiracist educators must work alongside students, communities, and institutions to push for the dismantling of WLS because of its deleterious effects on Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), domination and dehumanization of all people, and its detrimental effects to our environment and its resources (Richardson et al., para. 1)

Here, we see the word ‘exigency’ promoting an understanding that anti-racist work is responding to a need in the field. To use Bitzer’s terminology, there is an imperfection that must be overcome with rhetorical discourse. The goal of any conference, of course,

is to propagate critical academic discussion concerning pertinent topics, so this should come as no surprise. But this anti-racist scholarship, in particular, is being described as having direct links to social justice work that undoes systems of power that dehumanize people from certain populations. It would not be a jump, then, to suggest that both Augustus and Kwesi sought to complete their degrees in the United States because they too want to contribute to this bulk of social justice scholarship. Indeed, Kwesi noted that the “U.S. is one of the big powers” in the global academic community, so the assumption is that the work undertaken in the United States must be of a high standard; an appealing prospect for a prospective graduate student.

For Intan and Aparna, they also wanted to expand their knowledge in their respective fields, although these fields differ from the shared research interests of August and Kwesi. Intan sought out professors she shared similar interests with when applying to schools and chose Virginia Tech because “The tourism department is one of the best in the world.” While Virginia Tech is simply one American university, her comment here aligns with Kwesi’s assertion that the U.S. is known globally for its academic prowess. Indeed, in the World University Rankings published by Times Higher Education (2023b), seven of the top ten universities globally are in the United States (p. 21). Of those top seven universities, they average an international student population of 25.7%. Clearly, then, the international student perception of the U.S. as being an academic powerhouse is not misplaced. Similarly, Aparna stated that she “wanted to broaden my vision about... communication. I didn't know anything about technical communication” and therefore applied to a university in the United States.

Wanting to get a Graduate Degree and Return Home

For two of my participants, the driving force behind their degree was to return to their home country and get a job at a university. Now, this is not to say that Augustus, Kwesi, Intan, and Aparna might not have had designs to also work at a university post-graduation, whether in their home countries or in the United States. However, when asked what their primary reason for coming to the U.S. to complete a graduate degree was, they, as aforementioned, stated that they wanted to broaden their knowledge. Chiagozie and Luna, however, primarily responded that they wanted to get a degree in order to get jobs at universities in their home countries of Nigeria and Indonesia respectively. Interestingly, they both worked in universities prior to applying for graduate degrees in the United States. Chiagozie mentioned that, in Nigeria, “it's required that you go outside of your familiar zones and look at other places to study. For someone who wants to teach in university, you have to go learn somewhere.” This, then, showcases that Chiagozie made the choice to pursue a graduate degree in another country, but the impetus behind that decision wasn't entirely her own making. As aforementioned, universities in the United States consistently rank in the top 10 in the world, showcasing that the country, as a whole, is an academic powerhouse. Therefore, it is unsurprising that prospective PhD students flock to its shores when wanting to obtain degrees for professional development in their own countries. This was also the case with Luna, who said she came to the United States because she “was planning to actually come back home and then, uh, work in university where I did my bachelor's and masters.” Unlike Chiagozie, Luna didn't note that a foreign degree is a necessity to get a job, but, as with all my other participants, it seemed that the United States was an attractive prospect to get a strong degree. Luna also applied for, and came to the U.S. with, a Fulbright scholarship,

which, as aforementioned, is an exchange program built to attract foreign talent into the United States. The existence of programs such as these attract students into the country, as they promote the willingness of a host country to invite international students into the country's university programs.

Promoting International Collaboration in the United States

It should be clear, at this point, that the United States is an attractive prospect for international students seeking graduate degrees. This is not only due to the wide variety of universities in the U.S., but also caused, in large part, by the way universities and the government work to promote the integration of young international scholars into American universities. In July of 2021, the department of state and the department of education released a joint statement stating that they would be committed to promoting international student exchange, as the exchange of students “enhances American prosperity, and contribute[s] to global peace and security” (Reengaging the world, 2021, para 3). The statement was titled “Reengaging the world to make the United States stronger at home: A renewed U.S. commitment to international education.” The key words here are “reengaging” and “renewed,” as it showcased that the American government was returning to its previous stance that international education was something to be celebrated and promoted.

In particular, for students wishing to complete a degree in a specific field, or who want to participate in international scholarly pursuits, moving to the United States is a promising start. The Times Higher Education measures a score of universities called the “international outlook” score which is a data point that measures the amount of international students, international staff, and international authorship at an institution

(Times Higher Education, 2023a, para. 22). The international outlook score calculated by the Times Higher Education runs on a scale of 0-100, with higher scores meaning there is a push for international scholarship at a given institution. As of January 2023, the figures of American universities compared to universities in my participant’s respective countries show a large difference.

Table 6

A table showing the number of universities that achieved a 50% international outlook score or higher from six countries

Country	Number of universities with an international outlook score above 50%	Lowest score above 50%	Highest score above 50%
Nigeria	1	54.3	54.3
Ghana	2	51.5	52.3
Indonesia	2	57.3	60.3
Bangladesh	0	N/A	N/A
India	4	50.7	70.0
United States	112	50.1	93.8

I looked at universities that ranked above 50% for their international outlook score, and the United States far surpassed the universities in my participant’s home countries. Now, it should be noted that not all universities are included in the Times Higher Education reporting, so these numbers may not be entirely accurate. However, from this representative sample, we can see that scholars from these countries looking to participate in international scholarly collaboration would likely see the United States as an attractive prospect. Thus, for my participants, the choice of moving to the U.S.

becomes clear given that they were seeking a graduate degree in a certain field that was also open to inviting international scholars.

International Exigencies

To summarize, while desiring a graduate degree is an exigence that can be shared by many, the impetus for traveling to another country makes the exigence unique for international students. For the participants of my study, this drive to enter the United States was driven by wanting greater opportunity to study in their desired fields in a country that offered plenty of courses in their subject, and also promoted international student exchange on a larger scale. My participants either wanted to expand their knowledge in a chosen field, or increase their professional opportunities, but to do so they had to move across the world. In understanding the exigencies my respondents were responding to when considering their goals, we can better understand the impetus for entering into a rhetorical situation. However, the process of applying to a university, entering a new country, and maintaining a positive legal status during their time in the United States provides ample opportunity for a number of constraints to impede their goals.

Technical, Legal, and Financial Constraints

The importance of naming and analyzing the constraints of a situation is to better understand the situation as a whole, but also to see how a rhetor navigates the constraints present in an incoherent or indeterminate situation. In this chapter, specifically, I analyze the unique legal, technical, and financial constraints the participants of my study encountered during their time in the United States. Legal constraints pertain to the laws that affect international graduate students in the U.S. during their time in the country. As

nonimmigrants, they are subject to different laws than their domestic peers and, in order to both understand and navigate these laws, and potential constraints resulting from these laws, international graduate students must have an in-depth knowledge of the vocabulary and classifications that apply to them. Technical constraints refer to times when international graduate students have difficulty finding, or accessing, information on “official” - such as university or government - websites or channels. Further, technical constraints can also occur when university faculty or staff haven’t been given the proper training or resources to successfully address international graduate student concerns or paperwork. Financial constraints refer to the high costs of studying in the U.S. for international graduate students due to university and governmental fees.

These constraints, despite occurring during their study timeline, are not solely academic in nature. Instead, the constraints I perceived in my participants’ experiences constellate the completion of their degree. During the course of a degree in the United States, international graduate students must complete and maintain a large amount of paperwork. As one of my participants, Aparna, aptly noted,

“But in [the] department, they actually don't know like what actual paperwork we are doing apart from our graduate studies. Apart from our many other things like, okay, so I know that American people, I mean the native people, they say, oh, graduate studies is so taxing. We have to do so many things, studies, and then the administrative things and but we say we have another layer of challenge”

Her assertion that international students have a lot more paperwork to navigate than domestic students is true (Madden-Dent et al., 2019, p. 994); as well as the paperwork we would deem “typical” for students, such as plans of study, registrar forms, and graduation

paperwork, for example, international graduate students also have to keep up to date on their federal paperwork. Recognizing this extra workload is important for studies of international graduate student populations as it provides context for why technical communication scholarship is important for any analyses; given that international graduate students must consistently act as technical communicators parallel to their role as student-scholars, we must attend to the ways they navigate these communications. The list of international student specific documents is lengthy, with international graduate students having to apply for and, in certain situations, maintain, the following:

- *Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)/International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores (if applicant is not a native English speaker)*

To be eligible for a student visa, prospective students must prove they are proficient in English by taking a language proficiency test that is approved by the U.S Department of State such as TOEFL or IELTS (USCIS Guide, n.d.).

- *DS-160*

The DS-160 is an online nonimmigrant visa application document. This is the application that a prospective international graduate student has to complete in order to get an American visa in their passport (U.S. Department of State Consular Electronic Application Center, n.d.).

- *I-901*

The I-901 form is used to show that an international student has paid the SEVIS fee and proof of this payment should be shown in a printed I-901 receipt during a visa interview at an American embassy (U.S. Immigrations and Custom Enforcement, n.d.).

- *Form I-20*

The I-20 is a “Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant ([designation]) Student Status” that is issued by a school that is sponsoring a F-1 or J-1 student for the duration of their studies in the United States (Homeland Security, n.d.). This form should be taken to an American embassy for a visa interview.

- *U.S. Nonimmigrant Visa*

A nonimmigrant visa allows a visitor to stay in the United States for a specified period of time dependent on the specific purpose of their stay (U.S. Department of State, n.d.)

- *I-94*

Form I-94 is a record of the arrivals and departures of a nonimmigrant whenever they leave, and return, to the United States (Homeland Security, n.d.)

With this being said, the constraints in this section cover instances where international graduate students faced constraints in regard to their necessary paperwork both before, and during, their time in the United States. Bitzer’s (1968) original conception of constraints in a given rhetorical situation define them as ideological in nature, but I deviate from Bitzer’s original conception of constraints in this chapter. Instead, these constraints are logistical, but can nevertheless be navigated by employing rhetorical techniques. While coding with the framework of legal, technical, and financial constraints in mind, I parsed out my interview data into more specific codes that pertain to these three main constraint categories. This is because certain situational constraints cannot be placed into one category alone. There can be intersections of technical and financial constraints present in a student’s lived experience, for example. The aim, here,

is to demystify specific constraints that fall into these three categories as, Aparna explained, domestic scholars, faculty, and staff often don't understand the specific issues international graduate students face in regard to their paperwork. This is important as this lack of understanding may contribute, and begin to explain, the gap between scholarship and lived experiences of international graduate students; if scholars aren't aware of certain issues, they won't know how to address them, or even that they should. In the table below, I name and briefly explain the specific constraints faced by my participants.

Table 7

This table names the main constraints my participants faced, with a brief definition of what each code pertains to

Specific Constraint	Definition
Misperception constraints	Misperception constraints refer to times when students contacted department staff and faculty for information as they presumed they could get information regarding their student paperwork from these sources. This, there was a misperception of roles and responsibilities
Content accessibility constraints	Content accessibility constraints refer to times where students had difficulties accessing information regarding their paperwork when they sought out the information themselves.
Incorrect information constraints	Incorrect information constraints refer to moments where students had received answers to their questions, but that information later turned out to be incorrect.
Time constraints	Time constraints refer to the times students had to wait for information, or legal paperwork, in order to navigate their time in the United States.
Financial constraints	Fiscal constraints refer to times when students had unforeseen financial difficulties due to issues regarding their paperwork and when they felt the process of getting paperwork had a large negative impact on their financial health.

Throughout this analysis, I will not only analyze the specific constraints faced by my participants but also analyze how they fall into the intersection of legal, technical, and financial constraints on a wider scale.

Misperception Constraints

When faced with a problem, or constraint, it is typical to seek out information from people deemed more knowledgeable or having a level of expertise with the issue at hand. For my respondents, one constraint they faced was reaching out for help to people in their department and at their university in order to get help with their paperwork and finding that the people they spoke to did not have any knowledge or expertise either. The specific constraint of misperception of roles and responsibilities were technical ones, as my respondents were initially unable to find the appropriate avenues to gain information on necessary technical documents. For two of my participants, Aparna and Augustus, they presumed that their departments would be able to help answer questions regarding their paperwork. When trying to ascertain what type of visa she would need to apply for to complete her graduate studies in the U.S., Aparna reached out to the department at the university she had been accepted into but was surprised when, in her words, “when I actually asked my department if they could help me, they said they don’t have any idea. I did not get any help from the department. People didn’t have any idea.” After some discussion, Aparna followed up her response with the following statement, “They don’t even know about the [legal] terms.” International graduate students, when trying to puzzle through their paperwork, need to learn the legal terms that pertain to them. This helps them ask the “right” questions when trying to ascertain new information. For example, Aparna knew she needed a student visa, but wasn’t sure *which* one she needed.

Each visa has a designation for particular students. For example, a nonimmigrant student coming to the United States through an exchange program would be a J-1 classification, so would need a J-1 I-20 visa. A nonimmigrant student applying to an American university by themselves would have an F-1 classification, therefore needing a F-1 I-20. Here, we can see that a knowledge of legal terminology is important when puzzling through documents. Both a J-1 and F-1 visa are student visas, but they have certain parameters that separate them. This acquired knowledge is not only technical, but intercultural, as it involves international graduate students learning legal terminology in a cultural context that is not their own; while their designations pertain to their status, that is a status of “other” in regard to a dominant culture.

In order to navigate the situation at hand, Aparna turned to groups outside of the “official” channels. In her own words, “I actually personally yeah Google join some internet informal networks y'know, blog forums, Facebook groups. Those groups actually really helped me. Those are private groups.” For Aparna, a way to resolve the constraint of “lack of information” was to seek expertise from peers who had asked the same questions. The internet groups she reached out to were made up of current and former international graduate students. Collaborative work is a cornerstone of promoting equity and inclusion in creating technical documents (Moses & Mussack, 2021, para. 8), but, in Aparna’s case, the act of collaborating with peers allowed her to understand and, ultimately, find the correct documents she needed. Therefore, we can see that the act of collaboration not only helps in the creation of documents that attend to audience needs, but also in traversing technical situations where those needs have not been taken into account. The lack of information constraint, in this case, was not navigated by seeking

out official channels for information but, instead, seeking out expertise from within the same community.

For Augustus, he faced a similar problem when reaching out to his department for support. He stated that his “department was not particularly helpful either. I talked to several professors. Either they don’t know or they don’t care.” Here, Augustus is referring to trying to find information in general in his department; he expected that his professor’s would be able to help him concerning immigration questions. Here it’s important to consider this example from multiple perspectives. Augustus clearly expected that the professors in his department would have the knowledge to help him with immigration questions. However, Madden-Dent et al. (2019) found, in a study of 200 American universities, that there is a widespread case of a lack of integration training to teach faculty members how to help international students (p. 1002). What Augustus saw as a lack of care in his department is a widespread “problem” across universities. However, for the department, lack of faculty training may not be construed as a “problem” at all. For example, at Virginia Tech, the university my participants attended at the time of this study, the international student center advises that international students (both undergraduate and graduate) should direct their queries to international student advisors working in the center. The presence of international student specific advisors on a university campus may contribute to faculty sentiment that international student policy issues aren’t their concern in specific regards to advising.

Augustus did not disclose how he navigated the specific issues regarding lack of information in his current department. However, he noted that he had prior experience navigating technical paperwork from his time doing a Masters degree at an American

university. He explained that, if a student encountered the same lack of information he did without having prior experience at an American university “I would... never imagine that this student that are probably needing more help than me would know anything about that.” Reading between the lines with this response, we can see that the way Augustus navigated a lack of information in his current institution was by drawing on past experiences.

Both these examples highlight that these respondents felt as if their departments should have been sources of information regarding international paperwork. However, in both their experiences, department members were unable to help them. This highlights a discrepancy between my respondents’ perception of information networks and their departments’ understanding of faculty and staff roles. The constraint, here, of a misperception of roles and responsibilities impeded my participant’s ability to quickly locate places where they could get responses to their queries regarding paperwork.

Content Accessibility Constraints

A lack of information can also be experienced when people do not have access to the information they need. In my previous code, my participants went to faculty members they thought would be able to give them information. However, another information-based constraint faced by my participants was a lack of access to information. This specific constraint intersects both technical and legal constraints, as my participants were trying to access technical information that would have legal ramifications in regard to their visa statuses. In these instances, my participants found the appropriate channels to find new information, but were unable to talk to experts, or find the information they needed. Aparna and Augustus both called “official” channels in order to get information

on their paperwork. Aparna was going through the process of obtaining her F-1 visa prior to attending university and was anxiously waiting for it to be delivered. She decided to call the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) department to check on her status. However, when she rang she said, “no one was there to uh answer my calls <laugh> from USCIS.” Similarly, Augustus needed to receive his F-1 I-20 document in order to attend his doctoral program but he hadn’t heard about his documentation, so he rang the international center at his school. Similarly to Aparna, he was unable to speak to anyone there because, “I used to call [the international center], no one would pick up my phone.” In both these cases, my respondents found the appropriate avenues to direct their calls to, but were unable to access the information they needed due to an expert being unavailable.

Unfortunately, the only way to navigate this constraint is to continue ringing the appropriate channels in order to find someone to speak to. Long wait times for call centers is not an issue specific to international students, but USCIS did address the long wait times for their call centers in 2021. The Office of the Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman (2021) released a sheet for immigrants hoping to contact the USCIS call centers. They office noted that, due to “increased inquiry volumes” they would be promoting online self-help tools as callers were often unable to reach an agent to help them with their queries (p. 1). Similarly, the center that Augustus was trying to ring, as of February 2024, has three international student advisors and five immigration specialists that serve the entirety of the international community at the university, both undergraduates and graduates (Cranwell Faculty and Staff, 2024). With such a small team

working for the entire international student population at the university, it is little wonder that Augustus struggled to find someone to talk to.

Another way my respondents struggled with access to information was on websites. When Aparna found out which type of visa she needed, she went to download the forms from the USCIS websites but found that, “there’s no clear indication of which form to download.” On the USCIS homepage, there is a tab in the search bar titled “Forms.” On clicking this tab, a dropdown box shows users four categories of forms called: Most Accessed Forms, Family Based Forms, Employment Forms, and Humanitarian Based Forms. For international graduate students who work during their time in university (which would be a F-1 designation), they would need to navigate to the Employment Forms section. As we can see in Figure 2, a number of forms appear under each category title.

Figure 2

This figure shows a screenshot from the USCIS homepage that appears when a user selects the “Forms” dropdown.

Forms			
Most Accessed Forms	Family Based Forms	Employment Based Forms	Humanitarian Based Forms
I-485, Application to Register Permanent Residence or Adjust Status	I-129F, Petition for Alien Fiancé(e)	I-9, Employment Eligibility Verification	I-134A, Online Request to be a Supporter and Declaration of Financial Support
I-765, Application for Employment Authorization	I-130, Petition for Alien Relative	I-129, Petition for a Nonimmigrant Worker	I-589, Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal
I-90, Application to Replace Permanent Resident Card (Green Card)	I-360, Petition for Amerasian, Widow(er), or Special Immigrant	I-140, Immigrant Petition for Alien Workers	I-730, Refugee/Asylee Relative Petition
N-400, Application for Naturalization	I-600, Petition to Classify Orphan as an Immediate Relative	I-526, Immigrant Petition by Standalone Investor	I-821, Application for Temporary Protected Status
All Forms	I-751, Petition to Remove Conditions on Residence	I-539, Application to Extend/Change Nonimmigrant Status	
File Online			

(U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d., *Homepage*)

For a prospective international graduate student wanting to work during their graduate degree which, as aforementioned, would be an application for a F-1 designation, there is no clear language indicating which form to download. To apply for a F-1, a prospective international graduate student needs to apply for an I-9 which is the first form listed under the “Employment Based Forms” category. However, there is no indication that this is the appropriate form, with no language saying student, or F-1. In Aparna’s case, she had found the correct website on which to download the forms, but without clear language showing her which form to download, she was still faced with the constraint of being unable to access the information she needed online.

Similarly, Chiagozie struggled to access forms online. She wanted to apply for Medicaid for herself and her children after arriving in the United States, but when she went to access the online Medicaid portal, she found that, “there’s nowhere on the portal that says “Oh, if you’re on a student visa you can apply for this, or if you’re on this kind of visa you can apply for this.” On the Medicaid website homepage, there is no mention of either the term “immigrant” or “international,” so it’s understandable that Chiagozie was initially confused as to where she could find information on whether she and her children were eligible for Medicaid. As per the 2014 Affordable Care Act, Medicaid was expanded so that eligibility was extended to address the “gaps in coverage for the poorest Americans (medicaid.gov, n.d., para. 6) where the household income needs to be below 133% of the federal poverty level (medicaid.gov, n.d.,para. 5). With the language used in Medicaid’s “Program History” page and, most notably, the use of the word “American” it could seem as though international communities in the United States are ineligible to apply, even if they are eligible due to their income. Further, Shazal (2022) states that

accepting public assistance, including Medicaid, is a violation of immigration law for non-immigrants (para. 16). So, it would make sense that the Medicaid portal did not have information for Chiagozie to find, because she would not be eligible to apply.

Confusingly, however, in 2022, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services stated that all noncitizens are allowed to utilize affordable healthcare in the United States, including Medicaid, without penalization from the Department of Homeland Security (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022, para.2). The penalization, here, would be the international student being in violation of immigration law. For Chiagozie, then, the answer to whether she and her children were eligible for Medicaid due to her annual income was a difficult one. As different sources gave different information, without a clear answer on the Medicaid website itself. In this situation, Chiagozie struggled to find, and therefore access, the forms online that would allow her to apply for this health service, as, presumably, the website was not designed with an international audience in mind..

To navigate difficulties in accessing forms online, Aparna and Chiagozie took different routes. In much the same way she navigated the misperception of roles and responsibilities constraint, Aparna turned to the online peer forums she was using before and asked them to help her navigate the USCIS website. In her own words,

“I remember that I joined an international student forum at that point of time, some like Facebook group and also an online blog forum uh that I joined, and where I used to constantly ask questions to the peers in those groups, like how did they do it? “

As she mentioned, she consistently had to reach out to peers who had knowledge of these websites as they had navigated them previously. Here, we can see Aparna utilizing the rhetorical heuristic of *topics*, by finding fitting places to discover explanations for incoherent situations (McKeon qtd. in Consigny, p. 182). The unknown in her instance was understanding of a legal and policy-based website, so she found a group of people with knowledge of the website and then crafted appropriate questions to get the answers she needed. Chiagozie, on the other hand, noted that using peer groups to navigate a situation can sometimes backfire. When discussing this particular constraint, she noted that,

“I feel that for some of those services they have to clearly state on their site or whatever the approach or whatever that the services is not for those people instead of making people go through all of those troubles to apply and then people start hearing from some other sources either reliable or not that, oh, you're not supposed to use that.”

Here, we can see that Chiagozie also reached out to other sources to navigate the Medicaid website, but she noted that other sources may or may not give “correct” information while also describing the process of seeking out this information as a “trouble.” With this in mind, we can see that seeking out information from sources aside from official ones when it comes to navigating the constraint of access to information is only reliable when the sources have correct information. As a lack of access to information contributes to an incoherent understanding of a constraint, it can be difficult for rhetors to gauge which information is and isn’t accurate.

The constraint of having difficulty accessing information frustrated some of my participants. As aforementioned, Chiagozie noted that the Medicaid website lacking guidance for international students meant she had to go through the “trouble” of seeking out information from outside sources. Then, she had to walk through which information was reliable before moving forward. At stake for Chiagozie was not only her immigration status as a lawful nonpermanent resident in the United States, but also her children’s statuses. In Augustus’ case, when I asked a follow up question regarding the international center he was trying to contact, he simply said “I don't want to talk about [the international center]” with annoyance. However, later in the interview he noted that the international center mystified him, stating that, “I don't know anything about how this international center, this freaking [international center] works.” Augustus’ frustration is clear here, as he is contacting the one center on the university campus that is designed to cater to international students but he still can’t get answers to his questions. While the stakes were different for all my participants, they were navigating a constraint that could have potential ramifications for their legal paperwork, which is the same paperwork that allows them to live, work, and study in the United States.

Incorrect Information Constraints

The constraint of incorrect information occurred when my respondents were able to find someone to give them information, but that information later turned out to be incorrect. This constraint could have had potentially damning legal consequences for my respondents as this incorrect information pertained directly to technical documents that allowed my respondents to stay and study in the United States.

In Kwesi's case, his specific experience with the incorrect information constraint would straddle all three main categories of constraints, as his situation involved technical paperwork, financial issues, and legal requirements. Kwesi's acceptance into university was deferred due to the Covid-19 pandemic. He was concerned that he might have to repay his SEVIS fee, so decided to reach out to his school and ask if that was the case.

"I emailed my school [and] I ask... whether my SEVIS fee that I pay 350 bucks... would I have to pay again. And then the school told me... they've registered me that I'm... taking some courses online before I'll come to the US... Now I called the SEVIS fee when I was in Ghana [the] SEVIS, uh, office... [t]hey told me... I would have to pay again because... it has expired. So, there are contradictory information from the SEVIS fee office and my school."

If Kwesi had chosen not to double check with the SEVIS office, his visa would not have gone through, therefore rendering him unable to study in the United States.

Kwesi's navigation of the situation is clear in his statement above. He decided to double check the information he was given with multiple official sources in order to verify what information was, and wasn't correct. He was receptive to the issue at hand, and, in being receptive, he interrogated an indeterminate situations by reaching out to appropriate sources to fact check the information he had been given in order to craft, what he hoped, was a fitting response to the issue of getting a viable form I-901. While he had already attended a visa interview with an original I-901, the SEVIS fee payment is only valid for 12 months after receipt of payment, so the original I-901 became redundant when his acceptance was deferred. Regarding this constraint, Kwesi showcased a proactive mindset when it came to puzzling out an incoherent situation due to conflicting,

and incorrect information. He aptly noted that an embassy's information would likely supersede information given by an academic institution and acted accordingly. The issue remains, however, that he originally perceived his university as being able to give him accurate information as they are the ones that sponsor international graduate visas and, therefore, would assumedly be experts when it came to the paperwork that accompanies those visas. With this in mind, Kwesi's constraint could be seen to also fall under the misperception of roles and responsibilities constraint, but, given that he *did* receive a response from his university, we can presume that the university did feel as if they were in a position to assume the responsibility for conveying information.

Similarly, Intan experienced issues in attending her program due to incorrect information regarding her paperwork. Her experience with incorrect information was a legal constraint, as it involved the validity of her visa status. Intan had been told she could arrive in the United States by a certain time in order to attend her program. However, she stated that, "my head of my PhD program suddenly emailed me like 'Oh, you know what? You actually cannot arrive in the US after [the] 26th because your status will be suspended' ... why don't you tell me earlier?" In this case, Intan blamed the head of the PhD program for being given incorrect information regarding the deadline by which she had to enter the United States. However, the proactive response to the situation was not handled by Intan, as it was the head of her PhD program that uncovered the incorrect information and communicated it to her. Intan's receptiveness, in this case, was how she chose to handle her travel plans after receiving the correct information. Thus, she was responsive, but did not utilize what Consigny would name rhetorical heuristics in order to ascertain whether the original information she was given was correct. Instead,

she trusted the original information she was given from the university and did not follow up to check whether this information was correct. The outcome of this constraint, had she not received the correct information prior to leaving for the U.S., her visa requirements would not have been met, rendering her legal status as a nonimmigrant invalid.

Finally, Augustus experienced a technical and legal constraint when it came to the incorrect information he was given. In his own words,

“I have some problems regarding my I-9 at Virginia Tech. So, there was a miscommunication from the bursar office. They did not tell me to send me I-9 timely. So, I had to go to them... and ask them that, do they need my I-9? So like, yes, we sent them, and they told me that they sent me a document but they never sent it”

In this instance, Augustus was told he had been sent a document to sign and return, but he claimed that he did not receive the email with the I-9 form. He perceived this as a constraint of incorrect information, as his view and that of the bursar’s office conflicted. One of potential causes for this issue could have been that the graduate program coordinator typically is the one who sends out the I-9 emails at his university; they are not received directly from the bursar’s office. This is because new international graduate students have to go to a meeting with the graduate school coordinator in order to process the I-9. Therefore, if Augustus had checked through his emails by searching for communication with the bursar’s office, and not for the keyword of “I-9” he may not have seen an email in his inbox. Given that the bursar’s office deals with tax records, it could be that they sent follow-up emails after the original email sent by the graduate coordinator was unsuccessful. While considering this situation of conflicting information,

we have to ascertain why Augustus claimed that he did not receive this email. Without access to the email thread in question, it is impossible to get the full details of the situation. However, the emails regarding I-9 documents are typically sent out in the summer, just prior to the university spring semester start date. It could be that an email was sent, but Augustus was not proactively checking his new Virginia Tech email inbox.

To navigate this constraint, Augustus went through his emails to see if he had received correspondence regarding his I-9. While he did not state that he used knowledge of tax forms in the United States to navigate this conflicting information, we can presume he had antecedent knowledge of the genre, because he had already completed a Master's degree in the United States and would have filled out an I-9 form for them also.

Therefore, the situation of navigating tax forms wouldn't have been incoherent, it was merely this specific situation at his new institution that was confusing. The constraint was technical in nature because it involves specific forms, but it had legal ramifications. As the I-9 form is required for all employees in the United States, in not completing it he would not have gotten his employment authorization. As employment is a requirement for international graduate students on an F-1 visa, he would have been at risk of invalidating his position as a legal nonimmigrant.

Time Constraints

The constraint of wait times had an impact on my respondent's ability to obtain and access their paperwork in a timely manner. While wait times can sometimes be a minor inconvenience, the instances when my respondents faced wait times had potentially heavy consequences regarding their paperwork. Both Aparna and Augustus experienced wait times while applying for visa paperwork after being accepted into

university. This specific constraint straddles both technical and legal issues, as a delay in paperwork can have legal ramifications for international graduate students. An international student must apply to, and be accepted by, an American university prior to scheduling a visa appointment. Therefore, they must get a visa appointment, and the resulting paperwork, in a timely manner lest they miss the chance to attend their program. When trying to gain answers on the phone to USCIS, Aparna noted that, even if you were able to reach someone to talk to, “they would make you wait for like one hour or one and a half hours in a call.” Her experience with wait times happened while trying to find out more information regarding visa application processes. Augustus, on the other hand, experienced wait times affecting his process while trying to get a visa appointment while in his home country of Bangladesh. In his own words,

“if I’m being honest with you, I did not sleep for three nights because I... kept myself [awake] so I can get a visa slot because I did not want to lose my opportunity to explore American academia because I worked very hard”

To navigate this constraint of wait times, my participants' only option was to consistently reach out to the appropriate channels, with that being USCIS for Aparna and the American embassy website for Augustus. Further, wait times can be stressful for international graduate students, as a wide time lapse in any step of the legal process could bar them from gaining their paperwork and, therefore, live and study in the United States. For example, Augustus noted that he “worked very hard” to get an opportunity to work in the U.S. and “didn’t want to lose” his opportunity to do so. For context, in order to get to the stage of requesting his visa appointment, he would have taken a TOEFL/IELTS exam, applied to any number of American universities, applied for a DS-160, paid his

SEVIS fee and obtained his I-901, and received an I-20 from the university sponsoring his stay. This process can be lengthy, and requires a prospective international graduate student to spend a lot of time, and money, acquiring the necessary documents. Long wait times, which are outside of the international graduate students control, can undo all that work, as documents need to be completed in a timely manner.

The notion of waiting may not immediately seem to fall under the purview of rhetorical scholarship. However, with universities inviting more international graduate students to their institutions and the field of rhetoric and composition calling for these student-scholars to be celebrated, it becomes a cause for concern. Technical communication scholars are uniquely placed to tackle this issue with a rhetorical lens, because this constraint appeared, for my participants, between their university acceptance and their visa interviews. As outlined by Katz, technical writing prompts action that has material consequences for those needing, or reading, those created documents (Katz qtd. in Jones and Williams, 2018, p. 373). While university acceptance letters are currently standardized, the short amount of time prospective international graduate students have to turn around their paperwork puts them at a disadvantage compared to their American counterparts and this ensures the experiences for international students are inequitable. By analyzing the timeline in which acceptance letters are released, or what extra information could be added to the letters for international students accepted, technical communication scholars could begin to make inroads into tackling this very material constraint.

Financial Constraints

The final constraint felt by a number of my respondents was unforeseen financial strain, and, therefore, falls distinctly into the larger constraint of financial issues. This constraint was often a knock on effect of other constraints such as incorrect information or wait times. However, the reason unnecessary financial strain is coded as a constraint as opposed to an effect of other constraints is that it often had to be addressed separately from the original constraint in order to be navigated. In attending to the constraints of unforeseen financial strain, I demystify the costs of obtaining legal paperwork for international graduate students, thereby addressing the issues of information disparity, structural inequities, and exploitation of financial and informational vulnerabilities (Gray, 2023, p. 45). For Aparna, she could not find information on the correct IELTS exam to take for graduate school, so she took an exam but later found out she had taken the wrong one. In her own words,

“I mean uh y'know like this again, I had to take IELTS exam within like seven days without any preparation. I went for the exam and exam, booking the fees was like \$250 I guess for just one exam. IELTS exam. <laugh> I mean it was it was a lot.”

In this instance, she had to pay a total of \$500 for two exams, when she should have had to pay a one-time fee of \$250. Had she not swiftly retaken the correct IELTS exam, she would be unable to fulfill the language requirements asked for by many universities.

Aparna's navigation of this situation was reactionary, as the information she needed to take the correct IELTS exam was not specified. She noted that on the application form it

“was written that you have to just submit either TOEFL or IELTS score... I submitted my IELTS score and after that they said like, oh no, no, no, it's not it's general score. We need your academic score. So I was like uh, okay. Then you should have mentioned in the application thing only that you need an IELTS academic score. It is just written TOEFL or IELTS score.”

Here, she assigns blame to whomever wrote the graduate school application form, as there are two types of IELTS exams and the application form was not specific to the one it wanted. She had submitted her IELTS score that she previously took and got the response that it was the wrong exam. There was, seemingly, a presumption on behalf of those writing the application document that a prospective international graduate student would know about the two separate IELTS exams. However, Aparna had previously taken a general IELTS exam in order to get a visa for another English-speaking country, so presumed her scores would be valid for a graduate program application. Her lack of knowledge of the genre was at odds, then, with the presumed knowledge set for international applicants.

In Intan's case, a delay in her visa paperwork arriving meant that she had to pay for multiple flights from Indonesia to the United States. She noted that, “we have to reschedule our flight three times [due to paperwork delays].. It was so much hassle, like so much money.” This strain was also felt by Kwesi, who explained that, due to a deferred university acceptance, he had to pay “the SEVIS fee twice, \$350, twice. I paid twice [and] I have not really gotten any good accountability for it.” For Kwesi, the total sum of \$600 he had to pay in SEVIS fees were not a direct consequence of another constraint, but instead due to federal regulations regarding how long paperwork can be

valid for. For all these participants, the only way to navigate the constraint of unforeseen financial strain was to simply pay more money. Thus, while this constraint affects the rhetorical situation, the necessary navigation is not rhetorical in nature; it is a material navigation that could impede a rhetorical situation.

When considering the constraint of unforeseen financial strain, we must also attend to countries that the respondents were from. Aparna was already in the United States, so did not have to contend with currency conversion and the fees associated with that. Similarly, Intan was paying for flights in Indonesian rupiah, the Indonesian currency, so she did not have to convert funds. However, for Kwesi, he was paying the \$350 SEVIS fee in Ghanaian cedi, which is a far weaker currency than the dollar. For context, as of January 2024, \$700 would equate to C8,735.16 and the average individual wage for someone in Ghana is anywhere between C500-C2000 per month (Russell, 2024, para. 10). For my participants, being unable to pay the extra expenditure for their paperwork or travel arrangements would have meant they were unable to study at their universities in the U.S., so the “choice” to pay these unforeseen costs were heavily loaded. While this constraint was material in nature, thoughtful technical communication could have mitigated some of the “crisis” moments experienced by my participants. As per Walwema and Carmichael’s (2021) study, technical writing has the potential to affect negative consequences if it is not written thoughtfully towards the user (p. 119). Having a document, web page, or correspondence that outlined the potential issues with costs, such as the need to repay the SEVIS fee, would help international graduate students plan their finances more carefully. Of course, the creation of such documents would not preclude

additional costs, but it would help to mitigate the “unforeseen” aspect of this constraint, thereby making it more manageable for international graduate students to navigate.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I focused on the unique legal, technical, and financial constraints that constellate the international graduate student experience in the United States. First, legal constraints, for international students, are hallmarked by the different laws that pertain to them as opposed to domestic students. In order to navigate legal constraints, international graduate students must have a robust knowledge of the specific legal classifications and vocabulary that is used in those laws. Second, technical constraints are experienced by international graduate students when there is a lack of information, or difficulty accessing information, on university or government websites pertaining to international graduate student concerns. This constraint can also be met when staff or faculty need to process paperwork for international graduate students, but haven’t been given the training or resources to do so properly. Third, financial constraints affect international graduate students as studying in the United States is costly, especially when taking into account the various fees students need to pay for both the universit(y/ies) they’re applying to and for their legal documents. It should be noted that the financial constraints discussed in this chapter did not look at the “planned” financial fees associated with studying in the United States. While the experience is costly for all international students, these fees are planned expenses. Instead, this chapter looked at the unforeseen financial constraints that, due to being unplanned, further burdened my participants.

Within those three larger categories of constraints, I then parsed out my participants' experiences into five, more specific, categories. These being: misperception

of roles and responsibilities; access to information, incorrect information, wait times, and unforeseen financial strain. The reasoning behind creating these smaller, more specific categories, was that singular instances where my participants faced constraints could sometimes fall in intersections of the wider legal, technical, and financial constraints. The analysis in this chapter aims to demystify the experiences of international graduate students and, in creating more detailed categories, I name specific moments that constitute a constraint, as well as analyzing how my participants navigated those moments. In analyzing the various ways my participants navigated their respective constraints, I showcase moments where they either did, or didn't, employ rhetorical heuristics to interrogate, understand, and respond to constraints impeding their journey to completing a graduate degree.

My findings align with scholarship from the fields of technical communication in that they showcase how technical documents have material effects on the users when those documents have not been thoughtfully scripted to meet the needs of users. For example, Aparna was trying to find the information she needed for her paperwork but was trying to navigate a website that had not been created with non-experts in mind. The takeaways from this chapter, then, are not only to gain a better understanding of the technical, legal, and financial constraints that impede international graduate student success but to outline areas where future scholarship can begin to tackle these constraints.

Chapter Five: The Unique Cultural and Ideological Constraints faced by International Graduate Students

In the last chapter, I focused on the technical, legal, and financial constraints that can be present in a situation, but now I turn to focusing on the more ideological constraints that affected my participants ability to respond to their exigence. In Bitzer's (1968) original conception of constraints in rhetorical situations, he noted that that "beliefs, attitudes...traditions [and] interests" (p. 8) can be constraints because they have "the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify an exigence" (p. 8). Of particular interest is Bitzer's use of the word "power," as power structures have been of particular importance to the field of technical and professional communication after the social justice turn. The Oxford English Dictionary offers a simple, if shallow, definition of the word "power," stating that it is the "Ability to act or affect something strongly... energy; effectiveness" (OED, n.d.). Walton et al. (2019) noted that the concept of power is not static (p. 105), but instead a relation between groups of people and also a shifting collection of forces (p. 113). Thus, power can be the ability to act or affect something strongly, but the ability to wield power in certain spaces is impacted by relational structures between people, ideologies, places, and cultural values. Central to understanding these relational forces, according to Walton et al. (2019) is seeing how positionality and privilege intersect to impact how people can wield power in certain spaces (p. 64). Therefore, to gain a comprehensive understanding of power structures in certain spaces or situations we must first attend to the positionality and privilege of the people interacting in them.

Power, Ethnocentrism, and Ideology

For my research, this question of power is particularly important. By examining the intersections of positionality and privilege, then seeing how they affect power relations in a situation, we can better understand *how* beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and interests can act as constraints to respondents in their respective rhetorical situations. This attention to relational power structures is of import not only to the field of technical and professional communication, but also to that of rhetoric and composition. Diab et al. (2019) recognized that “relationships and power abuses are essential rhetorical and pedagogical matters that call on all of us, as communicators and educators, to respond” (p. 455). In short, building frameworks of understanding regarding power structures and the potential for oppressions and discriminations present in them can have beneficial impacts not only on our scholarship but also our teaching. By outlining the ideological constraints faced by international graduate students, and then uncovering the techniques they use to navigate these constraints, I aim to answer the question: what forms of oppression(s) do international graduate students face? Then, what rhetorical strategies do international graduate students devise and use to overcome these oppressions? In answering these questions, I aim to better map, and explain, the rhetorical situations faced by international graduate students in the U.S. So, in this chapter, I will follow the same method as last time where, first, I analyze the data from my six interviews and name, then define, the ideological constraints they faced. Second, I analyze the specific constraints faced by my participants and how they navigated their respective situations. Third, I look at support structures suggested by my participants that could help mitigate the effects of constraints.

For international graduate students, their stay in the United States is defined by ethnocentric values. Ethnocentrism is an “ethnic group self-centeredness” (Bizumic & Duckitt, 2012, p.4) whereby one group, community, or culture believe themselves to be superior in some way to another group, community, or culture. Ethnocentric values are often paired with discriminatory or racist research but, in the case of international graduate students in the U.S., this ethnocentrism is merely a by-product of moving across country borders; you are living under a new government and must therefore abide by the rules and laws of the new country. While it could be argued that the laws of a country aren’t ethnocentric per se, the intercultural communication occurring between international graduates and American citizens in technical communication settings *are* coded through a lens of ethnocentrism because the international interlocutor is working to appease, abide by, or adept to the centrality of the American paradigm. Thus, the situation calls for the international graduate student to change their behavior to fit the American standard necessary in any given interaction. This has the potential to cause anxiety on behalf of the international graduate (Logan, Steel, & Hunt, 2015; Hsu, 2017). These anxieties are, understandably, exacerbated by federal policies designed to surveil immigrants in the U.S. on the presumption that they could potentially be dangerous or in the country illegally. As Cortez’s (2021) aforementioned study highlighted, police have the power to detain those they suspect might be in the country without lawful residency in the state of Arizona (p. 87). While it may seem as if these laws should not impact the anxieties of international students and, even if they did, would only impact students in that state, similar laws continue to be contested across the country. For example, a similar law in Texas is currently being debated and, if the law continues to remain in effect,

police would have the power to arrest suspected illegal immigrants even if those immigrants are on university grounds (Méndez, 2024, para. 7). These laws may seem abstracted from the settings my participants find themselves in, but the general tenor of U.S. policy towards immigrants in the country constellates international graduate students’ fears of what space they occupy when they begin to attend their universities.

Further, discriminatory stereotypes held in these ethnocentric settings can have serious consequences for the international graduates attempting to communicate in these spaces. In 2001, Spencer-Rogers conducted a study which found that American students held firm to stereotypes of their international peers as “maladjusted, unsociable, and naive/confused” (p. 654), which showcases the discriminatory lens that international graduates are subject to. Despite the turn in the field of rhetoric and composition turning to embrace globalization, this scholarship suggests there are still discriminatory lenses used to view the international student population.

Table 8

This table names the main constraints my participants faced, with a brief definition of what each code pertains to

Specific Constraint	Definition
Linguistic constraints	Linguistic constraints refer to times when students had to mediate their spoken language(s) or accent in order to navigate a situation.
Cultural constraints	Cultural constraints refer to moments where students felt as if their cultural norms or behavioral patterns caused them to be discriminated against.
Institutional constraints	Institutional constraints refer to times when participants felt as if their institution had abandoned them, didn’t care about them, or wasn’t offering the help the participants presumed it should.

When it came to my coding scheme for ideological constraints, I found the data did not necessarily prove that my participants were being discriminated against. Hung Ng's (2007) understanding of discrimination defines how it is a "fully social act, connecting the perpetrator with the victim in the face of retaliation or, worse still, getting into trouble with a third party, such as the law" (p. 111). Using this understanding of the term, we can presume that discrimination happens between people and can have material retaliatory consequences. However, in the cases of my participants, they did not experience the material effects of discrimination. Instead, they felt as if the ideological views placed on them as international students had the *potential* to impede their success in getting a graduate degree. Therefore, they employed tactics to diminish or obfuscate potential linguistic or cultural aspects that they presumed U.S. audiences would discriminate against. In regard to the third code, institutional constraints, fear of overt discrimination was absent. However, it is still ideological in nature as it pertains to how my participants felt they were regarded in the U.S. As opposed to the fear of external retaliation, these feelings of abandonment or lack of care have internalized consequences, as opposed to consequences that involve potential retaliation by a third party. This fear of discrimination, and the potential for material consequences, is why I have named these constraints as ideological. Using Marx's understanding of ideology as rooted in idealism and an inequitable distribution of power and resources among groups in society (McLellan, 1995, p. 9), I see these constraints as heavily imbricated in Walton et al.'s notions of power, privilege, and positionality; these constraints, given that they are rooted in power imbalances and a sense of what is "right" or "ideal" are ideological in nature, as opposed to merely belief or value-driven.

Linguistic Constraints

Language discrimination is highly prevalent in U.S. society, with people speaking with thick accents, or those speaking in another language, experiencing social and economic hardship while also being asked to linguistically assimilate to a U.S. standard English (Lippi-Green, 2011, p. 332). This stands in direct opposition with scholarship in the fields of rhetoric, composition, and technical and professional communication that stand against the forced assimilation of language into a standardized form. For example, the *Conference on College Composition & Communication* (2020) that urged scholars to support multilingual writer's practices of integrating their cultural and linguistic values and resources into their classes and also their writing (para. 7). The potential of language discrimination was known by my participants and, in particular, Kwesi felt as if he had to manage his accent and language use ahead of his visa interview for fear that speaking naturally might be one reason that made him appear less honest, as his thick accent was often discriminated against through that lens. Kwesi had peers who "unfortunately... they couldn't get a visa and, um, the person would have to reapply for other schools and stuff." This was because the visa applicant would take too much time formulating an answer to an interviewer's question. This, according to Kwesi, was because interviewers would see the long pause as indicative of dishonesty.

I mean, um, I realize that [the interviewers] have to pay attention to that when the person is not really fluent. It doesn't mean that a person is telling lies. It could be that he thinks he or she thinks in the first language before trying to articulate. Thus, we can see an apparent disconnect between scholarship that calls for accepting linguistic differences and the lived experiences of international graduate scholars.

Perhaps most damning, is Kwesi's explanation that, "we are multilingual students and we are thinking, we are thinking through more than two languages, or even if it's two, it's difficult to talk about things." In thinking through more than one language, however many that may be, there is a change, by Kwesi's estimation, that interviewers could perceive interviewees as lying in their visa interviews and therefore deny prospective students' visas. It seems, then, that the traditionally accepted hegemony of English language continues to pervade federal institutions. Further, scholarship noting that international students lacked polished oral skills (Chiesi, 1992, p. 140) seems to meet an impasse here, as international students *do* display oral skills which are showcased in their visa interviews. For Kwesi, he had spoken with peers beforehand and was able to prepare himself accordingly for his interview. Therefore, he did not have to face this constraint. Instead, he preemptively navigated the potential of this discriminatory constraint in order to best protect his chances of gaining his visa. He was able to do so because he understood that he didn't have the privilege of being able to speak naturally in the interview, as his positionality as a Ghanaian prospective student could lead to potential discrimination, as that faced by his peers before him. Therefore, Kwesi had to navigate the power difference between himself and his interviewer in a preemptive move.

Given that the fields of rhetoric, composition, and writing, as well as the field of technical communication, have moved to refuting the traditionally held prioritization of English language proficiency, this particular case may come as no surprise; scholars know these instances happen. However, as hooks (2003) posits, educators must see how the university is intrinsically linked to real-life (p. 41) with students bringing their experiences into the classroom and to life at the university as a whole. Therefore,

recognizing that linguistic constraints are still occurring in the academic timeline for international graduate students is of paramount importance. Unfortunately, ideological constraints can't be "fixed" in the same way technical constraints can; scholarly research cannot undo language-based discrimination at American embassies. However, acknowledging that international graduate students may have faced the potential of this discriminatory lens prior to, or while attending, classes in the U.S. is important should we hope to close the gap between the goals of our scholarship and the experiences of international graduate students. For example, American University has a page dedicated to succeeding in visa interviews through their student affairs office (American University, n.d.). Technical resources such as this would not limit the potential discriminations faced by international graduate students, but they could help prepare these students so they can better navigate these constraints. By creating web pages, or documentation, that acknowledges the issue of linguistic constraints and how power imbalances can exacerbate discriminatory values, scholars would be promoting inclusivity, as stated by Walwema and Carmichael (2021) who note that, often, inclusive practices are not transferred onto technical documents. In Kwesi's case, he was able to adapt his language ahead of the interview, but he learned to do so from colleagues who did not have the same knowledge of linguistic expectations.

Cultural Constraints

Ethnocentrism can be present in any interaction, as "culturally conditioned values, emotional dispositions, and behaviors" (Neuliep, Chaudoir, & McCroskey qtd. in Borden, 2007, p. 174) lead us to view those deemed "other" through the lens of our own cultural perspectives. If the person is deemed *too* "other," this can lead to a negative view of them

as a person rooted in cultural, emotional, and behavioral patterns of behavior. For my participants, they often felt as if they were viewed as “other” in negative ways during their time applying for, and attending, university in the United States. For Kwesi, he struggled when attending his visa interview at the American Embassy in Ghana, as he felt unsure how to present himself in this new cultural situation. He noted a marked difference in how he should act politely.

in my culture when...an early person or someone in a high office, you are having an interview or you're talking with a person, and, um, you are looking really straight, fixing your gaze into the person. They don't really see it as a kind of... humility. You understand? So, from that, uh, cultural perspective... now people are telling me that when you go to the interview, you always have to fix your gaze really to the person [in the] interview. And if you put your head down, you are off. They would, um, deny you... the visa... So, I mean, there are cultural differences that really come into play.

In much the same way as his navigation of linguistic constraints, Kwesi relied on his peer group to help prepare him for expectations in the visa interview. Again, he was able to navigate the potential effects of discrimination against his cultural behavioral normativities, but only did so thanks to peers who had gone through the process before. His peers told him prior to the interview that his cultural and behavioral mannerisms would reflect so poorly on him that it could potentially impact his ability to get a visa and attend the U.S. university that had accepted his application. Further, the advice he was given, to look his interviewer in the eye when listening and answering questions, was antithetical to his understanding of humility and politeness. So, in order to act

appropriately in his interview, he had to use body language that he felt was impolite and disrespectful to someone who held a higher station than him.

This experience further legitimizes Chavajay and Skownerek's (2008) study that found international students often felt homesick in the United States and this feeling was exacerbated by what they describe as disrespect for their culture (p. 832). While, in Kyesi's case, no one overtly disrespected his culture, he still worked to assimilate his body language to the norms expected in that space, thereby reinforcing the belief that he had to change in order to be viewed favorably in the interview and receive his visa. This highlights an odd disconnect in understandings of what an international graduate student *is* to the U.S. system. The federal government has taken strides to encourage international students to come to the United States, stating that their cultural and academic expertise strengthens American systems of knowledge, yet those same cultural markers can be used against the prospective student. Therefore, the student is placed in a tough predicament where they have to assimilate themselves just enough to pass muster. The process of going through a visa interview after being accepted to a university program is a unique hurdle for international students, as they have already been accepted into a program based on their expertise, but they must now appease the U.S. embassy also. Visa interview tips can include suggestions for body language such as, “[m]aintain good posture, eye contact, and a confident demeanor” (GovAssist, 2023, para. 22) and remind interviewees how “it’s important to be polite and courteous to the consular officer” (Chernysheva, 2023, para. 10). For prospective international students, the expected polite body language that accompanies their interview responses may be unfamiliar and, if they don’t learn to adapt their cultural mannerisms, could affect the efficacy of their spoken responses.

Similarly, Luna also experienced difficulties stemming from the potential for cultural discrimination when she was applying for her visa. She noted that, after attending her interview, she was waiting for a piece of paperwork needed to continue her visa process. However, her and one other applicant did not receive this document. She was given no explanation but, after talking with the other applicant, they realized that neither of them had a social media presence which was the only difference that marked them apart from the other candidates. It should be noted here that Luna applied through the Fulbright program, which was why she was able to talk to other applicants in her group to see what the issue could be. She explained that, in her interview, “they did ask... the embassy, they did ask why I don't have [social media] ... they asked for some specific detail, so I was guessing that's why we didn't get that white paper thing.” This line of specific questioning further bolstered her belief that her visa process was being held up due to a lack of online presence. In our interview she laughed saying “The strange thing [is]... I just personally don't really like so- social media. I don't really have one.” While this could be deemed a “normal” opinion of social media, some of us have a presence and others don't, this raised flags for the U.S. embassy in Indonesia. Luna explained how she had learned from peers that a lack of social media presence could, in fact, impact her visa process.

This might sound extreme, but [the] seniors...who were advising us throughout the process, they did tell us [to]... look through our posts, our stuff that we shared in all of the sort of social media in the past, let's say five years. [W]e're from a country where there are things [that] might be controversial, uh, especially for an Americans, uh, or the, at least the people from the university... We were told to

delete our stuff that, so that's what our seniors already told us via the vi- the Visa application. So, we are aware of the how, social media, um, matters. In the Visa application. So, I, I was thinking that's why, um, I got this little issue that I don't really have one, so they, they can't really look through.”

Luna felt uncomfortable explaining what “controversial” topics could be raised on social media and, to ensure I didn’t distress my participant, I didn’t want to press. However, Luna’s peer network were well-versed in sharing how certain topics or posts should be deleted prior to a visa interview, lest their personal views impede their visa progress.

The social and political climate regarding cultural diversity is indeed fraught for international students after the 9/11 attacks and the Trump administration's penchant for restrictive laws. As per Allen and Bista (2021), the surveillance of international graduate students as potential security threats has become normalized (p. 189) to the point that we might not see any overt issue with their social media being scrutinized. However, this poses a problem for international graduate students who might come from a cultural and political climate very different to that in the United States. Jones and Williams (2018) also speak to the issue of normalizing forms and applications that infringe on people’s rights or freedoms (p. 384) and we can see this coming into play in Luna’s experience. It is her choice not to engage with social media, but that freedom of choice had a potentially damning outcome when U.S. officials couldn’t surveil her personal life and political choices. This, presumably, is because there are discriminatory views on Indonesian culture that may be seen as controversial in the United States, and the embassy’s lack of ability to ensure Luna was not “controversial” halted her visa progress for a time.

For both these participants, there were expectations that they would either assimilate, or already fall in line with U.S. appropriate cultural or behavioral patterns. For Kwesi, he was fortunate enough to be given advice on how to act in his interview beforehand, so he was able to navigate the behavioral code-switching prior to his interview, even if it made him uncomfortable. In Luna's case, she was lucky enough to not have social media and, therefore, did not need to ensure it fit with the embassy's purview of what was, and wasn't, acceptable. However, for Luna, this lack of social media presence may well have been one of the reasons why the embassy halted her visa progress for a time as they wanted to be able to scour her personal opinions.

Institutional Constraints

Institutional constraints could encapsulate several factors but for the purposes of this study, this coding label refers to times when my participants felt as if their institution did not show the level of care that was expected. This care was in regard to not only supporting student success but about recognizing the issues faced by international graduate students. As I will show, there is a presumption from international graduate students about the level of support they will receive from their institutions and, in the case of my participants, this presumed support was often not given. Rhetoric's ability to analyze the effect of written and spoken words is particularly important in the case of these institutional constraints as there is little to suggest that my participants were being discriminated against on ideological grounds. However, many of my participants internalized a lack of support as a lack of care, speaking to how this lack of support impacted their personal and professional wellbeing. Rhetorical scholars, then, need to understand how a lack of written, verbal, or institutional support structures can be

perceived as being in direct opposition to the inclusive goals purported by universities (Walwema and Carmichael, 2021, p. 107). However, to better understand what supports could be crafted, whether those are departmentally or on a wider scale at an institution, we need to understand specific instances in which a lack of support impacted international graduate student success.

For Augustus, he perceived himself as having a lack of power when it came to addressing issues he faced during his time as an international graduate student. He saw this lack of power stemming from a combination of his international positionality as “a person of color from a very, not very well-to-do or rich country” and his lack of privilege as a graduate student for whom the university saw as a vehicle for “cheap labor.” He noted that “The university does not, will not love me when I'm dead, but they need my cheap labor. That's why I'm here.” He contrasted this lack of power with his understanding of why U.S. universities invite international graduate students to their campuses.

I fit into that [DEI] narrative very well. So, they need me to show off that diversity. They need me to thrive [in] their department, their campus, and they need to show me, but maybe some of...them need me so they can have their tenures and promotions and big money.

It became apparent that Augustus felt used by his university and he felt that this stemmed from an ideological perspective of his positionality as a DEI hire. This reinforces the contradictory space inhabited by international graduate students; they are highly desired by universities but, in some cases, feel rejected or abandoned by the same institutions that

sponsor them. Further, Augustus noted that, from his perspective, professors did not care about helping him thrive when he faced issues.

Chloe, domestic students and most of the professors don't really care. No, no, no. Most of the professors don't don't really give a shit. And some of them also said, oh, I'm so sorry you had to go through this and that's it. I'm sick and tired of this. So sorry, you have to go through this thing. If you want to do something, do something. Because some of the professors have really ability to do something and they won't do anything. Nothing.

Here, we can see Augustus further solidifying his positionality as an international graduate student by putting himself in opposition with professors and domestic students. This, in his estimation, is because they don't care about the international graduate student community. Augustus spoke from his own experiences of asking for help and receiving what he saw as ineffective platitudes. Central to this belief is what Augustus saw as an unwillingness on the part of his professors to exercise their power in order to help him *because* he is an international graduate student. Bolstering this belief is his assumption that professors do have the power to help international graduate students. Whether or not this is the case depends on the situation at hand, but Augustus' response showcases that many international graduate students feel as if their professors both can, and should, be able to help them.

This particular example poses an issue for scholars who want to actively promote international graduate student success but also for university departments more generally. If international students presume a level of care and support when they arrive at their institution, the lack of support could well lead to situations such as Augustus' where he

felt simultaneously disenfranchised and used as a vehicle to help his department make money. Given Augustus' self-designated status as a "person of color," he was likely, to some extent, "psychologically terrorized by the bizarre gaps between theory and practice" (hooks, 2003, p. 29) when it came to his department's advertised anti-racist and inclusive goals compared to his actual experiences. Whether or not these gaps were intentional is, for this population, sometimes unimportant. As rhetoric is concerned with effect, not intent, it is important to note that Augustus was not feeling the effects of an inclusive workplace. Rhetorically, then, scholars need to address how they can best support international students to better manage this gap.

Similarly, Chiagozie also felt as if her institution, and her department, did not aptly recognize, and help mediate, the specific concerns she had as an international graduate student. She noted that, when she first moved to the U.S.,

I was the only one here with my kids. I had schoolwork, I had pressure on me, my marriage was going through its own challenges because I was more or less separated from my husband. So, I was trying to figure all of this out on my own and it just felt like... I'm not seeing the help; I'm not getting the help I need.

Here, we can see that Chiagozie's personal stressors, exacerbated by being an international graduate student, were impacting her performance as a graduate student. Most telling was her comment that she was "not seeing the help" and "not getting the help" that she needed to thrive as an international graduate student. One of the issues here, when it comes to international graduate students requesting specific supports, is that they often aren't sure what supports would be the most effective. As they are navigating a new culture, policies, and legal requirements, they often don't know what is required of

them until they are asked to complete certain procedures. This is telling with Chiagozie's statement of "I was trying to figure this all out on my own" which refers not only to her husband's absence but also the way she did not receive direction or help from her department. Here, we can see that Chiagozie was trying to look for the help she thought would be provided for international graduate students but was not finding it.

It could be presumed that departments don't need to create documentation or supports for their international graduate students because most universities have international student centers that are dedicated to serving the international student community. Indeed, Chiagozie said that, "you have this [international] offices that's supposed to be responsible for that, and they just go blank on you." Clearly, Chiagozie perceived that international offices at U.S. universities should have been "responsible" for the international graduate students at an institution. This responsibility included providing that community with support when they needed, or requested it. However, in Chiagozie's experience, she felt that the university international office had shirked these responsibilities. Further, she outlined how she felt the international office should treat their community.

I think [the international office] should be an office that represents a lot of empathy because it's really difficult to navigate in your space as a student and you have the same responsibilities, the same tasks as students who are already familiar with this environment.

Here, we can see that, for international graduate students, they perceive the international office as being an institutional support structure that would understand the distinct stressors faced by international graduate students. Ideologically, then, Chiagozie's

experience let her to perceive that she was receiving less resources than she needed as an international student, thereby creating an inequitable situation between her and her American counterparts. Her positionality as an international student meant she had less information to navigate situations in the U.S. which caused her to feel powerless in situations constellating her academic experiences. Further, she noted the extra difficulty international students have as opposed to “students who are already familiar with the environment” which refers to American students. This inequitable divide is troubling given Spencer-Rogers (2001) findings that American students stereotype their international peers as “maladjusted” and “confused” (p. 9). Unfortunately, a lack of technical, verbal, and/or institutional supports often means international students themselves feel confused or that they’re floundering in their new role as student-scholars.

The presumption that an international student center should help their international student community was also felt by Luna who, similarly, did not receive the help she presumed she’d be given by the international center. However, what set her experience apart was that she saw help being given to other students in her community that she wasn’t receiving. In her own words, “I started spring 21, like the peak of... Covid in the U.S. and I think the [international center] I don't know basically, they forgot about us.” Being part of this “forgotten” group of international graduate students impacted her ability to settle into university. The main aspect of being “forgotten” at the university was that she “never got any... email from the [international center]” which meant that she missed out on the international graduate student orientation and the subsequent emails promoting events. For international graduate students, the international center is a hub through which they not only learn about life in a U.S. institution, but also

meet friends in their international community. Luna noted that she was “really disappointed” because she “didn't know anyone...It was pretty sad. And I actually had to make sense after that myself.” Contrasting with this sense of disappointment and abandonment was the help that Luna saw other international graduate students receiving. She found through her roommate that international graduate students “made a lot of good friends” through events held by the international center. This roommate started a year after Luna and did not experience the dearth of communication from the international center, which Luna attributed to being caused by Covid. Luna, in response, noted that “I get, because it was during covid, [the international center] couldn't really do much. But at least reach out to us who actually got in during this covid next semester.” Here, we can see her reaction to feeling abandoned is markedly different from Augustus’; she doesn’t believe being left to fend for herself is a personal slight, but she does request that university support systems do a better job of tracking which students may not be receiving equitable care.

Unfortunately, social crises can impact student experiences at a university but presuming an international student center should be the sole space for international student support meant the Covid crisis had a large impact on international students. Luna’s arrival into the United States in the Spring of 2021 meant she was also arriving at the height of the Trump administration’s litany of proposed international student reforms. As a Fulbright scholar, Luna had more support than most but, as evidenced by the ways my participants navigated their constraints, international graduate students often turn to peer groups when seeking answers they cannot find elsewhere. With the breakdown in communication from the international center, Luna was left without ways to find

community when she arrived in the United States. This exacerbated her feelings of loneliness, which is a common issue among international students (Chavajay & Skownerek, 2008, p. 832) who don't have a substantial friend group. Much like Chiagozie, Luna was experiencing a deficit in resources being given to her community. This situation could have been mediated had support structures been put in place for international graduate students parallel to those offered by the international student center.

International Student Perception of Support

In regard to the ideological and technical, legal, and financial constraints faced by my participants, they often cited a lack of support as exacerbating the issues they faced. They also noted how effective support systems would have better helped them navigate, then overcome, the constraints they faced. This brings us to the question of what supports would help international graduate students excel during their time at U.S. institutions? And would support systems help mediate the gap between the desired goals of scholarly fields and the lived experiences of this community? One of my research questions was: What can U.S. universities and graduate programs do to provide better support for their international graduate students when navigating these technical and legal processes? While my participants navigated their respective constraints adequately, as evidenced by their continued ability to stay in the United States, they noted that an understanding of their issues by domestic scholars, faculty, and staff would have better helped them during this navigation. As Madden-Dent (2019) asserts,

International students have unique integration needs beyond those of their domestic peers and additional support services can help them navigate a matrix of

diverse and unfamiliar interactions, language, customs, campus policies, academic expectations, and U.S. laws (p. 994)

In short, not only do international students have more constraints to navigate than domestic students, but the contexts in which they are forming correct navigation is often incoherent. Therefore, extra support can help them during this navigation by demystifying incoherent contexts. But, what does “support” mean to international graduate students?

During my interviews I asked my participants to prioritize a single facet of support that would have helped them navigate the constraints we’d discussed during the interview (see Appendix E). When asked if there was anything he would like to see the international center at his university change or implement, Augustus said,

I would pick one thing, supporting us. The way the word support means y'know the literal meaning of supporting us. It's not like having big um big empty words. We do this, we do that. Being supportive, support us in whatever way we need it... help us just help... help to support us in whichever way is possible. And why does guide us support us? We're not asking for any money or any favor. That's our right. Freaking do your job. That's it.

Augustus exhibited the most frustration at this question, which can clearly be seen in the way he answered. Most telling is his comment to “do your job. That’s it.” Clearly, then, he believes the international student center should be designed to support international students, echoing Chiagozie and Luna’s opinions, and he believed they had promised that support with “big empty words”, but that promised support was not delivered. Frustrated as he may be, however, we are still not given a definition of what “support” is or what it

might look like for international graduate students. As per Johnson et al. (2018), it is difficult to distinguish between international graduate student concerns because each concern is so interconnected with the other (p. 1873). While this comment was directed towards scholars looking to conduct research with international student communities, the same message applied to international graduate students themselves. They are often so overwhelmed with constraints that the idea of “support” becomes somewhat ephemeral; there are too many issues to articulate specific supports. With that being said, a number of my participants suggested supports that would have directly helped them in regard to specific constraints. Not only do these supports proffer suggestions for scholars and faculty, but they also indicate areas where students distinctly felt something was lacking.

Departmental Supports

Two of my participants suggested departmental support structures that would help future international graduate students navigate constraints. Aparna noted, in direct correlation with her technical and legal constraint regarding misperception of roles and responsibilities, that she thinks collaborations between departments and international student centers would be helpful.

I mean I would say like a close collaboration between respective departments and [the international student center]. I think that close collaboration I... envision so that like uh the international students challenges could be also mitigated not only in the administrative level but also in the departmental level.

Here, we can see that Aparna still believes that departments should take on some of the responsibility of helping the international graduate students studying in their programs. She notes that her reasoning behind this is that she sees the international center as dealing

with general administrative issues, but the department as dealing with department-level issues. Here, the distinction becomes muddy as, often, departmental issues are merely administrative issues that have been flagged by people in said department. For example, Intan received an email from her PhD Coordinator regarding her arrival into the United States, but that was an administrative issue, despite being conveyed by a member of the department. However, the potential for department collaborations with international centers would certainly mitigate some of the confusion between the two entities. If we presume that departments should bear some of the responsibility for helping their international graduate students, then a collaboration with a university international center would certainly help the department best give information and advice to those students. Reading between the lines, Aparna's suggestion tells us that she perceives there being a distinct lack of communication between departments and international student centers. Given that international graduate students are housed in their respective departments, this suggests there is a disconnect between the two entities.

Another type of departmental support was suggested by Kwesi, who noted that "I know in the department, they might have representatives, uh, professors that goes for a meeting on behalf of the department... they, they could talk about how best they could fight for international, um, grad student." Here, it seems that Kwesi is addressing the service roles of professors in a department. Not all professors fulfill their service requirements by sitting on commissions, committees, or councils at the university and, indeed, Kwesi's university only has two commissions that would potentially discuss issues of supporting international graduate students. Further, the members of these commissions averaged 24 members. Given that there are a large number of departments

across Virginia Tech's nine colleges - excluding those that don't have graduate students - it is currently impossible for each department to have a representative sit on either committee or bring forward international graduate student concerns. Further, issues discussed by representatives are often grander in scale than simply discussing one student, although sometimes student issues can be used as exemplars of wider changes needing to be discussed. Perhaps, then, Kwesi's suggestion of a departmental support would be that each department should have a representative on one of these commissions that does bring forward concerns and suggestions for "fighting" on behalf of international graduate students. With Kwesi's suggestion comes a sad realization that he feels faculty currently do *not* fight for the rights and considerations of international graduate students. While some faculty may disagree with this belief, the issue remains that some international graduate students are feeling the effects of this lack. Whether this is because they are not privy to the conversations happening among faculty, or whether that support truly isn't there, the international graduates are not perceiving those benefits when it comes to their specific constraints.

International Student Center Supports

As well as departmental supports, some of my participants suggested supports that could be implemented at international student centers. For example, Intan suggested a two-part support system that would have helped her and, potentially, could help future international graduate students. She noted that she struggled to navigate her technical paperwork at first and, therefore,

like maybe in the beginning of the [application] process... they guide us like what to do in terms of like... how to fill in the I-20, or like what are the steps? And like

we need to find it by ourself in the websites. Like I remember how um how like confused I am in the beginning, like where do I start, right? Yeah. <laugh>

She noted that having this proactive step-by-step process would have been helpful for her, because she “need[ed] to keep, uh what is it asking [the international center] instead of” them guiding her in the process. Therefore, she was responsible for reaching out with questions to prompt responses instead of being given a guide on what to do. Here, we can see that Intan felt the current technical documents given to international graduate students by the international center are not user-friendly and do not accurately preempt the questions prospective students may have.

Further, Intan suggested that international centers could host “like a Zoom sessions for like any incoming students, for example.” While the international center at her university hosts welcome sessions for students post-arrival on campus, she is suggesting that they host pre-arrival sessions to help students acclimate to their environment prior to arriving in the United States. Intan also noted that she was helped a lot by her international student organization so, in these suggested pre-arrival sessions, it would be helpful if international student centers listed,

here are some of the resources of like a student organization that y'know you can contact, because I think they will instantly connect us... um the webinar, and then like in the end of the session, like they can pr- provide, like here are the resources of like our um international student organization.

Therefore, with the suggestion of Zoom sessions, Intan is not necessarily requesting a new support infrastructure be created. Instead, she is suggesting that structures already in place, such as “welcome” sessions and international student organizations, are more

frequent and also better explained to prospective international graduate students. With these suggestions, it seems, Intan believes that international graduate students would be better prepared to successfully integrate with their universities ahead of arriving in the country. This makes sense given that my data shows international graduate students are more likely to reach out to their peer groups for advice on constraints as opposed to going to their professors or other organizations. Intan explained why she would want the international center to advertise the different international student organizations because “we have the Indonesian community here... it's not big, but... we wanted to do this kind of thing like with [the] international center.” Here, we can see that she is not only suggesting that her international center promote these collaborations as an international graduate student but that she, as a member of an international organization, would like to collaborate with the international center. Intan went on to say how she managed to find other Indonesian students by herself and they “[found] me in apartment... because we know nothing right uh coming from a different country.” These organizations, then, don’t only address academic concerns within their community but also help international students navigate logistics when they first arrive in the United States. In Intan’s case, we can see that she did receive logistical support from her international student organization but her suggestion for the school was that they make these connections easier to find.

Chiagozie also championed her international student organization, but with a more critical lens than Intan. She stated that the international center “has kind of transferred its duties to student organizations.” This directly aligns with her institutional constraint of feeling abandoned by the international student center when she first came to the United States. However, she noted that the African Graduate Student Organization,

“before you even get here, they're telling you, oh, this is how you do it. This is how to get an apartment. So those people were really, really helpful.” Again, we can see that the organization helped her with the logistics of living in the U.S. but, thanks to her connecting with this organization prior to arriving, she was able to set up living arrangements ahead of moving. In contrast, Chiagozie stated “if we don't have this organizations, students are practically going to be lost on, for example, for someone to come pick you up at the airport, you have to make personal arrangements as an international student” highlighting how she would have felt even more lost without the organization’s support. Chiagozie went on to suggest that the international center should, for example, “be responsible for y'know transporting international students from the airport because this is a new place and what if they don't belong to the students organizations?” This example reinforces the idea that some of my participants felt as if their international student center was not offering them the kinds of support they needed to thrive when arriving in the United States. Chiagozie’s statement seems to suggest that she was perceiving a lack of logistical support from the university and, while she did receive that support from her peer group, she feels that the responsibility should fall on the international student center.

Intan and Chiagozie’s reliance on international student organizations aligns with the way they, and other participants, turned to their peer groups when it came to navigating constraints. However, this predilection could well be exacerbated by international graduate students perceiving a lack of effective support from the institution. While not done consciously, it seems that institutions place the weight of logistical graduate support back onto the student organizations. Student organizations play a vital

role in the health and wellbeing of students' lives; however, we should recognize that student organizations should not be expected to do this work alone and, therefore, we should critically examine the support needed by international graduate students more closely.

III. Conclusion

In this chapter I aimed to expand on the types of constraints my participants faced as they navigated the rhetorical situation of being international graduate students. In particular, I identified and analyzed ideological constraints that my participants navigated. This analysis worked to answer my research questions: what forms of oppression(s) do international graduate students face? Originally, I had named “oppression” as a presumed facet of international graduate student constraints, but this analysis instead highlights that ideological constraints were prevalent among my participants. Given that ideology is rooted in inequitable distribution of resources among different communities and a presumed “ideal” state of being, it could be argued that oppression is inherent in ideology. However, naming ideology as an important facet of these constraints, as opposed to naming them as oppressive, reiterates that the constraints are rooted in tacit systems of understanding. Oppression, while sometimes tacit, typically calls to mind an action of oppression. In the case of my participants, they did not have to navigate being actively oppressed by those they were communicating with.

Regarding ideological constraints, I named and coded linguistic, cultural, and institutional constraints as the three main patterns that emerged from my data set. First, linguistic constraints referred to moments where my participant had to mediate their language and accent during moments of communication in order to navigate potentially

damaging material consequences such as being denied a visa. Second, cultural constraints referred to situations where my participants had to mediate their cultural norms such as body language or social and political views in order to assimilate more readily into U.S. understandings of what was acceptable. Third, institutional constraints referred to times when my participants felt as if their institutions did not recognize their difficulties as international graduate students, therefore placing more stress on the international graduate student community that ran parallel to their experiences in classes.

My findings align with scholarship such as Chavajay and Skownerek's (2018) study that says international students often feel lonely in the U.S. due to insubstantial friend groups and perceived disrespect for their cultural values (p. 831). Further, my study demystifies specific situational constraints that can contribute to this emotional state. In demystifying these constraints, I showcase how the positionality of international graduate students can impact their privilege, thereby affecting the power they have in certain spaces. In order to overcome these situations, my participants have used rhetorical strategies such as acknowledging genre precedents to navigate potential discriminatory retaliation and barriers. Further, many of my participants utilized peer group knowledge(s) to ascertain what behaviors would be acceptable in these situations.

In the latter half of this chapter, I addressed the research question: what can U.S. universities and graduate programs do to provide better support for their international graduate students when navigating these technical and legal processes? My participants named specific support implementations that they posited would have helped them navigate their specific constraints. However, the supports they named did not only proffer suggestions for those named supports but also highlighted areas where they saw a lack of

support from either their departments or institution. In analyzing this data, I highlight key areas where departmental or institutional faculty can work to address concerns present in the international graduate student community. This outcome had implications not only for scholars wanting to conduct research on international graduate student concerns, but also for how we can better implement the goals of inclusive and social-justice oriented scholarship in our departments.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This study sought to demystify the constraints faced by international graduate students as they engage in study in the United States. This responded to a gap I perceived between the inclusive, globally conscious goals espoused in the literature and the research that showed international graduate students were not feeling the effects of this scholarship during their time in American academia. As aforementioned, this research project originally responded to a research problem as outlined by international education scholars Martínez and Plough (2018) who noted in their own research that international graduate students were navigating university systems that saw them as deficient (p. 1824). However, the research problem I chose to address became more multi-faceted as I continued my study, as I uncovered that university systems weren't necessarily operating with a deficient view of international graduate students, but those same students were still navigating deficient situations. Therefore, my new research problem focused on uncovering and analyzing the gap between the university systems, and scholarship promoting international graduate student expertise, and the lived experiences of that student community. To conduct this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six international graduate students who were currently studying at the same R1 institution. Ahead of writing my analysis from the data gained from these interviews, I situated my research not only in a suitable body of scholarly literature but also the history of social and political trends towards international students in the United States. In addressing both scholarship and federal mandates, I showcased how studies of international graduate students must attend not only to their position as students at an institution but also to their legal status as nonimmigrants in the U.S.

My first research question aimed to map the rhetorical situations faced by graduate students and I used Lloyd Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation to dismantle moments where my participants found themselves in technical communication situations in an effort to demystify the specific constraints they faced and navigated. The first step of this question was to uncover the exigencies that international graduate students respond to when entering into the rhetorical situation of being a graduate student overseas. My study found that my participants were responding to a singular exigence when they chose to enter into the rhetorical situation of being an international graduate student; they did not have their desired graduate degree and wanted to come to the United States to undertake their studies. While this exigence was singular, there were two main reasons my participants wanted to travel overseas to complete a degree: expanding academic knowledge at a foreign university and wanting to get a graduate degree and return home. In my analysis, I found that, for four of my participants, they had to travel overseas to get this degree as no universities in their home countries offered graduate degrees in their desired field of study. For the other two participants, they're choices were severely limited in their home countries as compared to the number of universities offering their degree in the United States. Further, my study highlighted why the United States was a particularly desirable location for my participants by analyzing how universities in the U.S. promote international collaboration among faculty and students, thereby making themselves an attractive option for aspiring international scholars.

The second step to mapping the rhetorical situation for international graduate students was to ask what audiences they needed to address while they navigated not only the situation they were in but the constraints they had to face. Throughout the course of

my research, I realized the constituent of “audience” was more intricate than I had first imagined. Whereas rhetors often have to name and recognize types of audience (such as experts, non-experts, professionals, etc.) my participants alluded to three “types” of audience: Americans, America, and Institutional Organizations. Each of these perceptions of audience had a direct opposite which were: student organizations, international, and home. For each of these three audience perceptions, my participants utilized different techniques when crafting fitting responses. For situations where institutional organizations were being communicated with, my participants would lean on their expertise as technical communicators to navigate and overcome constraints. When dealing with the concept of an “American” audience, my participants would mediate their outward language, behavior, and mannerisms using intercultural communication skills. The concept of “America” as audience was more internal, with my participants using intercultural communication skills to interrogate their own sense of self as someone who had chosen to leave their home and enter a different geographically grounded culture. Based on the data gleaned from my interviews, I was unable to answer my research question of “what audiences must be addressed [in the rhetorical situation of being an international graduate student]” because my participants alluded to grouping audiences into homogenous “types” and, due to the intricacies of perceiving audience as a cultural or institutional whole, I propose future research that tackles what “audience” means to an international graduate rhetor and how that mediates their construction of fitting responses.

The third step to answering my first research question was to map the types of constraints faced by international graduate students during their time as students in the

United States. Indeed, my study found that the most pressing element of the rhetorical situation for my participants was that of constraints. Johnson et al. (2018) recognized in their study that international student concerns are so imbricated in one another that it can become difficult to detangle them to distinguish specific concerns (p. 1873). My study of constraints echoed this scholarship to a degree, highlighting how numerous constraints were for my participants. However, in utilizing the theory of the rhetorical situation I found two distinct patterns of constraints: technical, legal, and financial constraints and ideological constraints. The two are distinct in that the first category named constraints that were able to be overcome thanks to rhetorical moves showcased by participants, whereas the second category of constraints could only be navigated. In essence, the first category could be “fixed” but the second category could not. Further, Bitzer named constraints as ideological in nature, but noted that a rhetorical constraint must be able to be overcome through rhetorical means. My study highlighted that the first type of constraint which was more logistical in nature, was not necessarily ideological, therefore moving away from Bitzer’s original conception of the nature of a constraint. However, those constraints could be overcome through rhetorical means. The second category of constraint adhered more closely to Bitzer’s framework, but those constraints could only be mediated, not entirely overcome, through rhetorical means. Therefore, my study not only contributes to our understanding of international graduate student scholarship but also proffers a more nuanced conception of the theory of the rhetorical situation.

My second research questions sought to answer what oppressions international graduate students faced during their time in the United States. Through the course of my research, I discovered that international graduate students were not oppressed per se.

Instead, they were navigating deficit situations that were exacerbated by a web of constraints that took different forms. While this caused some of my participants to feel oppressed, my data cannot definitively state whether oppressions were proactively placed upon them. The first category of constraints, legal, technical, and financial constraints, had five distinct types: misperception constraints, content accessibility constraints, incorrect information constraints, time constraints, and financial constraints. First, misperception constraints, referred to moments where students misperceived who could help them with technical paperwork and, therefore, were delayed in getting responses. This constraint affected my participants when it came to them trying to seek help in regard to legal paperwork. The stakes for this constraint were high, as completing the necessary legal paperwork not only affects an international graduate student's ability to study but also to live in the United States. In naming and analyzing this constraint, I showcase how scholars of technical communication and departmental faculty can better create documents that tell international graduate students where to access specific information. Second, content accessibility constraints, referred to times when my participants were able to locate the correct avenue to find information, but that information was obfuscated thanks to poor user design. While this constraint could be navigated by savvy international graduate students, scholars in technical communication have an opportunity to study how websites and documents could be better crafted to cater to international student users. Third, incorrect information constraints, referred to times when international graduate students were given incorrect information regarding their paperwork. As international graduate students are responsible for applying for, and maintaining, this paperwork, this constraint often presented a high degree of anxiety

among my participants. Analyzing this constraint presents a problem for scholars and faculty wishing to be helpful to the international graduate student community. While scholars and faculty may wish to be available to help their students, they also run the risk of conveying incorrect information which could have very material consequences for international students. Fourth, time constraints, referred to situations where wait times severely affected my participants. This, in turn, impacted their emotional and financial wellbeing. In regard to rhetoric's ability to address this constraint, we should turn again to technical communication scholars and the creation of documents and websites that guide international graduate students on how best to manage wait times and what considerations they must factor in when booking flights or managing their paperwork. Fifth, financial constraints, referred to times when my participants experienced unforeseen financial costs that could have seriously impeded their ability to travel to the United States for their degree. As with time constraints, addressing unforeseen costs is a task where scholars and faculty should consider how they can best create documentation that tells international graduate students what potential costs may arise as they book travel plans or pay for required documentation.

This category of constraint was largely concerned with logistical issues navigated by my participants. In terms of scholarship, my analysis offers the field new avenues of research to consider. Many of these constraints could have been mitigated had there been appropriately designed documentation that guided my participants through the process of applying for paperwork and managing the logistics of traveling to the United States. This aligns with Mitelmeier, Lomer, and Unkule's (2021) argument that international graduate students face intrinsically inequitable conditions (para. 6) that cause them greater stress

than their American peers. My research also reiterates claims made by Walwema and Carmichael (2021) who note that inclusive practices remain absent in praxis despite inclusive research occurring in the field of technical and professional communication (p. 107). My research, then, offers areas where scholars can conduct research to address these inequalities and work to put into practice the inclusive goals espoused in scholarship.

The second category of constraints, ideological constraints, had three distinct codes: linguistic constraints, cultural constraints, and institutional constraints. While my research question originally presumed these constraints would be caused by oppression, my data showed that these constraints often occurred due to the *fear* of discrimination in ideologically charged spaces as opposed to overt oppressions. First, linguistic constraints, referred to the idea that a participant's natural way of speaking may make them appear untrustworthy so, therefore, that way of speaking needed to be managed to better fit U.S. language normativities. While scholarship such as Hesford's (2006) argues that the field of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies has begun to push back against the tradition of upholding the myth that English monolingualism as the ideal (p. 11) we can still see this ideology affecting international graduate students in other scenarios outside of the classroom. Second, cultural constraints, referred to times when my participants had to consider what cultural and behavioral norms could contribute to their issues when it came to applying for their visas. The notion that my participants were desirable to universities in the United States thanks to their status as international scholars, yet they had to mediate their cultural mannerisms and beliefs poses a paradox that can be difficult for students to navigate. This aligns with Pottie-Sherman's (2018) assertion that international

graduate students are always navigating a complex system of racial profiling, neoliberal institutional agendas, and the way migration has become a security issue (p. 33). In short, my participants had to learn how to appear both appealing as an international student to universities and embassies and also how to hide enough of their cultural mannerisms so as to appear palatable. Third, institutional constraints, referred to moments when my participants felt as if their status as international graduate students put them on unequal footing with their American peer group thanks to a lack of care or attention being given by their university. I coded this constraint as separate from wider beliefs of a lack of care because my participants would point to specific instances in which they felt as if the university or their departments overtly chose not to help them. While this code is separated from the others, it serves to reemphasize the importance of analyzing constraints as a research focus; my participants noted that international graduate students are sometimes a forgotten or abandoned population and, given that these students are often working and communicating with others in their international communities, this mindset poses a problem for both institutions and scholarship.

Another step to answer my research question of “what forms of oppression(s) do international graduate students face?” asked what rhetorical strategies international graduate students devise and use to overcome oppressions. As aforementioned, my data did not uncover specific oppressions, but instead solidified that the constraints of a rhetorical situation put international graduate students at such a disadvantage that they can feel as though they are oppressed. Therefore, this particular research question shifted through the course of my research, instead looking at the rhetorical strategies that my participants devised to navigate constraints present in a rhetorical situation. I found that

international graduate students navigated technical, legal, and financial constraints by employing technical communication skills such as researching paperwork and using technical language to better find solutions to their issues. In the case of ideological constraints, my participants used intercultural communication skills to amend their body and oral language to better “fit” what they deemed appropriate for the communication situations they found themselves in. Future research would benefit from studying more closely the relationship between “oppression” and the unintended consequences of university structures on certain student populations.

International graduate students are, by their very nature, researchers. Therefore, my participants were versed in American scholarship, at least to an extent, prior to applying to university in the United States. While the inclusive, globally conscious literature coming out of the U.S. is working to improve the theoretical foundations of scholarship and teaching, it may be setting up our international graduate students with a presumption that their professors have a level of knowledge that isn’t there. For example, my participants often seem confused that their departments and professors couldn’t help them with legal or technical questions, with Augustus going so far as to say professors *could* but they *chose* not to. Therefore, I posit that international graduate students are often arriving in the United States with an expectation that their professors have a certain level of knowledge and understanding regarding international student documents, logistical issues, and emotional state. Future scholarship in the field would, therefore, benefit from addressing how their goals and findings may or may not be translated practice to avoid tacitly promising international graduate students a level of knowledge that is not realized.

An unintended limitation for my research ensured that one of my research questions, “what rhetorical strategies do international graduate students devise and use that have failed to overcome these oppressions?” was unable to be answered. As my research progressed and I uncovered that constraints superseded any notion of oppression, it became clear that any failed strategies would have, ultimately, led my participants to be unable to either enter the U.S. for their graduate degrees or stay in the U.S. This meant that all the strategies my participants discussed were effective, as evidenced by their participation in my study and their continued attendance for their graduate programs. As such, the bounds of my participant pool meant that I could not answer that question. Future research could certainly benefit from interviewing students who were unable to attend graduate school due to failed navigation of constraints, as one of my participants spoke about past colleagues who had been unsuccessful at their applications due to ideological constraints. However, any research hoping to gain a clearer picture of the consequences of failed navigation would likely be part of an international study and would have to account for the potential emotional harm that could come from seeking out these individuals.

Despite the wealth of data elicited by this research, my study has limitations that affect the generalizability of my results. First, all my participants attended the same university and, while this doesn’t make their experiences any less valid, it could be suggested that they only experienced these issues due to their attendance at a specific institution. Second, my participant group was small due to discomfort from peers who didn’t want to discuss their legal issues in a recorded interview and the fact that I could not ethically compensate them for their time despite receiving funding to do so. Again,

this does not affect the validity of my participant's particular experiences, but it does limit the generalizability of the data collected. Further, in relying on interviews as opposed to document analysis, my data was grounded solely in my participants' perception of events, situations, and/or understanding of documentation. This allowed me to gain a foundation of data regarding potential causes for the gap between the goals of literature and the lived experiences of international graduate students, but it leaves the voices of other stakeholders (such as professors, faculty, international center staff, etc.) out of the conversation. Future research would benefit from interviewing the perceptions of these stakeholders alongside analyzing university documents and websites. When choosing a method for my study I adhered to Mittelmeier, Lomer, and Unkule's (2022) assertion that research into this community should be conducted *with* international graduate students and not *about* them (para. 5). As part of the international graduate student community at the institution in which I conducted this research, I knew from personal conversations that my peers were apathetic towards surveys targeted at gaining information from them in order to improve overall international graduate student experiences. This was due to my community not seeing changes being made despite tacit promises being made by the distribution of the surveys. I could not in good conscience, then, turn to surveying my peer group when it became apparent that fewer students were comfortable with interviews than I had anticipated. Bearing this in mind, future scholarship would benefit from replicating this study at other universities to see if the findings remain cogent across different institutions. However, scholars planning to do this research should remain cognizant of prior research that may not have met the expectations of the international graduate student community and, therefore, created a

sense of apathy towards research projects. Another consideration I urge scholars to consider is ensuring they understand the legal ramifications of their chosen research methods. As evidenced by my issues with paying my participants, even well-intentioned research can put international graduate students at risk if legal requirements and restrictions are not understood.

My final research question asked, “what can U.S. universities and graduate programs do to provide better support for their international graduate students when navigating these technical and legal processes?” and my participants both gave targeted suggestions for improvements and, in doing so, highlighted areas of concern or deficit that universities would benefit from exploring. Regarding technical, legal, and financial constraints, my participants often struggled to understand and, therefore, navigate university systems in order to find information. Universities and department would benefit from interrogating the way they disseminate targeted information pertaining to international graduate students’ specific needs and requirements as my participants noted that they were often left feeling confused and isolated. As a specific example, the “misperception constraint” referred to times when my participants were confused as to who they needed to contact regarding specific information or issues. Making transparent the correct people to contact for certain issues or information would likely make this clearer. This suggestion would be applicable both to universities as a whole and departments, as evidenced by the “content accessibility constraint” that highlighted how my participants often struggled to access the information they needed. This was sometimes caused by inexpertly crafted web pages or being unable to reach experts via the phone. Despite universities often having international centers and offices, my

participants' experiences showcase how centralizing all communication through one hub can cause potential issues when those centers do not have the time to communicate individually with each student experiencing problems. Having cogent documentation that is co-crafted with international centers and then disseminated across departments could potentially ease the burden on the centers while also allowing international students better access to the information they need. In regard to ideological constraints, my participants proffered targeted suggestions that involve multiple departments and centers. For example, Aparna noted that collaboration across departments and international centers would not only help international graduate students seek information from professors they know, but it would also help professors in departments better understand the issues faced by their students. Another suggestion was that international centers and departments advertise international student groups more proactively, as my participants often turned to their peers when trying to navigate ideological constraints. This collaboration also has the potential to ease the burden from professors hoping to guide their international graduate students' issues, as international peers are better able to empathize with certain situations and issues.

Despite the potential issues with conducting research alongside international graduate students, there is a wealth of research opportunities elucidated by my data. It became clear throughout the course of my analysis that international graduate students will always face constraints when navigating the rhetorical situation of being a nonimmigrant studying in the United States. However, international graduate students would be better able to navigate these constraints with appropriate, effective support from their institutions. Therefore, scholarship would benefit from a study that asks what the

rhetoric of “support” looks like to the international graduate student community and what their expectations of support are. Further, my participants exhibited frustration with the communication (or lack of communication) from their international student center, so a future research study could examine the efficacy of emails, brochures, and other forms of communication to understand how the rhetoric of support is used in these materials. An example of this was highlighted by Luna’s experience with being left off the international student listservs during her first year attending university. While this certainly could be attributed to Covid, and she mentions this, future studies on communication efficacy could interrogate the way these listservs are created and maintained. Further, studies looking at the efficacy of the emails would likely benefit from seeing how frequently students read and respond to them. For example, the listserv that Luna wasn’t added to advertised international graduate student events. She lamented that she didn’t know about these events as it impacted her ability to meet peers, but future studies could analyze the effectiveness of these emails by examining how many students the event emails are sent to versus how many students attend the events. In a similar vein, several constraints occurred due to poor user design or a lack of appropriate documentation, so any study on the rhetoric of support in communicative materials would benefit from attending to how those materials are designed, or what supplemental materials could be created to better support international graduate students. For example, Intan noted that she was confused about how to apply for her I-20 and would have benefitted from receiving guidance from the university on how to do so. This highlights how she expects this type of support to be offered by her university as part of the application process. Further, Aparna struggled to download the correct forms from the USCIS website due to poor signposting. While this

is a governmental website (and, therefore, not the jurisdiction of any one university) scholars would benefit from interrogating the design of these websites as they pertain to specific student demographics. Further, studies on what best documentation universities could provide to help students navigate these external sites would likely uncover avenues for potential document creation to better support international graduate students at the university level.

In conclusion, my study worked to demystify why there might be a gap between the goals of scholarship and the experiences of international graduate students. By studying the constraints present in the rhetorical situation of being an international graduate student, I disentangled, named, and analyzed instances where my participants felt there was a dearth of support which goes to explain why the goals of scholarship are not translating into positive experiences for international graduate students. With these constraints demystified in the context of scholarly and political conversations, I move to naming spaces where scholarship and institutions can work to put into practice the goals they advertise. What is clear from my study is that international graduate students are adept at navigating technical, legal, financial, and ideological constraints, despite contending with unfamiliar systems of academic and cultural normativities, but they expect their institutions to help them with this navigation. Unfortunately, for my participants, they felt that expectation was not met.

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Appendix A

Header: PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE RESEARCH

Body of text:

You are invited to participate in a study about international graduate student experiences at Virginia Tech (IRB #23-082). Participants must be currently enrolled as international graduate students at VT. Participants will be asked to give one hour of their time for an interview with the international graduate student researcher. If interested, participants can opt in for a second (optional) 1-hour interview. In the interview, participants will be asked to explain their experience(s) with technical communication during their time both applying to, and being in, their graduate program. The interviews will be audio-recorded, with permission. Participants will be walked through a verbal consent session before the interview and have the option to rescind either their consent or register their withdrawal from the study at any time. Contact Chloe Robertson (chloerobertson@vt.edu) for more information or to register your interest.

Appendix B

INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS!

Did you have trouble applying for a visa to study in the US?
Have you had subsequent difficulties completing visa paperwork and other requirements to maintain your international student status?

If so, come tell us about it! In this research study we are interested in understanding the challenges that international graduate students navigate when studying in the US. By participating in this interview, you can help us develop better support for international students!

Who Can Participate?

Participants must be currently enrolled as international graduate students at VT. Participants will be asked to give one hour of their time for an interview with the international graduate student researcher. If interested, participants can opt in for a second (optional) 1-hour interview.

What Will The Interview Look Like?

In the interview, participants will be asked to explain their experience(s) with technical communication during their time both applying to, and being in, their graduate program.

The interviews will be audio-recorded, with permission. Participants will be walked through a verbal consent session before the interview and have the option to rescind either their consent or register their withdrawal from the study at any time.



Interested?

Contact Chloe Robertson (chloerobertson@vt.edu) for more information. (IRB #23-082)

Appendix C

Subject: Participating in Dissertation Interview

Email copy:

Hello XXX,

Thank you for showing interest in being a participant in the research study, *Navigating the Legal Constraints of Being a Nonimmigrant: A Study of the Technical Communication Challenges for International Graduate Students Studying in the US* (IRB protocol #23-082). For this research study, I am interviewing international graduate students here at Virginia Tech to understand how they navigate technical communication situations.

As an international graduate student, you are a technical communicator. Navigating all the policy, legal, and technical documents here in the United States is a shared experience that all international graduates can relate to, but little research has been done to elevate the skills and resilience needed to do this labour. In the course of my research, I want to gather the stories from the international graduate community so I can de-mystify these skills. Then, I aim to analyse, discuss, and publish this research so the university, our mentors, and our bosses can better support the international graduate community at Virginia Tech.

As a member of the international graduate community, I am excited to hear your stories and to shine a light on the hard work we do at Virginia Tech. To be part of this research, you need to be 18+ years old and a current international graduate student of Virginia Tech. I will ask you to take part in a 1-hour interview (with a possibility of an optional second 1-hour interview) that can take place either in-person or via Zoom. The interviews will be audio recorded and I will ask for verbal consent ahead of the interview.

Once you agree to an interview, I will send you the interview questions 48 hours before the interview time we schedule. At any point you are able to withdraw yourself from the interview process and/or the research as a whole. Please note that as an international graduate specialising in technical communication, I am well aware of the policy-based and legal ramifications that can affect our community here at Virginia Tech. No questions will be asked that could put you at risk of legal or professional backlash. Further, your identity will be kept confidential at all times.

For more information, or to sign up to the study, please feel free to reach out to me at: chloerobertson@vt.edu.

All my best,
Chloe

Appendix D

Subject: Preparing for Your Research Interview

Email copy:

Hello XXX,

I am excited to discuss your story more during our interview. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to aid in this research.

Ahead of the interview, I wanted to send you the interview questions (please see attached) so you will know what we will talk about during the interview. If you have any questions or concerns regarding any of the questions, please feel free to either email me or we can discuss these questions or concerns at the beginning of the interview.

As a reminder, the interviews will be recorded. The recordings will be taken on my phone but following the interview they will be transferred onto a password protected computer and an encrypted external hard drive. I will not share these recordings with anyone and your identity will be kept completely confidential.

At the start of the interview, I will ask for your verbal consent to start the interview and to start recording. Also, please remember that you are welcome to pause or stop the interviews at any time. You are also welcome to withdraw yourself from the research at any time. If you choose to withdraw yourself from the research, I will destroy any recordings and/or transcriptions of the recordings.

I look forward to speaking with you during our interview.

All my best,

Chloe

Appendix E

Interview Questions for the First Round of Interviews for IRB #23-082

Demographic questions

1. What's your name, and would you like to pick an identifier I'll use to refer to you in my research?
2. What department are you in?
3. What country did you apply from?
4. When did you apply for graduate school? Was it during or before the Covid-19 pandemic?
5. Why did you want to study here in the US? What are your goals after you finish?

Technical/legal process issues

6. Tell me about your visa application process. What challenges, if any, did you encounter while applying for your student visa?
7. Have you ever run into any issues related to maintaining your visa status?
 - a. *If so...*
 - i. Were any of these issues related to a miscommunication or a lack of clear communication? How were you able to overcome this issue related to communication?
 - ii. Have you ever had to deal with the same communication issues before? How did you solve them?
 - iii. Were you able to find resources at the institution to help with this communication problem?
 - iv. Would you say that cultural differences caused the issue or affected how you handled it? How so?
 - b. *If not...*
 - i. Have the resources at the institution helped you navigate maintaining your visa without issue? Which have been the most helpful?
8. In this study I am particularly interested in the F-1 I-20 document. How difficult was the process for you? What parts of the process or the document itself were difficult?

Resources and Support

9. [Earlier we spoke about different support structures you've used...] What institutional systems/support structures have been the most effective? For example, have you ever spoken to the international advisor at Cranwell or visited any of the events at international week?
10. If you could ask Virginia Tech to improve one aspect of navigating the visa application process and the subsequent upkeep, systems, and/or legal requirements, what would it be?

Appendix F



Information Sheet for Participation in Research Study (IRB #23-082)

Principal Investigator: Carolyn Commer ccommer@vt.edu

Graduate Student Investigator: Chloe Robertson chloerobertson@vt.edu

IRB #23-082

Title of Study: Navigating the Legal Constraints of Being a Nonimmigrant: A Study of the Technical Communication Challenges for International Graduate Students Studying in the US

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions.

What Should I Know?

Firstly, thank you for offering your time to participate in this study.

As a participant in this study you will be asked to participate in a one-hour interview with the graduate student investigator who is also an international student at Virginia Tech. In this interview you will be asked a series of questions regarding your experience(s) as an international graduate student, with specific regard to technical communication situations. At no point in the interview will you be asked questions that affect your legal status or put you in a compromising situation regarding your professional or academic standing at the university.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how international graduate students navigate technical communication situations both prior to starting their program and also during their time at Virginia Tech. In doing so, this study hopes to better understand the challenges faced by the international graduate community while showcasing the technical communication skills employed by international graduates. By the end of the research lifecycle, this study hopes to illuminate the resilience of international graduates and, in doing so, explain to a general audience how to better understand and support international graduates during their time in the United States.

After the interview, participants may be asked whether they want to participate in a second one-hour interview that looks at the F-1 I-20 document specifically. This second interview is optional and participants will be asked to discuss the F-1 I-20 document

generally, not with specific regard to their own F-1 I-20. Again, in the optional second one-hour interview, you will not be asked questions that affect your legal status or put you in a compromising situation regarding your professional or academic standing at the university.

Confidentiality

The Principal Investigator and Graduate Student Investigator will take all necessary steps to ensure the confidentiality of participants and their information. However, 100% confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

Data collected during the research lifecycle will be kept confidential as will the participant's identifying information. Identifiers will be kept for a minimum of three years as required by the IRB. Prior to the interview you will be asked for your verbal consent to be interviewed and also for the audio recording. Regardless of whether the interview is in-person or via Zoom, audio will be recorded on a phone. If the interview takes place via Zoom, the footage from the meeting will be deleted from any cloud storage and kept solely on the researcher's computer which is password protected. After the interview, the recording will be transcribed with a pseudonym to ensure participant's identifying information is not linked to their interview data. The recordings will be kept on a password-protected computer and no one but the investigators will have access to the recordings.

Who Can I Talk To?

If you have questions, concerns, or want clarification on any part of the study or how the data will be used, please feel free to contact Carolyn Commer at cocommer@vt.edu or Chloe Robertson at chloerobertson@vt.edu. As a participant in the study, you do not waive any legal rights or claims to your personal information. If you have any questions or seek clarification about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Virginia Tech HRP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

Please print out a copy of this information sheet for your records.