UNDERSTANDING THE INFLUENCE OF CONTRACTUAL AGREEMENTS
ON INTERNATIONAL SPONSORED STUDENTS’
ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES IN U.S. UNIVERSITIES

A Dissertation in
Higher Education

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
of the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2019
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ABSTRACT

The number of international “sponsored” students (ISS) is consistently increasing at U.S. universities. There is a lack of understanding of this student group and the complex relationships between these students and their sponsors. This dissertation explored undergraduate ISSs’ attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors associated with the contractual sponsorship agreement and their influences on ISS academic experiences at one U.S. university. This study enhances understanding and provides guidance for all stakeholders in the sponsorship process: sponsors, ISS, and colleges and universities accepting international students.

This qualitative dissertation followed three ISS through their freshman year at “Blue University.” These students were chosen using purposeful sampling. The ISS were interviewed in a series of interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol.

The results of this study identified several aspects of the ISS-sponsor contractual relationship that impacted the academic experiences of the ISS. ISS were provided with educational opportunities that align with specific sponsor goals. The ISSs were grateful, trusted these programs, and placed a high value on the financial sponsorship and employment guarantees they received. However, they often gave up their own interests and passions to pursue these opportunities. Particularly in their first semester abroad, ISS faced several academic, language, social, and cultural challenges adapting to their new academic environment. They began to realize the true cost of their sponsorship, especially their inability to choose or change the major assigned by the sponsor. Overall, the perceived advantages of the sponsorship opportunity outweighed the disadvantages.

Several recommendations emerged from the ISS interviews. The ISS believed more transparency in the benefits associated with the sponsorship contract could create greater trust,
thereby improving academic performance and experiences. They wanted more flexibility to decide and change their major area of study. Furthermore, more robust preparatory programs in their home country would help ISS address academic, cultural, and social challenges and reduce the adjustment period. Host universities should consider specialized resources within the international/global office along with training of faculty and advisors to address the specific needs of all international students. Enabling a smoother first semester could positively influence educational outcomes for ISS under the sponsorship program.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I always thought about writing this section once I finish my dissertation. It’s almost surreal that time has come when I get to acknowledge people who helped and supported me throughout my Ph.D. journey.

My heartfelt gratitude to my committee, Dr. John Cheslock (my advisor), Dr. Kevin Kinser, Dr. Karly Ford and Dr. Dennis Jett. I would like to thank them for their guidance, support and mentorship throughout the process. It’s been an amazing journey and I was able to receive guidance from the best in the field. Also, I am immensely grateful to the ISSs who volunteered to participate in this study and enriched me with their stories. I thank them for being so open and candid about sharing their experiences and wish them all the success in their lives.

Now comes the time to thank the love of my life who encouraged (pushed 🌟) me into pursuing my Ph.D. He stood by me like a rock throughout this process, my best friend and my husband-Amit Sharma. He has been my friend, philosopher and a guide in this journey and whenever needed gave me a nudge, inspiration and also a reality check to keep my focus on the goal. Along with Amit, I would like to thank my heart and soul, Arjun and Ishan. They are the best kids in the world! Always loving, supporting and encouraging their mother.

I would also like to thank my two sets of parents Mr. Som Dev and Mrs. Raj Dulari Mishra and Mr. Prakash and Mrs. Jyotsna Sharma who were always so encouraging and loving counsels for me to tread through this journey. Finally gratitude to my siblings (special shout out to my sister-Vinita), extended family and friends since they gave me reprieve when needed to recharge and get back to my research. Also, a special mention for my friend Dr. Asavari Thatte; our timely conversations sharing Ph.D. student frustrations were immensely helpful in enriching my data analysis strategy in Nvivo.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this Ph.D. to my father Mr. Som Dev Mishra who passed away in December 2017. He would always ask me “Ph.D. ho gayi teri (is your Ph.D. done?).”

I would like to tell him….Haan papa Ph.D. ho gayi meri (Yes, papa …my Ph.D. is done!).”

And to Amit, Arjun and Ishan………..
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Institute of International Education (2018) reported a significant increase in the number of international students attending U.S. Institutions, which surpassed a one million mark for third year in a row. International students attending U.S. institutions sponsored by Foreign Government or University, or by their current Employer has increased most significantly over the last 10 years between 2008 and 2018 (IIE,2018). International students sponsored by a foreign government or university have increased 168%; students sponsored by their current employer have increased 599% (IIE, 2018). As a point of reference, international students funded by their families and personal finances have increased just 65% over the same period (IIE, 2018).

There is lack of a clear definition in the literature or from institutions like the Institute of International Education (IIE) for international students whose government or employers are investing in an international scholarship for them to study abroad. However, in practice, at an institutional level, these students are typically referred to as international “sponsored” students, or simply “sponsored students, given that they are fully sponsored by an agency (educational institution, government agency, foundation, non-governmental organizations (NGO), or employer) to pursue higher education abroad. This dissertation uses the acronym “ISS” to refer to international sponsored students.

Recent studies, though limited in scale and scope, suggest that although international sponsored students (ISS) report being “very confident” about achieving their academic goals and their ability to gain admission to a foreign university, their academic performance often fails to meet the expectations of their sponsors, their families, and even the students themselves (Gauntlett, 2005). This is obviously concerning for the sponsoring agencies, students, and the
higher education institutions these students attend. Despite this relatively significant increase in ISS and concerns related to their academic performance, there is relatively less research about this student group and their experiences.

Chapter 1 describes the overall growth of international students and ISS in particular. It explains the significance of understanding factors influencing the academic experiences and performance of ISS in the U.S., especially as they relate to the contractual agreement between ISS and their sponsors. The chapter explores the relationship between sponsoring organizations and ISS as well as their academic experiences and performance. Finally, it identifies the research questions guiding this study and the significance of this study.

**Sponsoring Agencies and International Sponsored Students (ISS)**

Sponsors are third-party organizations (educational institutions, home governments, government agencies, foundations, NGOs, or employers) who directly pay for a student’s education at a U.S. university. Sponsors or sponsoring agencies invest in ISS for the sole purpose of having them pursue higher education in an academic program for a specific sponsor-designated purpose. That sponsor-designated purpose could be capacity-building within a government, foundation, or NGO context. Or, it could be acquiring a specific knowledge base or skillset needed by an employer and required for an employee for career advancement. O’Brien (2015) argues that, due to the increasing number of international students enrolling in U.S. universities, one of the critical challenges facing institutions is to ensure international students’ academic performance does not lag behind others. Thus, institutional factors should support the academic engagement of international students.

In addition to the sponsor and institutional concerns about ISS academic performance identified by Gauntlett (2005), Donat (2015) found that parents’ concerns for the educational
performance of their children could lead parents to get involved in the educational lives of their children, potentially influencing students’ educational experiences. Donat’s (2015) study found that direct parental involvement had a negative influence on undergraduates’ academic performance whereas indirect involvement had a positive influence on undergraduates’ academic performance. Donat (2015) recommended that future investigations should focus on the impact of transparency on student academic progress because a parenting style of acceptance and transparency “has a positive effect on engaged learning, academic determination and citizenship.” to facilitate college student success.

Donat’s (2015) research could be applicable in examining the relationship between an ISS and their sponsoring organization, where the sponsor influences the academic experiences and performance of the ISS. In this study, these influences studied by Donat (2015) are adapted to explore how the sponsor role and attributes influence undergraduate ISS academic experiences when they are studying abroad in U.S. institutions of higher education.

**The Academic Experiences and Academic Performance of ISS**

In light of the increasing presence of ISS at institutions of higher education in the U.S. and the relative scarcity of research literature that explores their academic experiences and performance while studying abroad, this study focused on understanding undergraduate ISS and their academic experiences.

Domestic undergraduate student academic goals and performance have been studied and analyzed through many lenses. For example, Wentzel (2000) studied relations between social and academic goal pursuit. Schunk (1991) investigated academic motivation in terms of self-efficacy with constructs related to perceived value of outcomes, outcome expectations, perceived control, self-concept, and attributions. Building on previous efforts, this study sought to
understand and assess ISS academic experiences and their relationship to their contractual sponsor. This study tried to capture the perspective of students towards their academic experiences while being in a contractual sponsorship program and to incorporate their voices in building an understanding of the programs and student experiences therein. This study explored differences in self-perceptions and attitudes of ISS, their academic experiences and performance, before starting their studies in the U.S. and their actual experiences in the new learning environment.

**International Students in the U.S.**

The Institute of International Education (IIE, 2011a) reported that the population of international students (non-U.S. citizens, permanent residents, immigrants, or refugees) at U.S. higher education institutions has been increasing for the past 20 years. IIE’s 2018 Open Doors Report reported the number of international students in the U.S. for 2017-18 surpassed one million and increased by 1.5% from 2016-17 totaling 1,094,792 students. Although, while IIE reported an increase in overall numbers, it noted that the new student enrollments fell by 6.6% in 2017-18 (IIE,2018) continuing a decline trend that was first observed in 2015-16. VOA, Learning English (2017) reports this decline trend being related to international students having more choices of host countries (Canada, Australia) and also U.S. policy changes. The increase in the numbers of international students coming to the U.S. for higher education from other parts of the world can be explained by various factors, including but not limited to: 1) overall improvement in the wealth and economic prosperity of citizens in foreign countries, allowing them to afford higher education in the U.S. (The Chronicle, 2011); 2) increasing demand in countries outside of the U.S. for quality higher education (Bhatia & Dash, 2011; The Chronicle, 2011); and 3) lack of availability of quality opportunities for education in their own countries.
coupled with a perception that U.S. higher education institutions offer higher quality experiences (IIE, 2011b).

In addition to these demand-side factors, there are also supply-side factors influencing aggressive international student recruitment in the U.S. For example, there has been a lack of demand for higher education within the U.S.; therefore, international students have been recruited to sustain programs (Difeliciantonio, 2008). Additionally, in the current climate of decreasing budgets coupled with declining Federal and state support to higher education institutions, international students signify a critical source of revenue for U.S. colleges and universities (Altbach, 2005). The IIE (2018) noted, “International students contributed nearly $42.4 billion to the U.S. economy through their expenditures on tuition and living expenses in 2017 per U.S. Department of Commerce. Furthermore, increasing requirements for global competencies and cultural exchanges is driving institutions and students to seek better cultural understanding and diversity (IIE, 2011c).

As a result of supply-side pressures, U.S. universities are now far more diverse and have intentionally embarked on a mission to “internationalize” and “globalize” their campuses (Marvin, 2003). The aggressive recruitment of international students, influenced by growing demand for high-quality education, has motivated universities to incorporate globalization into their strategic planning. Given this strategic goal, it is essential for institutions of higher education to develop an understanding of international student in order to attract and retain them.

International students benefit U.S. colleges and universities by growing the number of enrolled students and providing revenue through higher out-of-state tuition. They provide economic benefits to the U.S. through their economic impact and contributions to scientific and technical research. Additionally, there is immense value in cultural and social diversity that
occurs through educational collaborations, fostering intellectual exchange of ideas, and mutual understandings between nations. IIE (2015) advocates that international students bring international perspectives to U.S. classrooms, helping American students prepare for global careers and potentially building long-term business relationships. With such a growing presence of international students in the United States, increased research focused on ISS as a group is warranted and of critical importance.

**International Sponsored Students (ISS) in the U.S.**

Within the general classification of international students are a subset of students referred to as “sponsored students” (ISS); they have contributed most to the recent growth in international students in the U.S. (IIE, 2014). ISS, as defined by practice in U.S. institutions of higher education, are international students fully funded by a sponsoring agency (educational institutions, government agencies, foundations, NGO, and employers) to pursue higher education abroad. IIE (2013) reported that sponsored students represented approximately 14% of new international students; this group has demonstrated the highest growth (168% and 599%) over the last 10 years, a trend that is likely to continue. The IIE (2013) argues, “In this context, there is a large increase in students from several countries where national governments and corporations are investing in scholarship programs to send their students to study in the U.S. International sponsored students are becoming an important segment of U.S. higher education institutions.” This study primarily focused on the undergraduate ISS population, given their large and growing presence in undergraduate programs in U.S. colleges and universities. This study was conducted at “Blue University,” a public land-grant research institution which hosted one of the largest populations of undergraduate ISS in the U.S. at the time of this study.
The Chronicle of Higher Education (Fischer, 2014) reported that international government scholarships were growing and that there was a noticeable trend of growth in students sponsored by the three countries: Kuwait, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia. The Chronicle further noted, “These nations are an increasingly important recruitment market for American colleges, in no small measure because they pay their students’ way” (p. 3). The Chronicle (Fischer, 2014) reported that 86% of Saudi students, 68% of Kuwaiti students, and about half of Brazilians students go to America for higher education.

In spite of these staggering increase in numbers, coupled with the growing phenomenon of sponsored students’ programs, surprisingly little is known about this student population (Gauntlett, 2005). Furthermore, it has been reported that these sponsored students may not be meeting their own academic goals or the goals of their sponsors and families (Gauntlett, 2005).

**International Sponsored Student (ISS) and Their Contracts with Sponsors**

Financial resources are critical for accessing higher education in the U.S. While many studies have focused on financial aid and financing requirements for domestic students, almost no focus has been given to this aspect for international students in the U.S. Almost all institutions of higher education in the U.S. require a “financial guarantee” statement from international students as part of their admission process. Whereas international students will disclose family financial resources to pursue higher education in the U.S., ISS provide a financial guarantee for their tuition and fees through their sponsors. Furthermore, the key distinction between international students and ISS is the formal contractual agreement between the sponsored students and their institutional sponsors. This agreement generally specifies the financial agreement between both the parties, the area of discipline the student should be pursuing,
educational goals, academic achievements, and, potentially, a return to work in management, development, and research roles in the sponsoring agency (Gauntlett, 2005).

Sponsors offer these programs (sponsorships to study abroad) to individuals who have demonstrated academical abilities in their home countries and students contractually agree to study abroad in specific fields according to the terms of the sponsorship (Saudi Aramco, 2015). The Gulf States—the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—have pursued national scholarship programs to create a qualified national workforce through the students identified as the elites in their graduating high school cohort (Gauntlett, 2015). Some of the sponsors financing large number of undergraduate students in the U.S., including the institution chosen for this study, were at the time of this research: Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission, Saudi-Aramco Services Company, Embassy of the State of Kuwait Cultural Division, Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation, United Arab Emirates-UAE, Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman, ADNOC- Abu Dhabi National Oil Company MARA-U.S.A (Malaysia), Public Service Department- Embassy of Malaysia, Scientific Mobility Program-Brazil, and Bolashak-Kazakhstan.

In the case of ISS, a more formal contract is written between the student and the sponsor, given that the undergraduate student’s education expenses are funded directly by the sponsor. These sponsors generally provide a “financial guarantee” document to the educational institution for the student. Depending on the sponsoring agency, this document may include sponsorship terms like program of study, academic expectations, and duration of funded studies. The direct involvement of sponsors in these programs can manifest in various procedures that are undertaken between the sponsor, the ISS, and the host institution. For example, the ISS may be required to sign a release of information for the university to disclose their academic
performance to the sponsor, including periodic grade reports and/or transcripts. The sponsor may make campus visits. Some U.S. Universities, including Blue University, set up special offices and employ dedicated people to work with international sponsors and ISS to meet their unique needs. These unique needs may include, among other needs, specialized billing, paper transcripts, admissions feedback, and grade feedback.

Therefore, ISS present an interesting context to contribute to policies and procedures of institutions to enhance the student experience and to contribute to the overall understanding of factors influencing students’ academic experiences and performance. This study aligns with the criteria explored by Donat (2015) on parental interaction, involvement, style, and influence. In a parallel manner, it explores ISS perspectives on their sponsors interaction, involvement, style and influence based on their contractual agreement; this may provide a meaningful perspective towards the academic experiences and performance of ISS.

Given formal contractual agreements between the sponsor and the student and a considerable investment by the sponsor for the student, the motivations and incentives for this group of students were potentially different from other types of students. The contractual agreement could include terms that may provide ISS incentives for high performance and/or graduation (such as making employment opportunities conditional on graduation). The agreement may also impose stringent reporting requirements from students regarding their academic performance and GPA expectations. Given that even in less formal arrangements students can be influenced by their ‘sponsors’ (parents, grandparents, other relatives, scholarship granting organizations), there is reason to believe that formal contractual arrangements could impact the academic motivations, performance, and overall academic experience of students who are funded by agency sponsors. Understanding the motivations and incentives that might
influence the behaviors of this group of students may help researchers and campus leaders to understand the effectiveness of such contractual agreements as it relates to undergraduate student academic experience.

Sponsor attributes that might impact student academic experiences can be captured through exploring ISS attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors on the influence of their sponsor through their understanding of the student-sponsor contract. What is the nature of sponsor involvement in terms of their decision-making influence on ISS academic performance? How does sponsor style, especially their responsiveness towards ISS academic needs, and overall sponsor influence in terms of monitoring and incentives impact ISS academic experiences and performance? Table 1 presents the factors of sponsor involvement, style, and influence, based on Donat’s (2015) criteria headings of involvement, style, and influence mentioned in that research.

Table 1

Factors of Sponsor Involvement, Style, and Influence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sponsor Involvement</th>
<th>Sponsor Style</th>
<th>Sponsor Influence</th>
<th>Academic Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decision-making:</td>
<td>Responsiveness: transparency,</td>
<td>Monitoring transcripts, periodic check-in, permission</td>
<td>GPA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>selection of</td>
<td>acceptance, responsiveness</td>
<td>for additional courses, permission for study abroad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>institution of study,</td>
<td>to student academic needs</td>
<td>Repercussion for lower than expected academic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>program, academic</td>
<td></td>
<td>performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>performance</td>
<td></td>
<td>Incentives: job after graduation, incentives on</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expectation (GPA)</td>
<td></td>
<td>high academic performance, additional funds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Donat (2015).
ISS, Sponsoring Agencies, and the Contractual Relationship

In the contractual relationship, the sponsor is providing the financial resources to the ISS to act on their behalf; in other words, the ISS is being sponsored to study abroad at a specific educational institution and program for the benefit of the sponsor. The ISS are acting on behalf of the funding agencies in becoming competent future employees and/or citizens of their country of origin. The interest of the sponsors is that students gain knowledge and expertise so that the sponsoring agency can maximize the benefits from the sponsored students’ future employment, thus contributing to developing a globally competent workforce (Gauntlett, 2005). Therefore, the contractual agreement between the two parties could help guide behavior of the students in a manner that aligns with sponsors interests.

The ISS contract may stipulate both the incentives and the monitoring activities for the sponsor to ensure the ISS acts in accordance with the sponsor’s expectations. Consequently, ISS attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors towards the contractual relationship can impact the ISS academic experiences. The ISS contract with the sponsors can, thus, create a relationship between the two where there are monitoring and evaluation criteria to ensure alignment of interests and incentive structures to encourage the ISS to conform to the sponsor’s objectives and interests. Furthermore, the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of students towards this monitoring and evaluation versus the incentives may be different. They may also change from the time of signing the contract to the time of enrollment at a U.S. institution, given the influence of the academic environment they are in and its interaction with their sponsor’s attributes.

How this relationship between the sponsoring agency and the ISS impacts the academic experiences of ISS is unclear. It is also unclear how ISS might view the influence of monitoring and evaluation versus incentives as motivators to ensure high academic performance. A classic
example where contractual agreements have been relatively successful is in the case of franchising, where franchising agreements help franchisees to act in alignment to the franchisors’ interests (Madanoglu, Lee, & Castrogiovanni, 2013).

This study provided unique perspectives on assessing ISS academic experiences and performance, contributing to the overall theory of contractual relationships beyond the traditional view of this relationship and exploring the context of students’ academic experience. An overarching question is whether the presence of such a formal contractual relationship influences ISS behavior in their academic environment as they pursue their education as designated by the sponsor. The influence on ISS academic experiences of the formal contractual agreement and the ISS-sponsor relationship, reinforced through sponsor’s involvement, style, guided the investigation of this study.

The impact that the ISS-sponsored relationship has on students’ academic experiences may provide important insights for institutions, students, and sponsors. Sponsoring agencies are likely cognizant of the value of sending students to study abroad. This study can inform training to design effective policies, procedures, and contractual elements that would enhance student educational experiences and academic performance, especially with regard to incentives and risk-sharing. In addition, sponsors and students themselves will understand what contributes to student experiences, performance, and success studying abroad in the context of the impact of a contractual relationship and a new learning environment. Additionally, it will be important for U.S. institutions of higher education to understand the arrangement between the sponsor and the student in order to ensure proper resource alignment so that ISS are able to maximize on their opportunity to study abroad and graduate on time to minimize additional sponsorship costs. Students could also benefit by understanding the potential impact of contractual arrangements on
their academic experience, helping them to be more informed and prepared in their academic decisions around accepting sponsorships.

Therefore, the overall purpose of this proposed study was to capture what influences undergraduate ISS attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors regarding their academic experiences during their education in the U.S. within the context of their contractual sponsorship agreement with their sponsor. This study was conducted at a public land grant research institution with one of the largest populations of undergraduate ISS in the country, referred to by the pseudonym Blue University.

**Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study was to capture undergraduate ISS academic experiences during their education in the U.S. In addition, this research study investigated what role sponsors played in the overall ISS narratives and perceptions of the influence of their sponsor’s involvement, style, and influence on their academic experiences. The purpose of this study was detailed within the framework of ISS academic experiences, performance, and their contractual relationships with their sponsor.

Providing access to high quality academic education for capacity-building in designated areas was the sole purpose of these sponsoring agencies in sending their students to the U.S. Sponsors often brought a large group of students to each institution. Building on recent interest in the informal contract between parents and students (Donat, 2015), this research study investigated the involvement (financial investment for a return) of sponsors with ISS while they attended college or university in the U.S. Sponsor decision-making, responsiveness, monitoring, and incentive structures based on the contract between the sponsor and the student were posited
to have an effect on the academic pursuits and success of these students. This study tried to understand these interactions.

Gauntlett (2005) stated that ISS were very confident about their ability to gain entry to a foreign university and achieve their academic goals. However, participants were disappointed in pathway programs (programs helping students on the path into undergraduate programs) to their designated undergraduate degrees. Gauntlett (2005) noted that “contrary to their and their sponsors’ anticipations, the students had difficulties adjusting to their new learning environments and were not able to complete assessments to a satisfactory standard.” (p. 3). The ISS Gauntlett (2005) studied also assumed they would be able to easily maintain their academic performance (grades) in a foreign university. However, participants described feeling embarrassment in reporting their academic performance to sponsors and parents. The current research study helped understand students’ viewpoints and built a more nuanced understanding of their academic experiences under the sponsored program with a goal of bringing about a meaningful impact on the long-term viability of such programs. It may also have significant implications for the students, sponsors, and host institutions.

**Significance of the Study**

The following factors were the driving motivation for this study: 1) the significant increase in the number of ISS (168% for government or university sponsored and 599% for employer sponsored) in U.S. universities (IIE, 2018); 2) the paucity of literature that addresses this student group and their experiences; 3) the uniqueness of the phenomenon and experience of studying abroad as an undergraduate in a contractual agreement with a sponsoring agency. This work is a first step in understanding this significant and growing international student population, providing an insight into their academic experiences, performance, needs, influences. This
understanding comes from investigating these aspects in the context of their formal contractual agreement with the sponsor. This will inform institutional practice and contribute to theory. It was the hope of the researcher that the results of this study could be of critical importance.

Currently, institutions do not differentiate between international students in general and ISS with regard to their academic needs and experiences, besides setting up some specialized services. The aim of this study is to increase awareness and perspective on this unique student population as well as to help institutions develop better, more targeted programs, policies, and procedures that take into account the unique needs of this student population.

There is an acknowledgement of the increasing growth and presence of international students at U.S. colleges and universities. However, there is a lack of focus in strategically understanding international students and improving student academic experiences and performance to effectively engage these students once they enroll through on-time graduation. This study also helped to address that lack of research focus on ISS academic experiences. One possible reason why there is a scarcity of research in understanding ISS is that, until recently, this student group did not account for a large portion of all international students. However, recent growth in this student group and specialized services at host institutions provide an opportunity to appropriately recognize the growing importance of ISS. Therefore, results of this study may highlight the need to further study ISS. For instance, neither the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) nor IIE surveys categorize ISS within the general international study population. Results of this study could inform professional associations about the importance of this sub-group that has, so far, been largely neglected by researchers.

By creating a more robust picture of how the formal, contractual relationship influences ISS academic experiences and performance, institutions, sponsors, and students themselves will
understand what contributes to student success and how the contractual relationship impacts studying abroad in a new and different learning environment. While the findings of this study focus in ISS, they may, nevertheless, provide valuable insights for higher education administrators, students, and sponsors about the effect of such formal contracts on student academic achievement and success on other student populations. In addition, for U.S. colleges and universities, this study will help avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to international students’ needs.

Andrade (2006) warned that while recruiting international students, “higher education institutions that take these students for granted and as ‘cash cows’ are doing so at their own peril” (p. 69). Andrade (2006) further argued that it was critical to identify appropriate information, services and programs that help students have positive experiences and guide them to fulfill educational their goals so that they return home satisfied with their educational and personal experiences. This study, by isolating the aspects of sponsor influence via contractual agreement as they related to ISS academic experience, will aide U.S. colleges and universities in developing policies, programs, and procedures to better inform their administrators, international recruitment units, faculty, and staff. This study will also add to the very limited body of knowledge on the relationship between sponsor involvement and student academic experience abroad. Overall, the ambitious goal of this study is to help better understand ISS and the factors that influence their academic experiences and performance.

**Overview of Study Methodology**

This study was an exploratory qualitative study with a case-study approach. The researcher conducted a series of interviews with three undergraduate ISS from different countries throughout one academic year, focusing on their academic experiences given their contractual
relationships with their sponsors while studying abroad. A phenomenological approach was applied to the interviews with these students. Because of the informative nature of this study, the researcher aimed to provide rich, descriptive-information on ISS.

**Research Questions**

The overarching purpose of this study was to capture what influences undergraduate ISS attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors regarding their academic experiences during their education in the U.S. within the context of their contractual sponsorship agreement with their sponsor. More specifically, the following research questions were investigated in this study:

1. How do undergraduate ISS narrate the role of their sponsor on their academic experiences?
2. How do undergraduate ISS describe the influence of their sponsor attributes (e.g. decision-making, responsiveness, monitoring, and incentives) on their academic experiences?
3. How do undergraduate ISS describe the interaction between other aspects of the environment, the sponsor role, and attributes as an influence on their academic experiences?

**Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature, focusing on international students as a demographic; the impact of contractual relationships on academic performance; and the relationships between ISS, performance, and sponsor relationships. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used in this qualitative case study, including sampling techniques, data collection methods, and the process for data analysis. Chapter 4 analyzes the research findings. Chapter 5
provides conclusions, discusses limitations, and presents a discussion of findings as implications for practitioners and policy makers along with recommendations for future study.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a review of the literature critical for understanding the current research study. First, it reviews research on international students and International Sponsored Students (ISS) in higher education, including examining the recent growth trends, the importance of these students, and their needs in view of globalization in higher education in the U.S. The second body of literature this chapter reviews is the academic performance and contractual agreements affecting the ability of ISS to achieve their academic goals. The third area of research discusses contractual agreements and the application of such agreements in the context of their relationship to ISS, ISS academic performance, and sponsor relationships.

International Sponsored Students

An exact definition does not exist in the literature or among institutions for international students whose governments, universities, or employers invest in international scholarships for them to study abroad. However, in practice, at the institutional level these students are typically referred to as “international sponsored students” (ISS) given that they are fully funded by a sponsoring agency to pursue higher education outside their home country.

Similarly, the governments, universities, and corporations that fund these foreign scholarships for students are typically referred to as “sponsors” or “international government sponsors.” Therefore, in practice, ISS are defined as individuals: a) who have received financial guarantees from a third-party agency, such as their home government or a corporation (a current or future employer); and b) where the third-party agency has committed to paying for all educational expenses of the student.
Within this functional definition of ISS, several variations in the relationship between sponsor and ISS exist. In some instances, the third-party agency may simply provide a financial guarantee to the college or university, agreeing to pay for educational expenses. In other cases, this third part may include stipulations in their contract framing how the ISS should perform academically. Or, they may require work commitments from the ISS in return for the sponsorship after completion of their education. As stated earlier, sponsors could be the government or quasi-government agencies, for example corporations such as Saudi ARAMCO, an oil company controlled by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

**International Students and Higher Education Institutions**

Global interdependence and economic competition compel institutions of higher education to embrace globalization as a part of their strategic mission (Altbach, 2004). U.S. universities are incorporating globalization through increased international student recruitment, broader portfolios of education-abroad programs, and internationalizing their curriculum to enhance cultural exchanges among students. With this awareness and these globalization strategies, colleges and universities are focusing on their students becoming “globally competent” and prepared to thrive in our increasingly globalized, interconnected world. Here, global competence can be understood as: a) having an open mind; b) proactively pursuing an understanding of the cultural norms and expectations of others; and c) leveraging this new knowledge to conduct oneself effectively outside of one’s own environment in aspects such as interacting, communicating, and working effectively (Hunter, White, & Godbey, 2006).

Therefore, the presence of ISS on college and university campuses serves the purposes of multiple stakeholders: students, sponsors, U.S. institutions of higher education, and the U.S. global workforce.
In the 21st century, institutions of higher education in the U.S. are faced with the challenge of creating learning environments that reflect the fluid economical, geopolitical, and societal changes caused by globalization (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Institutions utilize a variety of methods to promote cultural awareness and diversity, including education-abroad programs and curriculum development that reflects global perspectives (Altbach & Knight, 2007). However, researchers argue that colleges and universities need to do more to develop students’ capacity to understand different cultures in order to prepare them to function in this globalized economy (Mestenhauser, 1998; Yershova, DaJaeghre, & Mestenhauser, 2000).

The influx of international students provides numerous opportunities for curricular and co-curricular initiatives that promote intercultural dialogue and understanding between domestic and international students (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Institutions have an opportunity to utilize campus resources to develop immersion experiences on campus, given that few students opt for immersion opportunities through study abroad programs.

**International Student College Adjustment and Engagement**

While the presence of international students, including those who are sponsored, creates opportunities and advantages for institutions, colleges and universities increasingly understand that these international students also have special needs for support in their academic journey (Andrade, 2006). For instance, these students often require help with language proficiency, both verbal and written (Andrade, 2006). Integration within the college or university environment and culture may be challenging for international students. Information sharing with international students and their parents may also involve different expectations than those of domestic students. Andrade (2006) noted that understanding these adjustment challenges is essential as
international students bring global implications for intercultural education, thereby making it essential to have targeted student support interventions.

Not surprisingly, studies have found that international students feel lonelier and experience a higher frequency of feeling homesick than domestic students (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002). Given the relatively large expenditure on education borne by parents (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009), there may also be additional pressures for academic performance. These needs and requirements must need be addressed by the college or university. Resource requirements could take the form of training and education for faculty, staff, and administration. It could entail the development of additional facilities and/or human resource capacities to provide the appropriate services needed for international students. Therefore, it is essential for institutions to gain a better understanding of the types of services that would be helpful for international students. Andrade (2006) has pointed out that the types and levels of services needed by international students may differ depending on factors such as year standing, degree level, immigration status, and country of origin.

What Andrade (2006) misses in this list of factors is sponsored versus non-sponsored status. This difference has barely been explored in higher education institutions in the U.S. The current research study will highlight ISS experiences by examining their adjustment on campus and academic performance in the context of their unique contractual relationship agreement with their sponsors.

The literature suggests that there are many barriers to campus engagement for international students. International students must continually and simultaneously adapt to differences in cultural, academic, social, and linguistic aspects of American culture (Anderson, Carmichael, Harper, & Huang, 2009, p. 18). Harper and Quaye (2009) warn,
As American higher education continues to become increasingly diverse, so will the needs of and challenges faced by our students. It is possible that creating engaging campus environments was easy when the overwhelming majority of students was male, heterosexual, Christian, and economically affluent. (p. 1).

The current research study contends that a keen focus on and understanding of the needs of the ISS population in higher education is necessary to help better meet their needs and improve the ability of these students to reap the known rewards of high academic performance, as often mandated in their contractual agreements with their sponsors. Additionally, when these students are able to fully engage on campus, they bring the potential for American students to gain tremendous insights into global culture, better preparing them for active participation in a globalized work environment.

Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002) conducted a study of international students from Japan and found that “engagement in extracurricular activities was positively related to students’ general life satisfaction, benefits drawn from academics and extracurricular activities, and levels of academic involvement” (p. 363). They determined that engagement was very important for the development for international students. It helped them develop social networks and skills as well as an understanding of values and customs of the host country (p. 366).

According to Anderson et al. (2009), the most common challenges for international students were psychological, such as loneliness, depression, and loss of identity (p.19). These authors also mentioned that the psychological adjustment of international students could be eased with better communication and time spent with American peers. However, this strategy may be challenging to achieve as international students often prefer to seek support from peers who originate from their own country and speak the same language.
International students go through many changes, creating a period of anxiety and uncertainty while adapting to their host country. For example, they are managing the loss of peer networks at home, a lack of a social network in the U.S., loneliness, and homesickness. They are grappling with language barriers. They are experiencing culture shock while adapting to new cultures and norms. And, they are navigating institutional, educational, and systemic differences. And, it is important to remember that many of these undergraduate students are just 17 or 18, with limited life experiences to help them navigate these challenges.

In this critical phase of initial college experience, international students deserve as much support from the institution as possible so that they adapt successfully and develop connections with the institution, faculty, and peers. Such early connections are critical for international students in developing a sense of belonging to the institution and giving them the confidence to effectively pursue their academic goals, learn, and develop into a well-rounded adult (Harper & Quaye, 2009).

Harper and Quaye (2009) advocated that since college environments are becoming increasingly diverse, an engaging campus should be an essential priority for institutions of higher education. They argued, that educators and administrators must be strategic and intentional about fostering conditions (inside and outside the classroom) compelling students to make the most of college. They noted, that an important way to achieve this is through validating different student experiences. However, the understanding of international student requirements for academic support and the resources needed to fulfill these needs is limited; an understanding for ISS is virtually nonexistent.

In fact, only few studies of ISS exist, conducted in Australia (Gauntlett, 2005). Gauntlett (2005) studied the Gulf-sponsored students in Australia and found that, in general, the academic
performance of these students met “neither the institution’s nor the sponsor’s expectations, nor indeed the student’s.”

The irony is that ISS are the students with a formal contract with a third-party sponsor that is more likely to expect or require high academic performance. Failure on the part of colleges and universities to provide necessary support for ISS could, over time, discourage sponsors from sending students to an institution, favoring other institutions with more supports that facilitate higher academic achievement for ISS. Given that these sponsoring agencies generally sponsor several students at a time to any given institution, the financial losses for the institution over time could be substantial. Therefore, understanding ISS needs and requirements to ensure quality academic experiences and high performance actually provides the revenue to the institution to respond to the needs of this particular group of students; once structures are put in place, the institution is then well-positioned to increase the number of ISS on campus, increasing the general revenue of the institution.

**Academic Performance and Contractual Agreement**

Much work has been done on predicting academic performance concentrating on pre-enrollment student characteristics (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978). Pascarella and Terenzini studied the nature of the social or interpersonal environment and the relationship between peer culture and academic achievement on campus. However, there is dearth of literature about students’ academic experience and performance in the context of a contractual agreement or another formal agreement where there is a sanctioned expectation for academic performance, as between ISS and sponsors.

Donat (2015) investigated the influence of parental interaction and involvement on student performance. This study, however, assessed how a non-contractual (informal) agreement
between parents and children influenced student’s educational experiences, finding that parental involvement had a positive influence on the academic performance of students. In the case of ISS, the contractual agreement is a formal contract where academic performance is often directly linked and, thus, there are sponsor influences and involvement that may directly impact how ISS perceive their academic experience.

**Goal setting.** Hockey (1996) investigated the process of supervising research using a written contract executed between the supervisor and the students. The study demonstrated how such written contracts formalizing expectations could provide value and enhance student performance. Hockey’s (1996) study found written contracts of particular value for student selection, monitoring and assessment of student progress, and conduct of supervision. Hockey’s study called for more consideration to be given to this strategy but stressed that it might not solve all the supervisor’s problems. He found that student research momentum to be problematic with the use of formal contracts.

In the current research study, there could be influences that a contractual (sponsor) agreement exerts on students as the pursue their academic goals, so that student momentum does not lag behind the contractual conditions and sponsor expectations. In particular, the contract may help in monitoring and assessing ISS academic performance, in exchange for which the sponsor has agreed to guarantee the ISS educational costs for study abroad. However, another influential aspect of ISS experiences may be the collaboration and communication between the sponsor and the host institution. In partnership with the ISS, a functional relationship in this context will be crucial.

Wentzel (2000) studied classroom goals of students from a content perspective, examining what it was that a student was trying to achieve in a given situation. Wentzel argued
that focusing on the content of student goals can provide unique and valuable insights into how social and academic goals influence student accomplishments. The author described the models of relations between students’ multiple goals and found that “relations and goals” can be complementary with “social and task-related goal pursuit independently contributing to academic achievement.”

McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) studied the factors that could predict academic performance in first-year students such as, academic, psychosocial, cognitive, and demographic predictors of academic performance. They recommended additional studies to identify positive influences on academic performance and targeted interventions for supporting at-risk students. As Gauntlett (2005) pointed out, ISS might not be achieving their academic goals. The current study will help identify potential factors that could be influencing ISS academic performance to help identify these targeted interventions and support programs.

**Communication.** Heffernan and Poole (2005) studied effective international educational practices. In the context of “trans-national education” and “franchising” partnerships, they pointed out that such relationships can cause challenges, create complexities, and increase the risks for international education managers and administrators. However, success factors like developing positive relationships between the host universities and their international partners, developing effective communication processes and procedures, creating mutual trust, and encouraging commitment helps maneuver through those struggles. Therefore, this study will be helpful in exploring the dynamics of those communication links, how they are best established and strengthened between the college or university and the sponsoring agency to achieve the mutual goal of high-quality ISS academic experiences and performance.
Motivation and persistence. Van Etten, Pressley, McInerney, and Leim (2008) did an ethnographic study on academic motivation among college seniors. They found that grades and graduation were the target goals motivating students’ academic efforts; however, there were other internal and external factors affecting student motivation. Internal factors included student characteristics and beliefs; external factors included academic-related factors, social factors, college environment, and extracurricular activities. This study suggested that there was a lot to learn about academic motivation in the college-going years and recommended employing qualitative methodologies to capture the complexities of academic motivation. Therefore, the current research study investigated the academic experiences of ISS in the context of the contractual sponsor agreement and expectations of the sponsor. The research explored how this influence can act as a factor in student attitudes and perceptions about control and expectations. This study looked at the source of funding and related contractual expectations as a factor influencing the academic experiences of students and sought to understand that aspect from the perspective of ISS.

The academic persistence literature does not delve much into finances and contractual agreements as they related to academic performance. Wetzel, O’Toole, and Peterson (1999) conducted a case study on factors effecting student retention probabilities. They found academic and social integration factors to be most significant in persistence; financial considerations were less important in persistence decisions. This raises the question of whether a lack of social integration on campus and a lack of engagement may make it harder for ISS to persist.

While there is a substantive literature on self-efficacy and its relation to students’ academic goals and performance. However, this research does not explore financing or contractual arrangements in higher education as possible influences on the students’ thoughts and
beliefs related to their academic objectives. Van Dinther, Dochy, and Segers (2011) suggested that self-efficacy was an important variable in affecting student motivation and learning. Vab Dinther et al. (2011) studied “the factors shown to affect the self-efficacy of students within higher education settings” and found educational programs enhance student self-efficacy. In the same vein, this study attempted to contribute understanding of additional factors in the self-efficacy literature.

Chemers, Hu, and Garcia (2001) also studied the effects of academic self-efficacy and optimism on student academic performance, stress, health, and commitment. This study also ignored the effect of finances in overall health and stress of students. Pajares (1996) investigated the combined effects of academic self-efficacy and stress on the academic performance of non-traditional and minority students: academic performance related to first-year GPA, accumulated credits, and retention after the first year. This study also ignored finance as a factor that could influence student academic performance.

Financial pressure. Joo, Durband, and Grable (2008) studied the academic impact of financial stress in college students and found that greater financial burdens lead to leaving school or reducing course work. The authors studied the academic impact of financial stress in college students and found that “staying in school and graduating on time is an important factor for students and their families” and financial burden leads students to reduce course work or drop out. While much research has been done concerning financial aid for college students, studies like Joo et. al (2008) are scarce, identifying finances as an important factor in the context of students’ higher education experiences and performance. This raises the question of whether, in the case of ISS, the sponsor provided financing could be a strong factor in reducing stress for ISS.
A significant factor influencing the student academic experience and performance could be the source of financing to cover for their educational expenses. While a substantial number of students pursuing higher education still rely on personal funds, from their parents and family, many obtain funding from external sources such as student loans. In the case of international students, the highest growth in this demographic is among students receiving funding from home governments and corporate sponsors (ISS), often current and future employers (IIE, 2014). Under a contractual agreement with the sponsors, ISS expenses for study abroad are borne by the sponsor. The funding these students receive is an economic transaction. That is to say, the financing students receive for their education comes with a contractual commitment. This raises the question, explored in this study, of how the release from financial pressure compares to the added pressure of contractual sponsor expectations.

**Contractual Agreements and ISS**

The international sponsoring agencies funding undergraduate student education in the United States can be corporations, foundations, NGOs, or government entities. If a host nation does not have a strong education infrastructure, this creates an incentive for sponsors to send current or future employees, managers, or leaders for education in leading universities in the U.S., such as Blue University where the current research was conducted.

Contractual agreements can include a commitment from the students to be employed with the sponsoring agency/business entity. The contract could also include minimum performance expectations that students would need to maintain. The terms, conditions and expectations of such agreements could influence how these students perform academically at the host institution.
Sponsor Motivations

Perna et al. (2015) conducted a case study analysis of the Kazakhstan Bolashak Scholars program to investigate the programmatic and contextual forces influencing participation in this government-sponsored international program. After dissolution of Soviet Union, Kazakhstan showed only a modest increase in higher education attainment and tertiary education completion among their working age population over a twenty-year period (Perna et al., 2015). They suggested Kazakhstan was an example where “participating in tertiary education abroad may be particularly beneficial for nations that are undergoing economic and political reforms, including the former states of the Soviet Union.” The Bolashak program, therefore, was a strategy for “promoting the nation’s transition to an innovation-driven economy” and helping a developing country’s human resources by providing an option to obtain education at some of the best institutions around the world (Perna et al., 2015).

Findings from Perna et al. (2015) were consistent with human capital theory in suggesting that program participants perceived benefits that were greater than costs of participating in such programs. Benefits included having an oversees experience, receiving a top degree and deep knowledge, interacting with different people, receiving generous scholarships, and returning home with technologies to help home country. Overall, such perceived benefits were favorable relative to costs such as collateral requirement, obligation to return and work in Kazakhstan, and limited fields of study permitted by the program.

Perna et al. (2014) extensively studied the characteristics of international scholarship programs (mostly graduate or post-graduate) in promoting human capital development and found that such programs encouraged degree attainment rather than merely exchange. They also found
that such programs, along with limiting permissible destination countries, mostly required participants to return to their home countries after program completion.

Perna et al. (2014) developed a typology for these programs with varying economic and political goals: 1) development of basic skills, 2) development of advanced knowledge in developing nations (developing economies not politically free), 3) development of advanced knowledge in developed nations, and 4) promotion of short-term study abroad (innovation-driven and politically free economies). This study suggested future research use a program typology to examine the economic and political contexts of sponsoring nations.

Kim (1998) also described how developing countries can benefit from and import advanced knowledge by sending students abroad for higher education. In returning, these students then contribute to creating new knowledge by helping other people acquire advanced skills. This study argued for the importance of recognizing how human resources and advanced knowledge contribute to economic growth and knowledge generation. This, in turn, leads to enhanced human capital development, increased productivity, and social mobility in sponsor countries.

Therefore, while the growth in this segment (ISS) presents increased enrollment, diversity, and economic opportunities to the U.S., more importantly it provides human development and capacity-building opportunities to the sponsoring countries. Hudzik and Briggs (2012) recommended that colleges and universities not just focus on economic gains, instead focusing on recruiting the best students to the U.S. and providing them with a world class educational experience. By analyzing the experiences of ISS, this current research study balances building an understanding, encouraging better engagement, and helping to clarify expectations of these sponsored students.
**Contractual Agreements and Relationships**

A broader understanding of the factors that impact ISS academic experiences could guide institutional policy and processes. It could also inform training and education for students and parents, so that they appropriately manage and even encourage this group of students to continue to perform well. Given that financial resources are critical requirements for obtaining an education, this issue has received surprisingly little attention by researchers.

In this context, ISS engage in a relationship with third-party agencies that provide them with funding to complete their education successfully. While banks and other financial institutions would require students to repay loans to provide income for banks (as interest and fees), for parents the ‘returns’ could be more visceral or hedonic than the more tangible or utilitarian returns for banks. In the case of ISS, “repayment” could come in the form of a contractual agreement that requires students to be employed in the sponsoring agency for a specific length of time. Usually, such contractual agreements carry severe penalties of violating such contractual agreements.

Donat (2015) was one of the very few investigations that assessed how a non-contractual (informal) agreement could influence the student’s educational experiences. Donat (2015) found that parents’ concerns (like sponsor concerns) for the educational performance of their children could lead parents (sponsors) to get involved in the educational lives of their children, potentially influencing students’ educational experiences. Donat’s (2015) study found that direct parental involvement had a negative influence on undergraduates’ academic performance whereas indirect involvement had a positive influence on undergraduates’ academic performance. This raises the question of the extent to which direct sponsor involvement may negatively influence ISS academic performance compared to indirect sponsor involvement. The current research
study explored the dynamics of the contractual agreement between sponsors and ISS, and how these dynamics influence ISS educational experiences and performance.

Students’ education can be funded by family and friends or through educational loans; in the case of sponsored students, it is funded through their national governments and corporations. Financial institutions expect to be repaid. As with financial institutions, sponsoring organizations often expect payback or return-on-investment. Financing entities or individuals expect students to act responsibly and create value through their education. Similarly, sponsors have expectations for responsible behavior and value creation. Informal, even invisible, relationships and expectations exist between students and family, friends, and/or financial institutions; these relationships influence students’ experiences and performance. It is not a big leap, then, to imagine that relationships and expectations exist between the sponsors and ISS. And, given the formal nature of a sponsorship, these relationships are more likely to influence student experiences and performance.

In the case of ISS, the formalized contracts between students and sponsors encompass a greater number of conditions: pre-departure trainings or orientation, financial agreements, release of information agreements, limits on choice of major, GPA requirements, sponsor approvals for additional courses or programs, grade reporting, transcript sharing, requirements to return to their country of origin, and home country or sponsor job requirements, to name a few. While parents may monitor behavior or grades, the ISS contract is more explicit and involves more significant observable monitoring costs compared to other international students.

Therefore, it is likely that the explicit contractual relationship will influence ISS attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, experiences, and possibly even academic performance. It is this aspect, that is under investigation in the current research study: to capture undergraduate ISS academic
experience during their education in the U.S. within the context of their contractual relationship with the sponsor.

**Contractual Relationships and International Sponsored Students (ISS)**

Astin (1993) identified the need to understand student characteristics, the nature of the environment they would be in contact with throughout their educational experience, and their qualities and characteristics so as to maximize their educational experience. Despite the rising enrollment trend for ISS, there is a paucity of research focused on understanding ISS at U.S. institutions of higher education. One of the few research studies focused on ISS investigated the phenomenon of ISS program characteristics (Perna et al., 2014). The authors argued that human capital development objectives were the core motivation for international study sponsored by national governments.

Perna et al. (2015) explored the understanding of how programmatic and contextual forces could influence participation in a mobility program sponsored by the government of Kazakhstan. This study used a case study approach, exploring the characteristics of these students and identifying the forces that either limited or promoted their participation in such programs.

Hölmstrom (1979) described the “moral hazard” or incentive problem that can result when it is not possible to observe or contract individual actions. To remedy this, sponsors invest resources in monitoring students’ actions in an attempt to enforce the contract, creating penalties for dysfunctional behavior. Thus, in case of ISS, there is high level of monitoring from the sponsors around ISS academic performance and incentives as well the penalties for high performance. Given the existence of contracts between sponsors and ISS, contractual clauses for
incentives and risk-sharing could be improved for both ISS and the sponsors with better information on the nature of these contracts.

Therefore, the current research study helps to understand ISS by focusing on the contractual agreement that exists between students and their sponsors as it influences ISS academic experiences and performances. ISS academic performance, in turn, helps to understand goals and outcomes. Positive academic achievement is what all higher education institutions desire for all of their students, including their international and international sponsored students.

**Sponsor Relationships and Educational Institutions**

Providing a supportive environment on campus for all students should be a strategic priority for all higher education administration. Understanding the unique characteristics of different student groups and subsets of populations is critical. Using evidence-based research and periodic re-assessment can help U.S. institutions of higher education create strategic goals to better support their international student population. ISS constitute a unique population that will continue to grow because of the educational opportunities that sponsors and students perceive are available for them in the U.S.

As with other non-traditional student populations, it becomes the responsibility of not only individual institutions but, also, of the U.S. government to recognize the opportunities inherent in the globalization of American higher education. This includes the financial, research, and scientific development of the institutions themselves as well as the building of globally thriving educated societies. The first is to fundamentally understand international students, especially ISS, to become familiar with the factors that influence their academic experiences and achievements.
The current research study takes a unique approach to understanding ISS experiences by examining their perceptions through the lens of their contractual relationship with their sponsor. This study proposed that the financial agreements with the sponsors comprised an additional and important factor that influences ISS performance in U.S. campuses and which distinguishes ISS from other students. Results of such an investigation will yield valuable insights into the needs and requirements of ISS, enabling colleges and universities to proactively enhance the student experiences for ISS. Furthermore, higher education institutions can consider implications of resource allocation and special accommodations to serve the needs of this student group appropriately. There may also be implications for sponsors, students, funders, and families of ISS and other international students to ensure that interests of all parties are aligned.

**Summary**

This chapter reviewed the literature critical for understanding the current research study, focusing on international students as a demographic; the impact of contractual relationships on academic performance; and the relationships between ISS, performance, and sponsor relationships. Global interdependence and economic competition compel institutions of higher education to embrace globalization as a part of their strategic mission. With this awareness and these globalization strategies, colleges and universities are focusing on their students becoming “globally competent” and prepared to thrive in our increasingly globalized, interconnected world.

International students often require help with language proficiency, both verbal and written. They struggle to integrate within the college or university environment and culture may be challenging for them. International students must continually and simultaneously adapt to differences in cultural, academic, social, and linguistic aspects of American culture. This creates
barriers to their engagement, hampering or threatening their academic and social success on campus. Contractual sponsorship agreements relieve financial pressures but they also influence, sometimes negatively, student goal setting, motivation, and persistence.

The number of international students, and especially ISS, is growing. U.S. colleges and universities must increase their understanding of the unique challenges and needs of these students. This will benefit students, institutions of higher education, sponsoring organizations, American society and our economy, and our larger global community.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In the current research study, the central research questions were investigated by collecting data through a series of face-to-face interviews with three international sponsored students (ISS) from three different countries during their entire freshman academic year. The qualitative research design used a case-study methodology. The overall purpose guiding this study was to identify what factors influence undergraduate ISS attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors with regard to their academic experiences in the U.S. within the context of their contractual agreement with their sponsor. Specifically, the following three research questions were investigated in this study:

1. How do undergraduate ISS narrate the role of their sponsor on their academic experiences?

2. How do undergraduate ISS describe the influence of their sponsor attributes (e.g. decision making, responsiveness, monitoring and incentives) on their academic experiences?

3. How do undergraduate ISS describe the interaction between other aspects of the environment, and sponsor role and attributes as an influence on their academic experiences?

Rationale for the Research Design

The choice of a research design frames the entire research study. Research designs can be qualitative, quantitative, or use a mixed methodology. Bogdan and Biklen (1997) describe many reasons why qualitative methodologies are preferred for research studies like this one. They are especially useful when exploring relatively under-studied phenomenon, like the relationship between sponsors, ISS, and the impact of contractual agreements. They ensure a holistic
assessment of the phenomenon of interest, which is especially important when existing research is scarce and the risk of coming to misguided conclusions is high. They can be used to investigate the inner experiences of the study participants and to understand how meanings are formulated by participants. They can determine factors that can studied in greater depth by quantitative methodologies in the future.

The focus of this descriptive study was to explore the attitudes and perceptions of ISS in relation to the contractual agreements between these students and their sponsors. Given that this phenomenon has been relatively understudied, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted. Since the research questions were designed to be informative with a goal of understanding ISS attitudes and perceptions about their academic experiences and performance, a qualitative study using case-study methodology was chosen.

**Overall Approach**

There are generally five types of qualitative research methods: ethnographic, narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, and case studies (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Given that the purpose of this study was to understand the phenomenon of interest through the attitudes and perceptions of ISS, the data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews of these students. Creswell and Maietta (2002) discussed case studies as exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or cases over time. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the scope was limited to attitudes, perceptions and behaviors of ISS towards their contractual agreement and its influence on their academic experiences, this study intends to produce findings encouraging future studies to develop deeper knowledge on this topic.

Case study approach is one of the qualitative research methodologies and is considered to operate within the interpretive paradigm, although case studies can be used within a positivist
paradigm as well. Therefore, it is important to clarify which of the two approaches are being emphasized when using case studies. Case Study approach uses interviews to collect data therefore, this study incorporated the use of case studies using an interpretive approach.

**Rationale for a Case-Study Methodology**

Eisenhardt (1989b) argues that case studies can be used to understand a phenomenon in a particular setting. Yin (2013) includes the three characteristics of research that would argue for the use of case studies. First, the research question should focus on answering questions such as “how” or “why.” Second, the investigator has limited or no control over behavioral events. And, third, the phenomenon that is to be studied is a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context. The current research study met all three of these criteria.

Given that the purpose of this research study was to understand how ISS perceive the influence of their sponsor’s involvement, style, and influence on their academic performance during their education in the U.S, a case study was determined to be an appropriate method to investigate this phenomenon. The behavior of the students (i.e. their attitudes and perceptions towards their academic experiences and performance) and their understanding of the contractual agreement and influence of their sponsor, which were the focus of this study, were outside the investigator’s control. Furthermore, the phenomenon being investigated was embedded in a real-life context, contemporary in nature, which fit with the requirements for a case-study methodology.

Wolcott (2009) describes case studies as a “genre” of research and argues that there should be more focus on fieldwork techniques. Given that the current research study was qualitative in nature and used student narratives, it took Wolcott’s (2009) recommendation and
focused intently on the interview protocol construction, interview preparation, and how the data was collected during the interviews.

Additional grounding for the use of a case study methodology was provided by the parallel use of case study methodologies in previous such investigations. While research about ISS was scarce, case studies have been widely used when studying the larger international student population. For instance, Odell, Ellis, Lawrence, and Smith (1992) focused on understanding the micro-computer competencies possessed by international students in context of their background and skills. Chowa, Danso, and Sherraden (2007) used a case study approach to document the learning experiences of five African graduate students in the United States in order to inform the broader curricula for students in international social work education. This research, which used individual students as cases, led to an understanding of how these students viewed and incorporated their education in context of indigenous knowledge from their home countries.

Archer, Jones, and Davison (2010) used case studies to understand the experiences of international students arriving in the United Kingdom. This study took a multifaceted approach to understanding student experiences and, for each such facet, used a set of case studies. Results of this study led to recommendations to universities in the U.K. to guide them to better communicate, coordinate services for, use technology with, be flexible with, and manage expectations of international students to enhance their experience.

Adams (2014) investigated the experiences of international students in the United States in context of students navigating the cultural and educational differences between their home country and the host country (U.S.A.), and how this influenced international students’ sense of
identity. The research conducted semi-structured interviews with six international students from various countries to collect evidence.

Teh (2011) also conducted a study using case studies through semi-structured interviews with 12 students to understand the outcomes of a New Zealand university program that was designed to introduce newly enrolled international students to the local Māori culture. Assessment of the data showed there were seven emerging themes that could help international students make cultural and social adjustments while in New Zealand.

**Research Process**

The following section provides a detailed outline of how this study was conducted.

**Preparation and Human Subjects Considerations**

An important purpose of the preparatory process is to minimize preconceptions related to the phenomenon of interest. The phenomenon of interest in this study, how the academic experiences and performance of ISS are influenced by sponsor relationships, was relatively understudied at the time of this research. Therefore, even after the literature review process, the researcher had a comparatively limited understanding of the issues related to this phenomenon. Therefore, the risks of approaching data collection, observation, and analysis with any preconceived notions was relatively low.

This study was reviewed in Fall 2016 by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Blue University and was categorized in the Exempt study status. Given the recommendations of the IRB board, the researcher followed the guidelines for the informed consent process of an Exempt study. Participation by ISS in the research study was fully voluntary and participants could opt-out at any time. Students received $100 at the end of each semester as compensation for their time. Data and respondent confidentiality and anonymity were ensured under these guidelines.
The three student’s names were kept confidential and students were identified only by pseudonyms.

**Study Population and Sampling**

“Blue University,” a pseudonym for a large, public land grant university in the United States, was purposefully chosen as the site for the current research topic based on its large population of ISS and its willingness to participate in the research study. Given the growing presence of ISS in undergraduate programs in U.S. colleges and universities, it made sense to conduct research on a campus that had a thriving ISS population.

A common method of sampling in case study research is purposeful sampling (Marshall, 1996). ISS sponsors differed by the size of their sponsorship programs and also by their geographic location. This study considered these two characteristics as important considerations when attempting to understand the phenomenon of interest. Therefore, a purposeful sampling method sought out sponsors based on the size of their programs (number of students at Blue University) and also the growing significance of these countries based on the total number of ISS they had at the U.S. colleges and universities. Using information provided by the International/Global office of Blue University, the following three countries were identified for the purpose of recruiting ISS participants for this study: Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Oman. These countries were ranked among the top five sources of ISS at Blue University.

It is critical to note that sponsors did not volunteer to participate or to have their ISS participate. Data on sponsors was collected from Blue University so as to select students from large, representative countries. Students were not invited to participate based on their sponsor but based on their country of origin. Complete confidentiality of student identifications was maintained.
Selection of individual cases is an important step in case study research. The International/Global office at Blue University invited all freshman ISS from the three countries identified to participate in the research study. In response to the invitations, three volunteer students were recruited to participate in this study. These ISSs participated in face-to-face interviews and received $100 at the end of each semester as an incentive to participate as compensation for their time and effort.

**Interview Protocol Development**

In a case study approach, interviews are one of the recommended methods of data collection. The main source of data for this study were the ISS participants themselves; this data was gathered through interviews. Since this was an exploratory study of attitudes and perceptions of these students on their academic experiences under the sponsorship agreement were captured through phenomenological interviewing over the course of an entire academic year. The case for phenomenological interviewing was also supported given that there was no prior research to help the researcher understand the contractual relationship between the ISS and their sponsoring agency, or how this relationship may have influenced the academic experiences and performance of these students. Phenomenological interviewing allowed the research to explore how this phenomenon (the contractual agreement) influenced the academic experiences and performance of ISS.

Formal interview methods can be structured or unstructured. Drever (1995) recommends using successive semi-structured interviews to understand the phenomenon of interest in small scale studies. Given the overall purpose of this research, the researcher need to carefully guide the process in a targeted manner to obtain relevant information. Furthermore, given that most of this inquiry required the participants to discuss personal experiences, opinions, and perceptions,
it was important that the researcher gained the participants’ confidence, and their cooperation, to ensure participation for the full academic year. These factors also called for a semi-structured interview process. A formal interview might have created a barrier to building trust. An informal, unstructured interview might have been perceived as too vague to be worth the investment of time. A semi-structured interview protocol struck the right balance.

The researcher incorporated semi-structured questions in these interviews for an in-depth investigation. Such questions provided the flexibility to probe and clarify misunderstandings as well as to provide an opportunity to develop an expression of participant’s overall intentions, beliefs, and attitudes (Kerlinger, 1999; Yin, 1989). These interviews also allowed time for questions from the student participants.

The main constructs guiding the interview questions were international sponsored students, ISS sponsor contractual agreements, sponsor involvement (decision-making), sponsor style (responsiveness), sponsor influence (monitoring and incentives), ISS academic experiences and performance, and other environmental factors that might contribute to ISS academic experiences and performance. Appendix in this document provides the interview guidelines and entire interview protocol that was followed in conducting these interviews.

**Data Collection**

**Interview Data**

Interviews were conducted in person at a time and location convenient to the participants and the researcher. At the first interview, the researcher and the participant introduced themselves. The researcher introduced the student to the research project. Participants were reminded of their consent at the time of establishing the first contact. The researcher explained the guidelines for the interviews and introduced a set of sequential discussion questions.
The researcher audio recorded each of the interviews, ensuring the audio recording equipment was working well prior to each interview. These audio recordings were then transcribed. Audio recordings were stored and transcribed along with collated observational notes from the interviews.

**Observation and Research Journal**

Unluer (2012) mention that during the interview and data collection process researchers should maintain a research journal. This recommendation was followed and the researcher maintained a research journal (electronic notes), allowing her time to document general observations about the interviews. Furthermore, it allowed the researcher space and time to reflect on her own attitudes and perceptions of the interview discussions. Given that the researcher was at the center of the data collection process, documenting her own reflections, opinions, attitudes, and perceptions of the phenomenon discussed allowed the researcher to remain unbiased in the interpretation and analysis process. This process also allowed the researcher to understand her own assumptions when interpreting and analyzing the interview recordings and transcripts. More specifically, the research journal included notes related to appointments, summaries of discussions, and reflection of those discussions.

**Data Analysis**

The continued advances in the ability of software to facilitate data analysis have justified the use of Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). The essential criticism of using CAQDAS has been that it promotes a positivist approach to the process. However, such studies fail to highlight the choices that the researcher has in ensuring the analytical process remains interpretive, in the spirit of the interpretive case study approaches. For
this study, Nvivo software (Version 11) was used. The following aspects of data analysis were integrated into the Nvivo software process.

**Memoing**

As recommended by Bazeley and Richards (2000) memos were used as part of the research process. These memos contained aspects of conceptual development, general events, reflection, emergent questions, exploration and helped the researcher in documenting all relevant information related to the participant interviews.

**Constant Comparative Method**

The research journal and particularly the conceptual memos were leveraged to constantly compare the interview findings to the results to the literature. In many research studies, this is also referred to as “triangulation.” It is an iterative process that helps to maintain reliability and validity in qualitative studies by comparing data sources for consistency in findings and interpretations.

**Concept Identification**

Open coding is an important stage in analyzing the qualitative data and within Nvivo, this was conducted through the process of concept identification. The researcher conducted this open coding scheme by creating codes for pieces of the interview transcripts. Then, these codes were stored in the Nvivo along with a memo for that particular code.

**Node structure.** Another critical aspect of concept identification is to divulge in the underlying dimensions of various concepts identified in the early stage of the analysis process. These concepts are assigned in nodes as “idea placements” (Bandara, 2006). Given that Nvivo facilitates this process by allowing multiple dimensions or branches for the concepts, the researcher conducted this micro analysis of each concept by creating multiple nodes for each
concept. This also facilitated conceptual clarity when reviewing the data in greater detail. Efforts were made to ensure this process did not overcomplicate the node structure. The objective was to understand the concepts in depth while maintaining simplicity.

**Conceptual and Theoretical Development**

In order to further advance the understanding of the underlying phenomenon, the researcher conducted axial coding for further conceptual and theoretical development. The purpose of axial coding is to relate the categories of data to their subcategories in order to reassemble data that may have been dispersed during the initial coding process.

There are several functions in Nvivo that facilitate this process. These include coding stripes, coding queries, sets, matrix coding queries, relationship nodes, and models. Coding stripes allowed the researcher to view additional nodes that have been coded with each text. Coding queries allowed the research to ask questions such as who, when, why, where, what, and how, focusing on certain sections of the dataset.

The sets function in Nvivo allowed the researcher to group or cluster nodes into broader concepts that might reveal more meaningful interpretation of the data. Matrix coding queries in Nvivo allowed the researcher to conduct multiple comparisons of code categories and subcategories across cases and concepts to better understand the underlying relationships. Similarly, relationship codes could be used to relate the structure or conditions that created the circumstances of the phenomenon with the processes that essentially imply the interactions and actions of individuals over time.

Finally, the Nvivo software allowed the researcher to represent these relationships diagrammatically through models. This further enhanced the interpretative process of
understanding the phenomena of interest. The researcher combined the use of these Nvivo functions to analyze and interpret the data in order to develop theoretical outlines.

**Analysis of Data**

Case study data can be multi-dimensional and often represents phenomenon that may not necessarily have objectively measured beforehand. Given this inherent nature of case study data, Yin (1989) recommended using an analytic approach to analyzing data by placing the information into different arrays in order to group them into logical themes.

Yin (1989) also recommends analyzing such data by placing events in a chronological order. A chronological approach was not being required for the type of data that this research generated; however, the researcher was able to document event chronology selectively when viewing appropriately during the data collection process.

Another aspect of data analysis was explanation building. This allowed the researcher to “develop ideas for further study” without the goal of deriving conclusions from the case study (Yin, 1994). The researcher also adopted this approach while analyzing the evidence from interview discussions. This took the form of narratives and, where possible, more precise explanations based on theoretically developed propositions. As suggested by Yin (1994), this process was accomplished through an iterative process of studying the case study data and then revising possible theoretical positions, in the process gaining more insight into the data.

Given that this could have also distracted the researcher from the main purpose of the study, constant reference back to the focus of the study was made; only as necessary were the new perspectives interpreted as alternative explanations of the topic of this research. The interview discussions allowed the researcher to develop these explanations in depth, and the use of matrix and arrays facilitated a more objective assessment of these discussions
Data analysis involved three software programs: Nvivo, Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel. The steps that were incorporated in the data analysis process are outline below.

**Step #1: Pre-Coding**

Following the line by line coding method in the initial coding, the researcher remained close to the data. The codes were kept simple and precise (more descriptive) to preserve the words of the student participants and to move quickly through the data. At some point in this initial coding, higher level nodes were identified and related sub-nodes forming tree nodes at certain points. Figure 1, below, provides is an example of the code ‘Becoming a Sponsored Student’ and related sub-codes. An Excel spreadsheet listed all the codes and sub-codes created at the pre-coding stage (see Figure 2, below).

![Sample codes and sub-codes.](image-url)
Figure 2. Sample list of codes and sub-codes.

Step #2: Organizational Analysis

The next step was to align the initial codes within “themes,” which was a more directed and conceptual effort. For example, initial codes making the most sense were categorized under themes corresponding to the central idea of this study (see Figure 3). Initial codes were then analyzed and color coded in Microsoft Excel (see Figure 4). After analyzing and color coding all the initial codes into themes and sub-themes, these codes were grouped accordingly into those themes in Nvivo (see Figure 5).

Themes:

1. Sponsor Role per ISS
2. Sponsor Attributes per ISS
   2.1.5. Involvement: Sponsor decision making per ISS
   2.2.5. Style: Sponsor responsiveness per ISS
   2.3.5. Influence: Sponsor monitoring per ISS
   2.4.5. Influence: Sponsor incentives per ISS
3. Other Environmental Factors
   3.1 Environmental factors interacting with sponsor role per ISS
   3.2 Environmental factors interacting with sponsor attributes per ISS

Figure 3. Sample themes in Excel.
Table of color coded codes and sub-codes in Excel.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comparison with Non-Sponsored and American Students</td>
<td></td>
<td>May 6, 2018, 4:50</td>
<td></td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Perception on Majors</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Aug 19, 2018, 2:52</td>
<td></td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference in Social Life</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>May 17, 2018, 11:05</td>
<td></td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in Clubs Fall vs Spring</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jun 5, 2018, 9:50</td>
<td></td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in clubs-NOT FROM HERE</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jun 5, 2018, 9:50</td>
<td></td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Support in Academics</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Apr 3, 2018, 8:34</td>
<td></td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realization of Major Choice after First Semester</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>May 6, 2018, 4:11</td>
<td></td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Life- Engagement with other Students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>May 2, 2018, 11:18</td>
<td></td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENVIROMENTAL FACTORS-SPONSOR ROLE</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Aug 29, 2018, 10:3</td>
<td></td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPONSOR ROLE VS ISS</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Aug 29, 2018, 10:5</td>
<td></td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Sample list of color coded codes and sub-codes in Excel.

Figure 5. Sample of Nvivo themes.

Once large number of codes were developed, Nvivo was not very helpful in managing the entire coding process; the researcher found Nvivo had a better capability for code summarization than for data or code analysis. Therefore, once the data was separated into themes, Nvivo data
was exported by theme as a separate Microsoft Word file for further analysis (see Figure 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference 1: 1.94% coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>how it goes in Saudi Arabia there are likely nearly 250,000 students graduating from high school every year and about 10,000 students are eligible to apply for this program. So what Aramco does is sit an exam of math and English for these 10,000 students. Then it selects the highest 300 students; usually 300 students male and 80 or 100 female.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference 2: 0.42% coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After that they tell you you have been accepted ... and your major is that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference 3: 1.56% coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So, based on the score they tell you this is your major, engineering or science or... A: It's kind of like in demand and supply. You'll say what you want, like my first option for example mechanical engineering; second is electrical; third is petroleum engineering</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference 4: 1.32% coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Then they say if you are from the highest scores, they usually let you choose whatever major you. But, if you’re not, they go to the second option, the third option ... It's usually based on the business planning for Saudi Aramco.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference 5: 0.31% coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is like you choose and they choose the university.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference 6: 1.40% coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actually for choosing the university, they look at your grades and their program and they let you, like if you have real good grades, they let you go to the top tier university to apply for it. But if not they let you like the second tier and so on?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6. Sample Microsoft Word file.

To understand themes in-depth, the researcher placed each interview transcript passage into an individual tab in an Excel spreadsheet. This step looked for any pertinent data to develop and support emerging theories, such as clarifying relationships and/or categories. This step also included further analytical coding and code categorization into themes. The final codes were organized by color scheme: Green for Adam from Saudi Arabia, Blue for Abu from Malaysia, and Red for Asma from Oman. Figure 7 shows an example of an interview transcript related to “Sponsor Involvement-Sponsor Decision Making” under “Sponsor Attributes” analyzed for the sponsor student’s ability to change Universities:
Figure 7. *Sample coded interview transcript.*

**Step #3: Data Synthesis**

At this point, the researcher worked on observing and analyzing patterns in these final codes. She formed relationships between these codes by tabulating all the final codes for that theme for all the students. This step allowed a picture of the final codes cross-sectionally across all students and came very close to generating the research findings. Analyzing final codes in this pattern helped in the analysis of the findings across case studies to draw overall conclusions for this research study. (See Figure 8.)
Research quality has been defined and identified as construct validity, external validity, and reliability (Yin, 1994). Construct validity focuses on the concepts that are being investigated and external validity focuses on the generalizability of study results (Yin, 1994). Reliability refers to the replicability of the study in the future, with future researchers being able to obtain similar conclusions and findings (Yin, 1989). Given this study was exploratory in nature and was based on student experiences, attitudes, and perceptions, there was limited attention placed on validity, reliability, or generalizability.

In this study construct, validity assessed whether the interview questions designed for data collection were actually observing or capturing what they were intended to investigate. In other words, did they accurately capture the contractual relationship between the student and
their sponsoring agencies (sponsor involvement, style, and influence) and the impact of this relationship on students’ academic experiences and performance? As a comparison, Weisburd (2015) investigated whether the behavior of managers with car insurance paid by their companies could lead to risky behavior. Additionally, potential solutions to agency problems were associated with incentive structures, monitoring behavior, and risk-taking by agents within their contractual relationships (Beatty et al., 1990). Similar to Weisburd (2015), this research argued that student behavior, like that of managers, may be influenced by the contractual relationship.

The purpose of external validity was to ensure study results were generalizable beyond the current research (Yin, 1994). However, given that the proposed research was a descriptive case study to understand the phenomenon of interest, and given that there was virtually no existing literature on this phenomenon, external validity was not of particular concern for this research. A preliminary understanding the impact of the sponsoring agency’s contractual relationship with ISS academic experiences and performance will ideally lead to future research in this area. This could lead to broader findings that would eventually be generalizable.

Reliability in this study ensured explicit documentation of the collection, compilation, processing of information, and analysis of the data. Also included was the process of data analysis, deriving interpretations, and arriving at conclusions. Sufficient flexibility in the interview protocol questions allowed for a thorough investigation of the phenomenon that was the focus of this study.

A critical element of qualitative research is to ensure a high level of transparency. Therefore, the researcher ensured proper documentation of the approach and the processes used at each stage of the research. This provides the opportunity for researchers in the future to
replicate this study. Furthermore, transparency also brings reliability to the process and the approaches that were used in this study.

Summary

The current research study was designed as a qualitative research using the case-study methodology. The phenomenon of interest in this study, how the academic experiences and performance of ISS are influenced by sponsor relationships, was relatively understudied at the time of this research, so the risks of researcher bias was relatively low.

“Blue University,” a pseudonym for a large, public land grant university in the United States, was purposefully chosen as the site for the current research topic based on its large population of ISS and its willingness to participate in the research study. Three student participants were recruited using purposeful sampling. A semi-structured interview protocol was used for interviews in order to enable in-depth investigations of the research phenomenon. In addition, the researcher maintained an electronic research journal, allowing her time to document general observations about the interviews.

Data analysis involved memoing, constant comparisons, concept identification, and theoretical development. Pre-coding, organizational analysis, and data synthesis generated codes, clusters of codes, and eventually themes. Every attempt was made by the research to provide validity, reliability, and transparency consistent with the nature of a descriptive case study in a research area with virtually no previous research.

Given that the issues surrounding the contractual relationships of ISS and their sponsoring agencies are not well understood, evidence from this study will inform future research to investigate this phenomenon with more precision. Additional applications of the results depend upon the accuracy and reliability of the evidence gathered here. Consequently, the
author has included a clear approach and specific details of the data analysis process with an eye to replicability. Future research with a larger population will help inform policy and process discussions between sponsors and students as well as at host institutions of higher education.
CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH OVERVIEW AND FINDINGS

The main purpose of this study was to capture undergraduate ISS academic experiences during their education in the U.S. In addition, this research study investigated what role sponsors played in the overall ISS narratives and perceptions of the influence of their sponsor’s involvement, style, and influence on their academic experiences. The purpose of this study was detailed within the framework of ISS academic experiences, performance, and their contractual relationships with their sponsor. “Blue University,” a large, public land grant university in the United States, was purposefully chosen as the site for the current research topic based on its large population of ISS and its willingness to participate in the research study.

Overview of Study Participants

The International/Global office at Blue University invited all freshman ISS from the three countries (Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Malaysia) to participate in the research study. In response to the invitations, three volunteer students were recruited to participate in this study. The following section provides a brief overview of the participants, the case studies. The students are identified through pseudonyms that were selected by the students themselves.

Participant 1: Abu

“Abu” was a female from Malaysia sponsored by the Public Services Department of Malaysia. She was first interviewed as a freshman in her fall semester, where she was studying mechanical engineering. While exploring various aspects and activities at the University, she saw an opportunity in being part of this research as a way to spend time constructively. Abu was pleased that someone was looking into student’ perspective on sponsored programs.
Abu was excited to begin her academic life in the U.S. She felt that as a sponsored student she was not only responsible to her sponsor but to the broader community, given that she was being funded through the taxpayers’ in Malaysia. The researcher found that perspective especially intriguing. Abu described how even on days when she felt under the weather or wanted to skip classes, being a “sponsored student” motivated her to be resilient.

Being in her first semester, Abu was concerned about not having "friends" in the classroom, fearing that this impacted her academically. During later interviews, it seemed clear that Abu respected the opportunity to be studying in the U.S., even when her contract prohibited her doing certain things. For example, with regard to the marriage clause of her contract, she said, "I am young so why would the marriage clause in the sponsor contract bother me? I am anyway not getting married so early."

Abu believed it was not right for students to not go back to their country once they were in the U.S. on sponsorship. She thought that the home country of the student had "invested" in their education and she felt it was the students’ duty to go back and "serve" their country. It was interesting to note that in the case of Malaysian sponsorship agreements, students return to their country after completing studies; if they do not find employment is their field of study after a year, then they are free from the sponsorship conditions. At that point, students can find whatever employment they want with no obligation to stay in Malaysia for work. They can go to any other country to seek employment, and they do not have to return any money to the sponsor.

In my discussions with Abu about her choice of her major area of study, she seemed concerned and also certain that a change in major would be something difficult to negotiate with the sponsor. She mentioned, that if the change in major was within the field—such as a change from mechanical engineering to computer engineering—it might be acceptable to the sponsor.
Any drastic changes in major (for instance moving from an engineering field to the humanities or social sciences) would not be acceptable to the sponsor and would involve a long approval process for students to explain why they wanted to change their major.

During the second semester interview, Abu reported that the Fall semester had not been a very good semester for her academically. She admitted she and her sponsor were disappointed, but that she had another chance to prove herself. Abu mentioned her grades in the previous semester were the "lowest ever” in her entire academic life and she was unhappy. Abu stated that if she were not a sponsored student, she would still “study a lot,” but perhaps she would study with less "pressure."

Abu mentioned that she engaged in "healthy social" interactions, that is, she was not interested in partying but doing meaningful things such as discussing cultures and other exchanges between fellow students. She also noted her struggle in making friends during the first semester. Her social life was much better the second semester and she had made friends from all over the world.

According to Abu, she and her fellow sponsored students were fortunate not to be worrying about costs, since the sponsor was paying for the students. They felt that was the main difference between sponsored and non-sponsored students. Later in the interviews, Abu was definitely becoming more social; she mentioned engaging in discussions with fellow students about religion, culture, and other social aspects.

Abu shared that she learned from her early experiences at Blue University. After her first semester, she had come to understand that both courses and styles of learning were very different in the U.S.; she suggested that her first semester should have been a fairly light with credit load to give her time to adjust better at Blue University.
Participant 2: Adam

“Adam” was a male from Saudi Arabia sponsored by Saudi Aramco Company. Adam was first interviewed as a freshman in his fall semester, where he was majoring in petroleum engineering. Adam shared that he was intrigued by the research and was interested to share his views.

Adam was very confident after the orientation and coursework he had received before arriving at Blue University from his sponsor to prepare him to study in the U.S. He also noted how he was able to skip some courses at Blue University since he had already taken those in his home country, allowing him to get a head start. He seemed very proud talking about some of the courses he was able to skip at Blue University due to the preparatory classes his sponsor was able to offer him.

While talking about the terms of his contract of sponsorship, Adam was adamant that he wanted to be a part of the sponsorship program no matter what. While certain conditions were restrictive, he had no issues since he had no “Plan B.”

Adam mentioned how that was difficult to make friends with domestic students and local individuals. He wanted to work on this and really wanted to make friends outside of his sponsored group. Adam talked about recent U.S. travel restrictions on certain countries and was thankful that the ISS had their sponsor to guide them through this difficult time.

Adam showed so much confidence and preparation in his studies that he was expecting to get a high GPA in his first semester. However, later, he shared that he had learned more about his interests and wished he could major in Computer Engineering/Programming. He was disappointed but knew that it would be impossible to change majors as his sponsorship was based on the business plan of the sponsor. He noted that he would try to take some courses
related to computer engineering but knew he could not pursue that major given his commitment in the sponsorship contract.

Adam mentioned that he considered himself more mature since signing the sponsorship contract. Prior to signing the contract, he had only been exposed to Petroleum Engineering and related topics. Given he did not know anything about other fields, he signed his contract for petroleum engineering as his major. However, after his experiences at Blue University, he realized that he was interested more in Computer Programming and hoped to pursue that on his own in the future. He mentioned that since the sponsor was paying for his fees, the sponsor’s business plan was more important than his own choice of major at that point in his life.

Adam was open to talking about his social life as a sponsored student. He described how, unlike most of his friends (also ISS), he wanted to make friends with non-sponsored foreign students and American students. But, he realized that in practice it was more convenient for people from the same "culture" to quickly get to understand each other's jokes and get along. However, there was more reasoning involved with his desire to be friends with individuals from different backgrounds. Adam referred to his first semester as a "trial" semester; he described his second semester more like "this is college." He mentioned having 12 credits in the first semester, which left him with lot of free time, giving him the opportunity to explore, understand the college environment more, and adjust and adapt to his new environment.

Participant 3: Asma

“Asma” was a female from the Sultanate of Oman sponsored by the Ministry of Higher Education. Asma was first interviewed as a freshman in her fall semester, where she was majoring in Communication Arts and Science. Early during the interviews, Asma wanted to
know why the research focused on sponsored students; she also appreciated that this study would incorporate students' voice in understanding international sponsored student programs.

Asma was slow to open up in the earlier interviews; she opened up in successive interviews. She was curious if the research involved more Omani sponsored students and thought that the researcher might have been bombarded with students offering to be part of the study since she thought many ISS would love to share their experiences as they study in the U.S.

In terms of her contract and becoming a sponsored student, Asma mentioned that her family was fine with her studying abroad in this sponsorship arrangement. During the decision-making process, she went with her brother to meet with the sponsor representative and, whatever the conditions of the sponsorship contract were, she was mentally prepared to accept this opportunity.

Asma shared how under the sponsorship there were more "can’t do" items because the sponsor wanted the students to focus on their studies. However, her sponsor encouraged involvement in activities such as study abroad programs and travel, as long as they did not interfere with her graduation timeline. Asma received her sponsorship as part of a "special program;" the Omani government was building a university opening in 2020 and they needed trained "staff/personnel" for that institution.

During later discussions, Asma talked about her fall academic performance, which she considered weak. She attributed this to it being her first semester and the result of adjustment challenges at the university. Asma also had concerns about making friends outside of her own country's ISS group. She found it difficult to make friends with individuals from the United States, but wanted to work on that and really wanted to make friends outside of her sponsored student group.
Asma also mentioned recent U.S. travel restrictions and was thankful that the ISS had their sponsors who could guide them in this difficult time. It was very sad and disheartening to hear that during the early spring that, due to the political climate in the U.S., Asma and her parents were concerned about her security.

Although Asma always wanted to become a doctor, she reconciled to the fact that it might not be possible to pursue her interests because she welcomed the opportunities that came with sponsorship in the U.S. Accepting the terms and conditions of this sponsorship contract, she was pursuing the academic program she received the sponsorship for and realized her responsibility towards her sponsorship contract. Asma used the word "freedom" for the non-sponsored students and the students from U.S., compared to herself as a sponsored student. She said these other students were "free" to do and decide for themselves.

Overall, it was a pleasure getting to know these three international sponsored students for an entire academic year. The willingness of these students to share their experiences candidly with the researcher not only added richness to the data collected for this study but also to the researcher’s own experience in conducting this research. These students were brave as it is for all students coming from different parts of the country to pursue undergraduate studies and begin a new life of experiences. However, ISS undertaking such a “leap of faith” pursuing studies with additional variables entailed in a sponsorship contract deserve a higher level of appreciation. International sponsored students, who balance expectations of themselves, their parents, and their sponsor deserves a special mention.

**Study Findings**

The findings of this research study are presented in the following section aligned to the research questions that framed this study. The findings under each research question are
organized into topical areas. These topical areas emerged from the discussions with the study participants and reflected the final codes and themes that arose as the researcher started to assimilate the evidence to respond to the three research questions.

Each of the topical areas also includes a brief summary of the findings, without any interpretations or additional discussion. This was an important step to ensure that the research was both comprehensive and unbiased in summarizing the findings and leveraging those findings in the discussions and conclusions in Chapter 5.

**Research Question 1-Sponsor Role**

“Yeah. I was generally ok because that’s what they were teaching us. They were teaching us only petroleum related topics. So, normally I will get interested and mostly in these things.” - Adam

The first research question asked, “How do undergraduate ISS narrate the role of their sponsor on their academic experiences?” The following section summarizes the discussion under the topical areas that emerged when ISS discussed the overall role of the sponsor and how these areas impacted ISS academic experiences.

**Selection and approval for sponsorship.** One of the emergent topics from interviews with the ISS while discussing the sponsor’s role was the selection and approval process for them entering the sponsorship program. In describing the program eligibility for students, Adam noted that in his country approximately 4% of graduating high school students were eligible to apply for the sponsorship programs and almost two-thirds of the selected students were male. He elaborated on the recruitment process and academic superiority of the students selected for the sponsorship program and said, “…so, what Aramco does is sits an exam of math and English for these 10000 students. Then it selects the highest 300 students.” Adam also pointed out that being
in the sponsorship program and getting paid to study his major of interest was an ideal situation for him.

Asma noted that high school counselors are the ones who generally advise students regarding sponsorship opportunities and help with applications. Adam and Asma both noted that eligibility was based on academic superiority at high school, the sponsor’s test, and the English language program respectively. Asma mentioned “but for studying abroad, you cannot get into university immediately you need to go through an English year. You learn English.” Abu noted that the selection of students was based on the TOEFL and SAT scores as well, followed by an interview “so, after they look at if we passed the minimum requirement number of A’s, they will call for a selection like interview, interview session.”

Abu shared that sponsorship opportunities were available for all students graduating from Malaysian government high schools mentioning, “Yes, actually the exam is for the like highest level in the high school. So, basically, it’s like everyone who studies in the government school in Malaysia, they will be able to take that exam.” Abu added that she was denied sponsorship in the first application and, then, submitted application with reconsideration letters for a second chance. She received sponsorship on reconsideration and said this regarding that process “…after the first result we can ask for a, how would I say, it's like a second chance where we can write letters to ask them to consider? I mean ask for consideration. So what I did is that I sent them letters and I ask for consideration, a reconsideration. And at that second point I got that scholarship”. Her sponsor agreed to a reconsideration process in exceptional circumstances.

In detailing the sponsorship information process, Asma noted that she benefited from a sponsor publication that prescribed major and required GPAs. She believed the guide communicated expectations and requirements to the sponsored students before application
Adam and Asma revealed that, while they could provide their choices of major on the application, the sponsor made the final decision of the major that the ISS would be pursuing at the university. Adam mentioned that after taking the examination for the program students are notified about their acceptance and also the assigned major “…after that they tell you have been accepted … and your major is that.” Abu shared that the process of selection for sponsorship in Malaysia included a session in English; eventually, the ISS were evaluated on case study scenarios and group discussion on the subject. Acceptance status was monitored on a web portal.

In describing their prior academic performance and its role in becoming an ISS, Adam shared that the ISS in his group were required to take a strict gap year of college preparatory after high school. Furthermore, if the students got a C or below, they could lose the sponsorship after probation. Adam added that the SAT preparatory exam was also quite hard. He noted that high performing high school students and those who pass these tests eventually make it into the sponsorship programs and that the preparatory programs could help ISS skip some courses at the University. Asma and Abu also noted availability of a preparatory program, along with a language focus, helping them to enter university with transfer credits. Asma added that the preparatory course scores also impacted the major choice and university choice available for the students: “And yeah actually depending on your performance in the English year and SAT, depends which university you’ll get in.”

All three ISS noted that academic superiority in their home country was a required condition proven through high school grades, English language mastery, and/or sponsor tests and an interview. Asma added that this included a higher high school GPA. Abu noted that students from schools that had an international syllabus were identified to apply for the sponsorship programs. Adam noted that the decision of the major to be pursued at University once accepted
for sponsorship was that of the sponsor and the philosophy that drove the major choice was the sponsor’s business plan as well as supply and demand for expertise needed in the home country. Adam noted the following: “It’s kind of like in demand and supply. You’ll say what do you want, like my first option for example mechanical engineering; second is electrical; third is petroleum engineering.”

The allocation of the major and the university tier for application was also determined by the level of scores and finalized by the sponsor. Abu mentioned that sponsor chooses the major and there are parameters in majors getting selected for ISS, “…alright, so again my sponsor only choose, I mean we are allowed to choose any field of engineering, except doing it once. Let’s say, science engineering and then biomedical engineering. We are not allowed to choose that kind of field because it’s not being, I think it’s not being offered; it’s not being established in Malaysia.” Asma elaborated on the reasons why an ISS would agree with major assigned to them by their sponsor and said the following regarding the major assigned to her: “But, if this happened I will need to go to Communications College because I cannot… what is the problem the sponsor that they pay you the money for your tuition and why are you in a sponsored scholarship? Because you cannot pay the tuition yourself! So, you will need to follow their instructions, do what they say and I believe so that if I went to communications college I still can do good in it.”

**Sponsorship process concerns.** In terms of expressing some of their concerns with the sponsorship process, Asma and Abu noted that the sponsor essentially informed students of the acceptance for sponsorship, major approved, the application process necessary for the universities, and even the visa once it came through. Asma added that the international areas that were categorized as “dangerous” were listed on the sponsor’s application process and were
denied for submitting applications to universities in those areas: “Oh yeah, they have some areas in U.S. that’s considered dangerous, so they tell you not to go there. And if you actually apply for university there, they refuse your application. They don’t let you go there.”

Abu also mentioned ISS inability to choose their program of study “we just say that we want to study abroad; I want to study engineering. Where I’m heading, like which country, it’s not under my power to choose. I mean, like they can send you wherever they want and I'm lucky enough to be here.” In elaborating on the process when Abu was denied the sponsorship the first time and submitted a reconsideration to the sponsor, she learnt that in the selection process the sponsor looked at the parents’ salaries, in addition to the students’ academic credentials. Abu noted the following: “But, suddenly I didn't get the scholarship. So, at that point after I was quite disappointed. And I heard that someone say that this year, they actually look at our parents’ salary, at it added more besides just our performance.”

In describing the sponsorship paperwork, Adam noted that, due to sponsorship contract, ISS could have the liberty of focusing on studying and with no pressing reason to work. However, the non-ISS often did not have this choice, given they had to provide their own tuition. As for the contract itself, Adam noted several papers had to be signed to get the sponsorship process approved: “OK so when we are preparing for abroad studies we had like massive papers to sign for the abroad studies. For example, one of them is like, you can't get married in this period unless you have an approval or something. Also, you can't travel wherever you want.”. Asma recalled that throughout the contract and the approval process her advisor repeatedly informed them of the contract during the English preparatory program: “…they, actually your advisor come to meet you in your university or your English program and they told you things
about the contract again and again.” She recalled that there were more restrictions than approvals since the sponsor was paying money for the ISS.

Abu had the same recollection about the contract restrictions; however, she added that she did not recall any details being shared regarding the benefits of the contract to the students. Overall, all three ISS mentioned their willingness and pre-conditioning towards taking up the sponsorship opportunity, regardless of the contract restrictions. This willingness was attributed to the sponsorship being a huge opportunity, offering financial security and having a precondition of value to opportunities in the home country. Abu mentioned in this regard the following:

“…and also, about who did I review, discuss it with. I definitely with my parents. But, I’m the youngest; I’m the youngest child so, they don’t really review it like really detailed because this is common; I will say it’s common.”

ISS also recalled their experiences about how this sponsorship process help them feel prepared for the new academic experiences. Asma noted that she did not feel prepared for Blue University and wished there had been more information/training on the culture, education system, and academic experiences in the new university. She felt afraid because of this lack of information, so had to google all of the relevant information, laws, and other details related to safety and other concerns. She also felt that past ISS could have shared experiences with the current ISS better than the sponsor advisor could. However, there was no mention by her of any such efforts by the sponsor and mentioned: “It’s not the same in my country.” So I need to Google everything, every law, read not every law but little things to read everything and trying my best. That made me realize that I need to wish more and I wasn’t really prepared for what was happening there. I feel like if there was a program telling you; they tell you there will be a different culture.”
Asma also noted that, during the orientation, the sponsor advisor told the ISS that just a high GPA did not guarantee ISS a job after university and that they needed to have an overall experience. However, since the sponsor only stressed meeting minimum GPA requirements, she felt there was a lack of the whole truth from the sponsor about the needed additional requirements for getting a job: “Yeah. What do you want me to focus on? My GPA or my activities, or what because you are taught to focus on one thing.” She also felt confused that the sponsor would require only GPA and for ISS to graduate within the graduation timeline as conditions to meet. Asma mentioned that although ISS could submit their choice of major through the sponsor website (listed per the GPA requirements), this process was still quite restricted by the sponsor.

In summary, the sponsorship selection process for the ISS truly seemed to begin in high school. Based on the interviews, it was apparent that certain types of students were preferred by the sponsors: those performing well in high school with a good family background and stable income. Some sponsors preferred students from certain high schools, such as those run by the government or those with international curriculum in their educational programs.

The student selection process also seems to begin with the high school counselors who guided these students to consider the sponsorship programs. Once these students were either identified or self-selected to apply for the sponsorship programs, it was also quite clear that they had to go through a rigorous selection process followed by an intense preparatory program (detailed below) in order to prepare them for SATs and advanced courses, which might confer advance transfer credits for the U.S. university. One interesting concern that was raised by two of the three students was that the sponsor did not facilitate former students sharing their experiences
with the current students. The study participants felt that could have better prepared the students for the U.S. experience more than what they heard from the sponsors.

Additionally, when students were selected for the sponsorship program and were provided an overview of what the contract entailed, what the students heard was mostly requirements of the program and not much on how the program would be beneficial to them. Furthermore, the sponsors mostly focused on grades and the minimum GPA that the ISS needed to achieve and maintain throughout the sponsorship. However, students found this to be incomplete information when they heard at sponsor orientation that an overall experience (not just a high GPA) was required for a job with the sponsor after graduation. Also, to be prepared, ISS hoped that more help and information would be provided by the sponsor on culture, education, and the university system of the U.S. or other host countries.

**Preparatory/Foundation Programs.** ISS also discussed the preparatory or foundation programs in their home country while narrating the role of their sponsor. These preparatory or foundation programs are undertaken by ISS before or after being accepted for sponsorship, preparing them for the sponsorship opportunity and also for life in a U.S. university. Intense preparatory programs are designed to prepare ISS to take the SATs and also take preparatory courses (often up to 30 credits) that they can then transfer to the U.S. universities. Adam mentioned the following: “Well, actually the freshman year for us, Saudi Aramco students, we skipped many courses with the AP exams. We usually take, like there is physics track and chemistry track. So you either take calculus AB and chemistry AB, or calculus AB with the physics C, I think.” Asma shared that she participated in a summer high school preparatory program that had a similar curriculum as programs in the U.S. This program was intensive and
prepared her for the SAT test so that she would be better able to compete for a sponsorship for undergraduate studies.

Adam noted that there was a mandatory and very strict college preparatory program for one year: “Actually there is a gap year between high school and the freshman year at university. This gap year is like 10 months in Saudi Arabia, in Saudi Aramco Company. It’s called college preparation program or college preparatory program. It prepares you to the university and it is very strict.” Asma report that students had to complete a mandatory year in an English program before being accepted for a sponsorship as well as earn adequate English language scores and SAT scores. Asma noted that the high school foundations program was focused on preparing and competing for sponsorships, so that the ISS could add the program to their resume. According to Asma, the preparatory program helped ISS with English but did not provide them experience of interacting with American students. She described the impact of this in dealing with a culture shock, being in large classes of over 200 students. She felt that the ISS graduates should come and speak to students in preparatory programs to share their own experiences. Asma noted the following: “Well, so you got a year to study English in institute in America. But, what I noticed that the institute I studied in was more for internationals. So, I didn’t get to deal with Americans or people who have their English as their native language that much. So, for university was my first time to interact with Americans directly. So, I think the institute was more for safe environment for you to get used to the things, not to have a culture shock.”

Abu noted that she came with 30 transfer credits from the foundation program, and therefore was ahead of other freshman at Blue University: “I mean, I’m a freshman but I managed to transfer around 30 credits. So technically I’m one semester ahead of the other people. So, I spent around one year doing my foundation program before I apply here. So, I
managed to get around 30 credits from that classes.” This program helped her in her language skills, physics, and chemistry. It prepared her to deal with large credit loads (20 credits) during the preparatory program: “…because before we came here we were in a prep college, in that prep college we are so used to actually have a lot of classes, we take credits up to 20 credits per semester. I guess that actually trains us to not be so relaxed.” Despite this experience, she felt she made a mistake of replicating the foundation program experience in the U.S., taking a similar high credit load which impacted her first semester GPA. She also felt she had no experience with scheduling classes in the preparatory program and having large amounts of homework. Preparatory program provided her direct help but in the U.S. she had to navigate courses herself. Also, she found the services more helpful at the university than at the preparatory college. In Abu’s words: “So what I learn during my first semester one of my mistakes is to take a lot of credits just to try to make it seem somehow like in Malaysia. So, I guess that’s a huge; that’s the very biggest mistake I made.”

The ISS referred to their preparation to be at Blue University, essentially as a result of the sponsor’s role in the prior selection and preparation process when they were in their home country. During the discussions ISS shared their views on how prepared they felt initially to perform well academically in the U.S. having undergone the sponsor provided foundation training.

Adam and Abu noted that given the preparatory program in their home country, they felt rather confident undergoing the first semester in terms of their academic performance. Abu also noted that her superior performance as a student in Oman had contributed to her confidence and mentioned, “Yeah. Exactly. I guess I thought it’s going to be the same like I have in Malaysia.”. Asma also felt confidence in her academic performance but noted that studying was not the only
thing she would want to do, and she sought out other college experiences. Adam noted that he had already taken science topics during the preparatory program and so he was aiming for an A grade. Asma stated that the sponsor’s preparatory program encouraged students to explore America and travel, not just study. Abu noted that she found the English/writing classes easier since she had already taken those topics under the sponsor’s preparatory program.

In summary, the preparatory programs were essentially designed by the sponsors to ensure that the ISS had a smooth academic transition and were positioned to succeed once placed at a U.S. university. However, one aspect of this preparatory program that seems to be raised by all three ISS was that it primarily focused on getting students prepared for the educational aspect of being in the U.S. The preparatory program did not prepare the students to absorb the social and culture shock they would eventually face once in the U.S. Certain limitations of the preparatory programs (e.g. lack of American students in preparatory classes, English language comfort, class size, course scheduling difference) did not help ISS to navigate campus life themselves once they were in the U.S. confounded by adjustment and adaptation issues in the first semester, replicating aspects of the preparatory program (by taking a high credit load fall semester of freshman year) created more academic issues and pressure for ISS.

**Fears of sponsorship cancellation, differences with other students and concerns.** In narrating the role of their sponsors, ISS also discussed their fears related to their sponsorship. Asma noted that she was concerned about her scholarship being cancelled due to her academic performance, since she believed she could not get another sponsorship opportunity ever. Therefore, there was always a concern of being “watched” for skipping classes, impacts on grades, and reports being sent to the sponsor as she mentioned the following: “…not that I want to skip classes. Sometimes, you are just so tired, and you have AM class, and you just want to
sleep. But, then you remember, I cannot do that because I have a minimum absence. If I exceed them, this will affect my grades and this will be reported to my sponsor and then they will give you a whole lecture about why are you skipping classes? It’s complicated; there is someone watching you.” Asma also noted that she was always uncertain and afraid given that the sponsor advisors changed from time to time. She also felt that she needed protection during the times of conflict or political changes; she felt fearful about how sponsor would care for all the ISS they were supporting internationally. In spite of receiving the sponsor’s and parental advice, she needed to make decisions at university in view of the reality; so, she had to look up information and laws to stay safe and navigate herself to meet her academic and other needs.

Adam noted that having other ISS students created a healthy competitive environment, and also cohort students motivated each other to get better grades: “Yeah. Everybody is doing good. So, I just don’t want to be the guy that gets the lowest grade. It’s not like…unspoken language. Nobody speaks about it but it’s there.”

Abu noted that it was good to have other ISS friends, particularly seniors to get advice on classes, given the limited class availability. On the other hand, Abu noted that she was the only student assigned to this university by the sponsor. She reported finding it harder to survive and communicate. She was also unclear whether there would be any other ISS from her home country through this Sponsor.

ISS also shared their views on comparing themselves with other students that also gave an insight on their Sponsor’s role in preparing them to be in the U.S. academic environment. Adam noted that even if he was not on sponsorship, he felt he would still perform well academically. Also, he noted that other students had less competition, lower stress, and fewer concerns about their social life than did ISS. That said, he also believed that, given the sponsor
was taking care of the expenses, there was more focus on studies. Abu shared that she needed to learn to deal with this positive pressure of sponsorship on academics and make the most of this opportunity. Asma and Abu also noted the differences between ISS and other students; other students were perceived to have less pressure on getting higher GPAs and less concerns about their social life. On the other hand, they felt the ISS were more concerned about grades and did not have peers to interact with.

Asma mentioned: “As a sponsored student you will spend more time studying since you need to worry about your GPA. You need to worry if they will give you a job or not.” Asma also noted that some of this pressure was positive, encouraging her to explore other experiences at the university, and try to get double majors and add minors if the sponsor allowed them to do so. Asma noted that while non-SS students can apply to any of the universities, the ISS students were restricted to a sponsor-approved list. For instance, the ISS could not apply to MIT. Abu, on the other hand, reported that ISS do not have to worry about the tuition as that is paid by the sponsor, unlike the non-ISS students. Adam stated that the ISS did not have to worry about anything and could stay focused on their studies because of the sponsorship. Whereas Abu noted that the ISS had to do everything the sponsor’s way, given the minimum academic performance requirements from the sponsor.

ISS also discussed the limitations that are imposed due to their ISS status. Adam noted that he would explore more for his own interests. He would also change his major to computer engineering from petroleum engineering. He would meet professors and attend college to decide on his major later, once he had fully explored possibilities: “I wouldn’t specify a major that I would like to because in high school you don’t get specific and know what it is like to be what
your major is you want to be. But in college, you meet the professors, you know how do they work, what do they do.”

Asma stated that if she was not an ISS student then she would worry about tuition and have to work for tuition and thus was very thankful for the opportunity: “Actually, there are a lot of benefits that I’m so grateful. I would say that every day in my prayer that I am grateful for being a sponsored student because I know, I tell myself how it is hard to pay for tuition, to manage all the things about university for a sponsored student.”. However, if not an ISS she would study abroad and pursue a double major with four minors as there would be no pressure of graduation timeline. She also admitted she would skip classes and sleep in, but she would still care about studies. She also expressed that she would major in medicine rather than in communication for better job prospects. She noted, however, that earlier she had refused medical sponsorship in the UK.

Abu noted that she would study with less pressure and stress of academic requirements. She would have no pressure of tracking time, "what if" grade combinations, and the pressure of graduating in four years. She would work more and would study engineering in her home country instead of abroad, she said: “So the main disadvantage of being sponsored students is kind of a lot of pressure that you have to meet your requirements. I mean your life is like just between two whether you pass or you pass. So sometimes it is quite like stressful. But, at the same time, I think it’s good. I mean they have to do it because they are spending a lot of money on us. So it’s like one our ways to actually pay them back.”

The ISS throughout the study mentioned their concerns about their inability to choose, change, or add their major. Adam noted that the process to change majors was virtually “impossible” and in extreme circumstances would need an inside ministry person to facilitate it:
“I think that the big disadvantage is we don’t really get to choose our major and change it if you want.” Asma shared her experience of wanting to change her major to communications at a different college, since she did not want to pursue media or advertising; but, she realized that the college in which she was pursuing a major was not supported by the sponsor and given the confusion in selecting colleges for that major, the sponsor would like her to change to the college they preferred. Abu shared that while the student could express preferences of a major, the final decision rested with the sponsor and any change process was very hard.

Adam shared that he was in a gap year for about 10 months. As stated earlier, the major was selected by the sponsor and changing the major was discouraged and often. Or, there may be a major awarded to high scorers in a sponsor test. Adam also noted that he was okay with his decided major in the beginning, as that “was what the sponsor was teaching us.” His program exposed him to only petroleum related topics so, with that conditioning, he only became interested in that topic. Asma mentioned: “So, your academic performance in high school actually affects which major you get in because after you finish your intermediate school you have 2 choices: To go for more for the traditional majors or go with scientific majors, something like that.”

Adam and Asma both noted that sponsors decided ISS majors based on their business plans. Therefore, any ISS request to change to programming was denied or told it was impossible given that the major was assigned in alignment with the business plan. Abu noted that the list of approved majors was available on the sponsor’s website. She could choose a major that was on the approved list but, the final decision was the sponsor’s. Abu further added that choice of major was also determined if the major was not available in the home country, in which case they would deny that major to be pursued by ISS in the U.S. Abu noted: “I mean like, if we want
to change like the major of our studies too far, I mean you will definitely be not allowed to do so.”

In summary, when these three ISS arrived at Blue University, they faced a multitude of unexpected realizations, emotions, and observations that they had not prepared for as they were accepted for sponsorship and went through the preparatory program provided by their sponsor. There seemed to be a clear understanding of the sponsor’s requirements of ensuring high academic performance at Blue University. Students believed they were being constantly observed and monitored by the sponsor. These ISS feared cancellation of the program, never finding another sponsorship, and having to return the funds sponsor spent on them.

It was concerning that one of the ISS feared for her safety in case of political conflict between the U.S. and the home country. Although the sponsor was responsible, the ISS was not sure how they would protect all ISS and that the ISS needed to be aware of laws as well. Once ISS are here on their own, they have to navigate for themselves both academically and socially, for which they were sometimes not prepared. ISS found adjustment and adaptability issues to be real in the first semester.

ISS also experienced a multitude of cultural and social shocks for which they were unprepared. This included differences in the academic environment, differences between themselves and other international and domestic students, fearing how they would pursue their academics if they were not ISS, and having second thoughts on their major. They noticed how the non-SS and domestic students did not have as much pressure to perform academically; they wished they had similar freedoms to potentially consider other majors. However, there seemed clearly to be a sense of gratefulness for the opportunity and even responsibility to perform well
while in this program. In some instances, they highlighted the positive aspects of being in the program, such as being funded with stipends and not having to worry about anything.

While all ISS were grateful of the opportunity and costs covered for University studies, they wished there was more leverage with major choice once they interacted and engaged with the real academic environment where they were exposed to other areas of potential interest. Overall, the choice of major that the students eventually selected for their studies was an important issue. The sponsor’s selection process seemed to be structured around guiding students to the majors based on the sponsor’s and/or the country’s needs. Majors were selected based on the sponsor’s judgment of what they thought the students should pursue as their choice of education, based on the students’ high school academic performance. ISS had no say in the final decision on the major they would be pursuing at the university. Given the preconditioning of these students around these sponsorship opportunities and the benefits attached to them, they were willing to accept the sponsorship opportunity as presented irrespective of the contract restrictions and the prescribed major.

**Responsibility and accomplishment as a sponsored student.** ISS discussed the responsibility they feel as an ISS. Adam noted that the advantages of sponsorship overweighed the disadvantages of not being able to choose major, especially given also that there was positive pressure to focus and perform well in their studies: “I think with being a sponsored I focus more about my studies and I have a salary and my tuition is paid. So I have no reason not to study or not to perform very well. So, I have this pressure, I like to call it positive pressure, because it pushes you toward working harder and also when there are several sponsored students with you, you have to be as good as they are or better than them.” Asma admitted to being a procrastinator and owned that she needed to be better at time management, making the most of her future with
this opportunity of being part of the sponsorship program. She also wished to experience college beyond studying, and to fulfil her dreams. She felt grateful for being an ISS, especially as all funding was taken care of and all responsibilities were on the sponsor. In her view, ISS only had to decide on classes and meet expectations. Abu noted that given that the sponsor was paying for all of her education, and also through Oman’s tax payers, there was an increased sense of responsibility to do well: “So some people think the government is quite strict, but then I don’t think it’s strict because I mean again, we are using like the peoples’ money. I think it’s quite fair for us to come back and serve our own country.” She noted the disadvantages of being under pressure, therefore cutting down on activities to achieve a higher grade working less hours than others, constantly monitoring grades to achieve sponsor requirements, and learning to manage this pressure.

The ISS were proud and considered being an ISS an accomplishment. Adam noted that the ISS got an allowance for housing, dining, and other expenses. He did not need to work, given that the sponsor took care of everything. Asma noted that the national government (or, in her case, the Majesty of the kingdom) gave the final criteria for choosing students and, therefore, being chosen for sponsorship was an accomplishment. Abu stated that the exam scores of the international syllabus high school, along with co-curricular experiences and parents’ salary status, determined the selection. Asma was reminded that sponsorship was like a grant as long as the students met expectations; if not, they then must return the money. The government in her home country controlled these grant programs along with some private money from oil companies. Such opportunities had value in the home country.

**Sponsor Advisor.** In talking about their sponsor’s role ISS mentioned their sponsor assigned advisor and their contact with ISS and the host University. Adam and Abu noted that
the sponsor advisor periodically visited to meet all ISS. However, they also came for urgent issues. Adam mentioned: “There is an advisor for each university. Ok, so this advisor comes to the university and sets meeting with the students.” Asma noted that the sponsor coordinated directly with the University and that relationship, according to her, also impacted ISS admission at Blue University and are very helpful: “Well, he is a great advisor. I mean he first talk to you about the majors; about the university; what’s good in them; what’s bad in them; what’s the requirement for them.” Adam and Asma noted that the sponsor directly coordinated with the international/global office of the University for student needs and contacting the ISS as needed. The sponsor-advisor relationship early in the interviews, appeared to be highly structured and one that the ISS could rely upon for guidance and help as needed. For sponsor monitoring and their contact with sponsor advisor the ISS understood that sponsors also needed to protect their interests.

**Research Question 2: Sponsor Attributes**

“So, yeah actually they are monitoring everything. They monitor your grades, too. Even though they don’t say it, they actually they do it.”—Asma.

Research Question 2 asked, “How do undergraduate ISS describe the influence of their sponsor attributes (e.g. decision making, responsiveness, monitoring and incentives) on their academic experiences?” This question focused on the study participants’ description of their understanding of the influence of the sponsor attributes on their academic experiences. Sponsor involvement fell into three categories: decision-making ability towards ISS academic performance, sponsor style in terms of their responsiveness towards ISS academic needs, and sponsor influence in terms of monitoring and incentives towards ISS academic performance
**Sponsor decision-making.** In describing the Universities ISS were allowed to apply, Abu indicated that the sponsor required the ISS to apply in the top 50 ranked U.S. universities. Adam stated that the sponsor asked for a tiered university selection process based on the ISS grades and the program of study they were interested in. Asma noted that the sponsor asked them to apply to five universities and also encouraged them to visit them before accepting. However, Asma also reported that the sponsor only provided funds to apply to up to three universities from the top 50 in the U.S. university tier. Asma also noted that based on the major study of interest, sponsors divided universities into two groups: Group A included the highly competitive universities and Group B were lower in competitiveness. Asma said: “So, if you are in Group A, you cannot go to Group B universities. That’s bad because they will be like lower. But if you are in Group B, if you change majors and university, you can go to Group A. But if you didn’t change majors, you cannot go to Group A; just move in Group B universities.” Adam noted that the University selection was based on the tier of the university and the ISS grades. Adam considered inability to change universities as an disadvantage of the program and stated that, “I think a disadvantage is also you can’t transfer to another university if you can.”

ISS pursuing a second tier could change to first tier if qualified and accepted. All three respondents indicated that ISS were generally allowed to change to a higher tier or ranked university and, in fact, it was often encouraged. All three ISS reported that the university, once chosen, was bound by the contract and generally was not allowed to be changed. Abu stated: “But then changing off institution, they definitely wouldn’t allow me to do so.” However, there were exceptions to this clause in certain circumstance as noted in the topical areas.
- Changing from Home Country University: Adam noted that if the ISS was unwell due to weather and/or had a low GPA, they could go back to the home country to another university, such as the King Fahad University.

- Changing to a Lower Tier University: Adam noted that changing to a lower tier university was also permitted if it was due to health reasons, concerns with the weather, and/or low GPA. Asma stated that ISS were provided with groups of universities, ISS could go from a lower to a higher University and change majors.

- Changing University if the Major of Choice Was Not Offered – Asma noted that a change in University was approved by the sponsor only if the university of interest was on the sponsors’ approved project list. Otherwise it would mean rescinding the scholarship.

- Changing University Due to People Problems: Asma noted that the sponsor also allowed a change in the university if ISS academics were being impacted due to people related issues in certain circumstances.

ISS spoke about their sponsorship contract before arriving at university as a critical aspect of the sponsorship program detailing sponsor decision-making. Asma indicated that the sponsorship contracts could be of several types, including full, half, or no scholarship. The full scholarship was generally determined by the ISS’ GPA in school and also the income status of the family; families from middle class backgrounds were given a priority. Abu indicated that the sponsors’ preparatory programs provided information about the contract, particularly through web portals.

In describing their perceptions about the contract paper work, Adam indicated an element of trust in the sponsorship contract, adding that while the contract often sounded “weird,” it did
not negatively impact the ISS while understandably protecting the sponsor’s rights: “There were like some rules that are a little bit weird but I signed it and I mean I know the company does not want to, to get something from me. They just want to protect their rights and so on.” Adam was prepared to sign it either way. Asma suggested that she, too, trusted the contract, particularly because there was a desire to get the sponsorship. This trust was certainly conditioned by these ISS being the first recipients of sponsorship opportunities in their families as well as information received from prior sponsorship recipients and from high school counselors. Abu indicated that there was a sense of gratefulness for having received the sponsorship. She added that the sponsorship terms allowed the ISS to make a positive impact in their own countries upon graduation and also stated: “Generally speaking, on behalf of all sponsored students from Malaysia, the contract regulations are more like what are the drawbacks of being sponsored student. But again, it’s actually for our own benefits, yeah. It may look like it’s a disadvantage, but actually its quite good.”

The family background of an ISS impacted the attitude towards the contract. The contractual arrangement allowed the ISS to be close to their family after graduation and be employed. Abu also indicated that the strictness of the contract should not be of concern to the ISS, given the sense of trust and that sponsorship alleviates financial burden from both ISS and their families. The contract drawbacks were, therefore, willingly traded for these benefits.

In describing the paperwork and contract review, Adam noted that in making the decision to accept the sponsorship or not, he reviewed the paperwork with his father; in the end, however, it was his own decision. He had issues with some clauses but still signed the contract as he knew the sponsor was protecting their rights and there was no harm intended for ISS. He also
mentioned: “I mean it is usually like rules for people that have a second plan and different plans. But, it is like I’m not planning to get married in this period, so it is an easy decision for me.”

Similarly, Asma reported that she went with her brother and signed the contract. Her brother read the contract, but she did not. She noted this was common practice in her country and she was prepared to sign the contract either way: “Yeah, actually because it’s nothing like; it’s not like I have, that I will refuse in my mind because I already know that and I already actually decided. I went there just to give them my paper and they review it again and I was like, “OK, I know that already.” So, actually, you taught about that in school in your classes for your application and stuff.” Abu reviewed the contract with her parents; however, given that such sponsorships are quite common in her country, she did not review the contract and its clauses in detail before signing it.

Abu indicated that there were also often miscommunications in the process and ISS understood or believed there was flexibility in the contracts. However, the sponsors had unilateral authority on changing requirements and/or terms of the contract. There was also inflexibility in the money and allowance clauses of the contract. Furthermore, any changes to the marriage clause had a long application and approval process. She mentioned: “But then in certain terms, let’s say about the working terms, and then about the marriage terms. It says that we can’t. Ok, the marriage term, we can’t but, if we really, really want to get married we will have to sign, fill in a form and then ask them for permission and the permission thing all, I mean it takes time. So we have to work really hard for it. Certain things, like allowance, money they wouldn’t change.”

Discussing the impact of sponsorship contract during their education and given the importance of the contract, it was not surprising that the ISS had much to share about how this
contract influenced them while they were pursuing their education at Blue University. In terms of academic sponsorship duration and most essential clauses of the contract, all ISS agreed that generally the sponsorship was usually bound to between four and five years, and there was no room to change that clause. The ISS had to graduate within the contracted time frame. Adam mentioned: “You have to finish your academics in 5 years; they give you 5 years to finish the program.” ISS did select the major they wanted from those listed as approved on the sponsor website during the application process. However, Asma also indicated that she would have preferred a different campus than the one she eventually attended. Abu also indicated having choice in the field of study and the country for the sponsorship: “We just say that we want to study abroad; I want to study engineering. Where I’m heading, like which country, it’s not under my power to choose.” However, all three students, reported that the final decision regarding major was that of the Sponsor.

In terms of sponsor decision making with ISS credit load and strategy, Adam noted that ISS were supposed to take at least 15 credits per semester, but he thought that was rather high. Asma stated that the sponsor monitored the credit load, as the ISS had to maintain this for visa requirements. Abu, on the other hand, suggested that the sponsor required 20 credits in preparatory college. She considered a load of 16 to 17 credits to be relaxed, allowing the possibility of free time. She added that her approach was to take more credits in the first three years so she could have a more relaxed schedule in her senior year.

Abu stated that the ISS strategy was to arrive with 30 extra credits and take fewer credits during the first semester. The ISS provided differing perspectives on this issue. Adam indicated that the sponsor allowed them to take a reduced credit load so that they could essentially take a trial approach to exploring, managing their time, and adapting to change in the first semester.
However, Abu indicated that the ISS were generally unprepared to understand the credit load and to adapt to the changes, taking a high credit load in the first semester, which impacted her first semester GPA: “So what I learn during my first semester one of my mistakes is to take a lot of credits just to try to make it seem somehow like in Malaysia. So I guess that’s a huge; that’s the very biggest mistake I made.”

Adam indicated that his sponsor suggested that starting with the second semester, the ISS should take courses they were confident in performing well in. It was generally not easy to drop courses. On the other hand, Abu indicated that from the second semester onwards, she learned to manage high and low credit courses. Asma noted that after the struggles of the first semester, she took the courage to add a minor in the second semester, but with the plan of completing the minor credits with full time credit loads so as not to add costs for the sponsor. Both Asma and Abu mentioned first semester high credit load to be a mistake, given the adaptation and adjustment issues they faced in the first semester.

In describing sponsor’s decision making to drop classes/courses, Adam noted that, in general, sponsor advisors did their own calculations to grant approval to ISS for dropping classes, even if the ISS believed they were going to fail in the course. This calculation for the approval process required that the ISS was over 15 credits and was certainly going to get an F in the course: “Well, I’ve been reviewing and catching up. I wanted to drop a class because I wasn’t getting what I want. But the problem is I can’t drop a class unless I tell that supervisor. Last week I talked to him, me wanting to drop that class, and he refused because he says you have to be 15 credits or more.” Abu, on the other hand, noted that ISS could drop a course as long as this did not impact the graduation timeline or graduation requirements; the sponsor would certainly not pay for any fees or penalties. With regards to grade expectations and
consequences, Adam indicated that the preparatory program that he attended in his home country before arriving at Blue University was tailored to offer a curriculum similar to that in the U.S. Both Adam and Abu indicated that the sponsors usually gave a warning to the ISS to improve; otherwise the ISS would need to go back to their sponsoring country. Adam also indicated that, in such cases, ISS must return the money that the sponsor paid for their studies. Adam indicated that the sponsor requirement for maintaining a 2.5 GPA was not a concern, as the cohort usually earned a GPA between 3.0 and 3.5. However, there was an unspoken language within the cohort that no one really wanted to be the one to be penalized for dropping their GPA.

Asma thought that the ISS spent most time studying and worrying about their GPA requirements, particularly given the job promise from the sponsor and the competition they faced from their own home country. Asma also noted that she was not satisfied with her GPA given that she came from a country where the GPA needed to be perfect. Asma also felt that there was always this sense of positive competition from within the ISS cohort, and this generally pushed everyone’s performance higher. The ISS also described some limitations/restrictions with sponsor decision-making, Asma noted that if ISS received any scholarships from the U.S. university, the sponsor divided that amount and gave some part to the student that they could use as additional stipend: “Because we already have a scholarship but the new scholarship given from the universities, they divide the money and give them part of the money; the scholarship.” Per contract, sponsors accommodated the allowance calculation and divided that share with the ISS.

In terms of travel restrictions by sponsors, while Adam reported being eligible for an annual round trip ticket home after freshman year, Abu reported that traveling back to her home country was disallowed during her program of study and exceptions needing approval. Also, on
being allowed to enroll for study abroad courses at the University, Adam noted that he would need approval of the sponsor for study abroad programs. Asma, on the other hand, noted that the sponsor encouraged study abroad and also helped with the funds, on approval. However, Abu stated that the sponsor disallowed study abroad programs as they are already considered studying abroad as an ISS in the U.S. “For study abroad, we’re actually, we are not allowed to join study abroad because they say that you are already abroad so why do you want to go study abroad again? So, I mean they wouldn’t allow us to do so.”

In describing the ISS ability to work, Adam and Asma stated that the sponsor discouraged working as it interfered with studying. Asma mentioned: “You cannot work outside the university; just within the university and they don’t trick them into working because they want you to focus on your study more. Because we are paying for you just study, that’s it. And, they are right.” Abu, on the other hand, commented that being unable to work could be disadvantageous to her. Therefore, she was working during her second semester without informing the sponsor. She also felt that the sponsor was ignoring this contract clause as long as the work was not impacting the ISS grades: “No. (Laughs) They told us not to tell them. As long as we make sure that our performance is good, I mean is balanced.”

The importance of the contract for ISS was significant in how it influenced their ability (or lack thereof) to pursue a chosen field of study (major). The interview conversations concerning this aspect of the ISS education experience were very intriguing. All three ISS indicated that the graduation timeline was non-negotiable; however, not all of them agreed that there was room to change to the major of their interest, add a double major, or even add a minor to the program of study. Adam noted that the sponsor usually decided the major area of study and reported that it was impossible to change the major. Asma noted that she was initially
selected for a medical program in the U.K., but she refused that opportunity. Adam indicated that
the choice of petroleum engineering as major also happened to be his choice, given that the
information he was given only related to that major in his home country. Also, since financial
sponsorship was a huge opportunity, he mentioned: “On the other hand, if I want to study
computer science, I would be paying it myself and I would have to work in my free time. But, on
the other hand, if I continue with petroleum engineering, I get paid. So, I have free time because
I didn’t have to work. And I can use this free time to do whatever I want. So, I think the
advantage of being a sponsored outweigh the disadvantage of not choosing the major.” Adam
also noted that ISS were unable to change their major, even if it was in the same field of study: “I
think that the big disadvantage is we don’t really get to choose our major and change it if you
want.”

Irrespective of the major, there was pressure to perform well in the program. Abu echoed
Adam’s sentiments, indicating that generally this was bound by the contract and generally major
change is not allowed. Asma reported that in some cases when the major was changed, there was
a possibility to extend the graduation timeline by a semester; however, it was generally
discouraged by the sponsor. Otherwise, a major change within the same field of study was
acceptable. However, it becomes less so if that meant changing the entire field of study, such as
from engineering to social sciences: “You cannot change majors from communication to math
maybe, or from communication to engineering because they are different levels. So you cannot
do that. And I know people who tried and they struggled and they are struggling to now.”

Asma also added that changing of majors was also hard due to the logistics involved in
the process. In discussing the process of changing major, Asma noted that the change in major
was allowed as long as it was in the same field of study. There had to be a clear justification for
the request to change the major and the sponsor would give three chances to the ISS to change their major. Asma indicated that the major change process was hard and indicated that there was an approval process for such changes, with no guarantees. Furthermore, the changes needed to be conferred with the advisor (change to the major, university, campus of study) but was eventually decided by the sponsor. Asma also noted that low GPA could be a justification for change in the major in the same field of study.

Abu noted that a change in majors was possible once it was conferred with the sponsor advisor. However, ISS would have to provide a justification and also maintain a GPA of 3.0 or better. For instance, Abu was contemplating a major change in the second semester given the hard courses and low GPA. The latter, she thought, could become a justification for the major change request. Abu reported that the major change was allowed as long as the new major was on the approved list of the sponsor. But this still had to be approved. And no change was allowed in the university. Adam mentioned no change in major being allowed even in the same field of study: “Or, if you want to do that, the process is really hard and you have to know of some people in the management that could push your papers and stuff. So I think this is one disadvantages.” Adam and Abu indicated that, generally, the double major and adding a minor were disallowed due to cost concerns. Asma indicated that as long as the costs did not increase, these were allowed.

The ISS discussed decision-making of sponsors related to the sponsorship contract requirements post-graduation since the contract had implications for the ISS while they were studying at Blue University as well as post-graduation. While this discussion is on the post-graduation phase, it does reflect on how ISS feel and view this impact during their education regarding decision-making of the sponsor. All three ISS indicated there was a requirement to go
back to the sponsoring country to be employed written into the contractual terms. Asma also indicated that, for higher performing ISS, there were special employment opportunities: “it’s like, they send you; they spend money on you to study. If you meet their expectations to have a high GPA and be outstanding student, they will offer you a contract for work or employment with them.”

The three ISS offered slightly different perspectives on guaranteed jobs post-graduation. Adam indicated that the contract allowed the flexibility to return home for employment after obtaining foreign working experience for one year, if such an opportunity were available: “A good thing of the program is, after your bachelor’s degree, they give you like, you have a year to work in the U.S., to have a good experience from working with a, in a foreign county; with a foreign company so you can bring more experience with you.” Asma indicated that ISS had an employment opportunity waiting, dependent on final GPA. On the other hand, Abu noted that ISS were free from the home employment condition if they were unable to get employment within one year of their graduation: “…and then actually for the job cases let’s say we ask for a job and then after like waiting for a year and we don’t really receive any job, we are able, I mean we are free from our bonds.” If the ISS did not comply with the home employment condition, they had to return all funds spent on them (with no interest owed). Adam indicated that the employment requirement in his home country was for as many years as the sponsor paid for their education (four to five years), and said: “Actually, in the contract, you have to work as many years as we paid for you. So, for example, if I have been studying for 4 years under the program, I have to go back and work for 4 years for the company.” Thereafter, the ISS had the choice to continue or leave employment with the sponsor.
Abu indicated that in her case the employment requirement was six years: “…and then after we finish our study here, we have to come back to Malaysia and we have to work with, I would say not really government sectors, but they have a new program where we can still work with not the government bodies. So we have work and serve them for 6 years.” She had the choice of being employed by the sponsor, if they were able to find a job for her, or she could find a job in either the public or the private sector. The sponsorship advantage in her case was not guaranteed employment but the sponsorship funds. Asma, however indicated that her sponsor reserved the right to offer employment only to the better performing ISS. She was surprised that even after spending so much money, the sponsor might not be able to find appropriate jobs for the ISS.

In summary, it appeared that when it came to the selection of a university, ISS were allowed to make choices within certain prescribed parameters. The ISS could select a university from a prescribed group (for instance the top 50 U.S. universities) and were also provided funding to send in these applications. However, once the university was selected, then it appeared that ISS would find it challenging to change that selection, unless the ISS was able to demonstrate challenges either due to health, personal reasons, or challenges due to adjustment problems. The final decision was still the sponsor’s to either allow the change, deny the change, or rescind the sponsorship. It is also worth noting that while the sponsor encouraged ISS to visit the campuses, there was limited to no funding provided for this purpose.

The sponsor contract was an important element of the sponsorship program. Even though there could be variations in the contract, the ISS generally trusted this process, even to the extent of not reviewing the contract terms. This trust could be due to conditioning from the family, community, or the prevalence of such contracts in the home country. It could also be based on
the gratefulness and the value that the ISS felt for having the opportunity to study abroad, particularly as their families would likely not have had the resources to provide them this opportunity without the sponsorship program. Despite the trust in the contract, there was mention of ISS not always understanding everything related to the contract at the time of signing it. Often they arrived at the university without a copy of the contact with them and had to ask sponsor to see the contract.

The findings from this section suggest that while there might be some variations, generally contracts lasted four to five years and ISS had to graduate within that time frame. Once at the university, ISS seemed to indicate that the choice of major field of study and even campus could be the sponsor’s decision. The ISS could select their major on the application as long as it was on the list of approved majors on the sponsors’ website but final decision was the sponsor’s.

Also, ISS were to be enrolled in preparatory programs before arriving at Blue University, and this could include obtaining credits that could be transferred. It appeared that such preparatory programs could impact ISS experiences at Blue University. However, there were variations in how sponsors approached this issue. There was a view that ISS could explore in their first semester and get comfortable carrying fewer credits. Others took higher credit loads but found that challenging in light of adaptation issues during the first semester. Not all sponsors took this approach. In either case, though, there seemed to be consensus that grades and GPA were important for ISS to stay in the program, otherwise, they risked being asked to leave and even to return all the money that was spent on them. All three ISS mentioned that if they did not meet the minimum GPA, they would receive one-time warning/probation to improve their grades. If they didn’t improve, they would be asked to leave the program.
Credit requirements were also recommended by the sponsors, not just for the entire program of study but also for the first semester. In some cases, this might be more relaxed than in others. In some cases, the sponsors were prescriptive as to whether the ISS could drop classes or not—essentially, as long as it did not cost the sponsor any more money, and as long as the ISS GPA and academic performance were not negatively impacted. ISS also noted getting better at handling and understanding the credit load and requirements in the second semester.

**Sponsor Responsiveness.** ISS also discussed sponsor’s attribute of responsiveness to ISS academic and non-academic needs which, in turn, influenced their educational experiences. The topical areas that emerged from these interview discussions are presented here in context of ISS needs from the beginning or their academic life.

Asma noted that the sponsor usually helped with the application preparation and also with SAT preparations. Asma noted that the decision to visit the university was that of the ISS and they themselves had to pay for visiting schools before accepting admission. In spite of the fact sponsors didn’t pay for college visits, they advised and encouraged students to visit. Abu mentioned: “So the sponsor actually advised us to go on a visit the universities to see if you like them or not and I came to visit Blue University before getting in. And I like so I confirm my acceptance letter. So, yeah, I get in.”

While discussing, additional courses and special class fees, Adam stated that the sponsor did not provide any information related to special fees. On the other hand, Asma stated that the sponsor did not provide any such additional fees unless it was needed for the major requirement or for graduation. Asma noted that no additional fees or class fees were provided by the sponsor unless it was needed for the major or for graduation purposes and said that, “…additional class fees depends if it’s required for your major and you need it to graduate, they will pay for it, but if
something you just want to do, they won’t pay for it.” Abu noted that summer class fees needed to be approved in advance by the sponsor so that they were not unaware of the bill (or were not blindsighted by the bill). He further added the, “…and then, if let’s say you want to take like summer classes, I also need to inform them like in advance, because they say if they don’t really, I don’t tell them that I’m taking summer classes when they receive the bill they might be like shocked because it’s more like expensive.”

For tutoring and summer courses, Adam noted that the sponsor was willing to reimburse tutoring costs if the course grades improved due to ISS taking private tutoring: “You have to give them the documents that show that you need that tutoring course. So, you study that and if your grade gets higher like a B or an A, you get reimbursed for whatever you paid the next semester.” Adam noted that he could take any free tutoring; however, sponsor-funded tutoring needed approval and a justification. Asma and Abu both noted that they were struggling with courses and needed tutoring. However, they would have to pay for it themselves. Abu mentioned the following: “But sometimes, let’s say for my physics; I’m struggling with my physics. So, I do go to outside tutoring for 3 or 4 times just to make sure that I’m doing fine. So, in that case, I mean, I have to pay myself for extra tutoring.” Asma noted that it would be helpful for the ISS if the host university provided tutoring services and writing center help. Abu also noted that some academic departments provided weekly tutoring services. These, together with the lecturers’ office hours, were helpful to her. Abu noted that the ISS needed to send the bill to the sponsor for summer and online courses; otherwise, they would impact their allowance.

Abu also noted that prior requests by ISS to raise their allowance were denied by the sponsor and said: “I mean in the agreement they also mention how much they will give us per month.” She also worried about whether the sponsorship program would continue due to
economic pressures in her home country. While mentioning transcript confirmation and honors opportunity, Asma noted that the ISS needed to provide semester transcripts in order to get approval for any special request such as a plane ticket or even for changing majors. Asma noted that the sponsor did not object her getting selected for the Honors College as long as it did not increase the graduation timeline.

ISS also talked about their sponsor responsiveness to ISS non-academic/nonfinancial needs. For contacting the sponsor advisor, Asma noted that the sponsor advisor was available 24/7 through an emergency line and acted as a guardian for the ISS. Asma noted that the sponsor advisor was available by phone or email, and generally the advisor would contact the ISS in case of any problems. She mentioned that, “…but there is an emergency line just in case of something happens and you can use that emergency line every time, 24/7, and they are required to answer you on the emergency because they are like your guardian something in this country.” Adam and Asma also mentioned sponsor advisor being available by phone and email, along with visiting the ISS at the university periodically.

While talking about the scenario/decision of ISS to exit the program, Adam and Abu noted that exiting the sponsorship program (that is, not completing study or even not taking up employment after graduation) would require the ISS to pay back all the money (without interest) to the sponsor. Adam noted that this would include the support received for the preparatory program. Abu said: “…and some people say that if we don’t finish our studies we have to, actually in the agreement itself, it says that we have to pay back all the monies that they spent to us.” Asma, on the other hand, noted that the sponsor advisor usually tried to resolve issues facing the ISS and even facilitated the ISS contacting the Ministry of Education to help resolve issues related to them exiting the program.
For travel conditions, Adam shared that the sponsor provided one round trip ticket each year for the ISS to visit their home after freshman year: “You can’t travel wherever you want. They give you each year, each year they give you a travel ticket round trip.” However, Abu noted that the ISS was not expected to visit the home country in the entire four years of their sponsorship: “We can’t actually; we actually can’t go back; we can’t come out from US.”

In summary, sponsor’s responsiveness to ISS academic and non-academic needs had varying perspectives on whether ISS could change their major area of study, add a minor, or add a double major. In general, the sponsors seemed to discourage any such changes to the contract, especially when such changes might: a) result in additional costs to the sponsor; b) impact ISS academic performance; c) extend the graduation timeline of the ISS; and/or d) change the field of study initially assigned to ISS.

Post-graduation conditions were also an important aspect of the sponsorship agreements. In general, the sponsors required the ISS to return to their home country to pursue employment opportunities provided by the employer. While there were variations to this clause, such as employment availability, timeline adjustments, and consequence management on either side, there was consensus that this post-graduation clause of employment was a critical element of the sponsorship program. Overall, ISS could opt out of the program by paying the sponsor back the funds spent on them.

Adam reported being allowed an annual travel ticket for home after freshman year, other ISS were not encouraged to travel back during the sponsorship. Another aspect that ISS reported was the varying view of whether ISS could be allowed to go on study abroad programs. Finally, working while studying seems to be discouraged, though there were variations in how strict the sponsor was to implement such a contract clause.
ISS suggested that while the sponsor did provide funding and support during the application process, in general there was no funding available for the ISS to visit the campuses before deciding on their university.

In general, the sponsor would pay for course fees if it was a necessary part of graduating. However, funding for additional courses not in the program for graduation, honors college, and/or summer courses needed pre-approval from the sponsor and could not increase the graduation timeline for ISS. One aspect that concerned the ISS the most was funding for tutoring, especially given that they were struggling with certain courses and needed to maintain their academic performance as part of the sponsorship contract. ISS also worried about the entire sponsorship program getting cancelled by sponsor if economic conditions change for the worse in their home country. Among the key non-academic needs of the ISS was the need to contact the sponsor when required, travel support to visit home, and a process to resolve issues that might appear in their relationships with the sponsor and decisions to exit the sponsorship contract.

**Sponsor academic monitoring.** Given the importance of the sponsorship contract, the sponsors’ monitoring influence was also an important area of discussion with the ISS. ISS shared their thoughts in context of sponsor’s monitoring influence on ISS educational experiences. While talking about the release of information form, Asma noted that ISS usually needed to sign a release of information form for transcripts and other ISS related information to be sent by the university directly to the sponsor. Abu noted that failure to send the transcripts would impact the ISS allowance for the next semester: “So, let’s say if we don’t really send the transcript to them, again they won’t give us allowance for next semester because they say that it, it actually pictures that we’re having trouble with our studies.” Each of the participants stated that there was a
minimum required GPA. For Adam is was 2.5, Asma needed a 2.0; and Abu required a 3.0. Adam reported that the allowance was generally prorated to the GPA; if an ISS earned a 3.5, then they received 100% of the allowance compared to 70% for a 3.25 and 50% for a 3.0. The ISS also got awards of additional stipends during the year if they performed more than the requirement. Abu noted that her allowance was based on submission of transcripts where her GPA was analyzed before releasing the allowance.

While describing sponsor monitoring in terms of transcripts, grades and academic performance, Adam stated that ISS need to provide transcripts and scores to the sponsor each semester. Adam did mention that he received a 4.0 during his first semester. Asma noted that sponsor contacted the university for ISS academic information and transcripts; the sponsor contacted the ISS if they demonstrated poor academic performance, low GPA, or low attendance. Abu noted that failure to send transcripts impacted her allowance for the next semester. She also noted that sponsor received transcripts every semester to monitor ISS academic performance. She mentioned that, “If someone get like below GPA, like get a really low GPA, they contact that person or if they go low in their attendance or something, they actually contact that person. And I don’t know what happen, but... Yeah, they have control over everything.”

Adam noted that GPA was reported to the sponsor each semester. Adam stated that as part of the GPA monitoring he informed the sponsor when he was receiving a C in a course. The sponsor met with him and asked him to improve the grade and inform them of progress. Adam felt that monitoring academic performance was positive pressure to work hard and improve by competing with other ISS. He also felt it was good to have received mentoring from advisors.

If the ISS did not earn the minimum required GPA, they could usually petition the sponsor in writing with an explanation letter to get a second chance. Abu noted this might
happen if the ISS has not performed well during their first semester. In this case, the ISS could request another chance, given adjustment issues in the first semester: Abu stated the following in this context: “Every semester we have to report to our sponsor. And I told them what happened and all and they asked me to write a letter to them asking what happened and so what. So, basically, they gave me chance again; one more chance because they knew that it was my first semester.” The sponsor had to approve Abu for another, last chance semester to compete and improve her performance by the following semester. Abu was obviously stressed and afraid as she felt it was the last chance and wondered whether she was the only ISS from the company that year with a low GPA. She mentioned that, “I think it helps me to do better in a sense that, I, myself, I don’t want that kind of bad results. So, I am basically motivating myself. But then, the warnings that I got, that is kind of scaring me.”

ISS also described GPA probation in the monitoring process. Both Adam and Abu confirmed that if an ISS was on a one-semester probation due to lower than minimum required GPA, then they must maintain a 2.5 and 3.0 GPA to get out of probation. Adam mentioned that, “When you get 2.5, you get warning and you are under probation. And if you get again under 2.5, they end your contract.” Asma, on the other hand, stated that if an ISS had a low GPA or low attendance, they were contacted by the sponsor for the probation process. Adam noted that if, after two warnings, the ISS was not doing well, they were out of the program “there’s a warning and a second warning I think. Then, if you’re not communicating with them, you’re out of the program immediately.” On the other hand, Abu noted that ISS got one chance to maintain the 3.0 GPA. If they were unable to do it, then they were out of the program. Abu said: “So, basically for the academic, we have to maintain GPA which is 3.0. So what happen if we don’t
really achieve that, as I say before, they will give us like one chance, and then if don’t, they will definitely send us back.”

ISS described the role of sponsor advisor in the monitoring process. Adam noted that the sponsor advisor was usually a “godfather” who looked after ISS and was available for all ISS issues, such as U.S. policy changes on immigration (ban on countries). This advisor also sent helpful tips to ISS, monitored and took care of academic issues, and was someone who looked after the ISS as if they were family. Adam further noted that this advisor set meeting with each ISS every semester at the University to discuss academic performance and other issues. ISS generally needed to inform this advisor beforehand if they are not performing well in a course, so that they could get the right type of help.

Asma stated that the advisor usually guided them through issues related to requirements for the university admission, eligibility for admission, university selection, and major selection. An advisor was also assigned after admission who was available for any issues and needs that the ISS might have on campus. This person visited at least once a year to check on ISS needs and to assess if they were in any difficulty. Advisors monitored everything through the university. Asma noted that she felt “grateful” for being an ISS, since the sponsorship program was taking care of tuition and managing everything at the university. That meant that ISS were only responsible for deciding on classes and maintaining the minimum GPA requirements. Sponsorship programs also provides insurance help and assistance with any issues, such as those related to the police or other unfortunate needs. She said: “they check if you have a problem with university and you didn’t inform them; if you have suggestions to add to program or not, they don’t really consider it, but they tell you like to say it. They check if your organization you made in the university is working well; you’re doing well.”
Furthermore, the sponsor advisor was responsible for the ISS as if they were the surrogate parents. Abu suggested that the advisor should visit the university within a month of an ISS’s arrival to the university. Periodically, advisors monitored academic performance, resources for any sponsorship changes or home country economic changes, random checks on ISS and visits for ISS club events. Advisors could also be stationed in a nearby big city thereby allowing close proximity to visit on short notice. Reporting was a drawback for ISS, who were required to inform the sponsor of everything and do whatever the sponsor wanted. Abu noted that the sponsors should review how non-sponsored/other students live academic life and realize the pressure the sponsor usually ended up placing on their ISS.

When ISS met with their sponsor advisor, Adam noted that ISS needed to discuss with their advisor predicted grades compared with actual grades on transcripts at the end of each semester to assess academic performance. ISS were also required to inform the advisor of any academic issues, major and minor decisions, and other issues, like home sickness. Asma noted that her advisor usually discussed university requirements, pros and cons of majors, ISS life goals, university-related issues, ISS organization updates, sponsorship changes to the requirements, and any suggestions for improvement for the sponsorship program. Abu noted that advisors visited university within a month of the ISS first semester to inform ISS of rules, embassy contacts, and working rules. Furthermore, advisors also visited when ISS was in any type of trouble or may had academic issues as well as for annual ISS club celebrations.

There were also aspects of non-academic monitoring that ISS discussed. ISS needed to inform sponsor on arrival. Abu stated that she needed to confirm her arrival, bank information, housing information, and confer on issues (such as housing) with the sponsor: “…and then I have to like basically I just have to, even in here I have to report to them that I here where I am.” The
sponsor advisor then visited the university within a month of ISS arrival-ISS mentioned restrictions from the sponsor is their ability to discussing sponsor’s country policies and joining rallies. Asma reported that she was unable to discuss the sponsor country policies with anyone. However, it is unclear whether the sponsor monitored her or has simply told her not to discuss these policies. Asma also stated that her sponsor told her she could not engage in violent rallies, fights, protests, or anything political. ISSs also could discuss country policies or offend other countries or cultures during their education. Asma mentioned: “They tell you not to engage in protest something political; don’t talk about that country’s policies. Don’t talk offend someone’s other country from other culture. Don’t engage in fights, um, like in violent rallies or something.” Abu mentioned similar aspects such as not joining rallies, maintaining country name, and not doing anything restricted by her sponsor: “I would say that’s the only… also the common things that we can’t join any rallies. We have to somehow like maintain the names of Malaysia and don’t really do any other like unwanted stuffs. I think that’s the main thing.”

In discussing travel eligibility and vacation approval, Adam noted that after his first year, he was eligible to receive an annual airline ticket to visit his home country. Abu, needed to share all travel plans with the sponsor. By contract, some ISS could not leave the U.S. until studies are finished, and they needed permission for an exception. Adam noted that his sponsor did not require approval for spring break vacations within the U.S. Abu added that her sponsor asked ISSs to share their travel plans (away from university) for break to ensure information was shared with the sponsor to assess if additional medical insurance was needed.

ISS discussed concept of “space” for decisions in terms of freedom, marital status, and visa status. Adam reported other students had the “space” to make decisions about changing university and/or majors without needing permission from a third-party. However, that was not
true for the ISSs. Asma noted that other students had the “freedom” to take a semester off, participate in games, buy cars, and take road trips. ISS could not do these things due to limited sponsor options, restrictions, and funds. Asma said the following in this context comparing herself with a classmate: “Anyway, he take semester off. I think they have freedom.” Both Adam and Abu stated that ISS could not marry under their sponsorship contracts. Abu added that it was difficult to get an exception and said, “So that’s one of the drawbacks of being sponsored. I mean that everything you do is quite restricted. And, also, for those who want to get married, they can’t get married because it’s in the contract. I think it depends on people what they are aiming for in their life.” Asma did not recall whether such a clause was included in her contract. Asma noted that sponsors monitored and ensured international ISS visa status was not violated by the ISS. Furthermore, the sponsor also monitored and ensured that ISSs took 15 to 16 credits per semester, and that they are not below 12 credits.

In summary, ISS provided much insight into the impact of the sponsorship program and its academic monitoring. First and foremost, GPA and academic performance were important and integral to the sponsorship agreement. In some cases, the GPA could also determine the amount of continued sponsorship the ISS would receive; allowances could be based on the GPA. As a consequence, the sponsor was generally authorized to receive all information and transcripts directly from the university. Given the importance of the GPA, the sponsorship contract included probation clauses and often a process of petitioning for an exception before the sponsor decided on consequence for poor performance. Usually the consequence included going back to the home country and repaying all the money to the sponsor that they spent on the ISS. Sponsors did have advisors who periodically meet the ISS and as needed for problems. These advisors provide guidance to the ISS and the ISS considered them as their family away from home.
In addition to monitoring the academic performance of the ISS, sponsors seem to be also interested in monitoring other aspects of ISS life. For instance, this monitoring included ISS participation in non-academic activities such as in rallies, deciding to get married, and even keeping a track of travel plans.

**Sponsor incentives.** As in many other contractual agreements, the sponsorship also included incentives. This section addresses the topical areas that emerged when discussing the incentives that were included in sponsorship agreements. There was a high GPA reward, Adam shared that having tuition, rent, and food taken care of helped the ISS focus on studies. In addition, the ISSs in his program could earn monetary rewards ($1000) for high academic performance every semester. Adam noted the following: “If you get like high GPAs, like above 3.7 or 3.8 or something in each semester, they give you kind of a reward, like a thousand dollars.” Asma and Abu noted that they did not have any such incentives when performing better than needed. Abu also noted that while there were no short-term rewards for her, the sponsorship certainly provided long term benefits, especially in relation to getting a job. Abu noted that her sponsor had a national awards event acknowledging students for outstanding achievement in innovation and sports. For ISS, that was generally difficult to achieve given other university pressures.

Sponsorship agreements required home country employment for ISS in either government or non-government sectors. Abu noted that ISS attitudes towards the sponsor could be captured as that of “gratefulness”, and said the following: “So, I think, I don’t really like care whether there is going to be incentive because they bring me here. I mean they pay a lot for me here, so I think that’s good enough. I mean rather than asking for more.” This was especially true because ISS were often in university using public funds for sponsorships; so, they found that it
was fair for them to go back to home to serve their country. Therefore, employment in itself was an incentive. She mentioned: “So some people think the government is quite strict, but then I don’t think it’s strict because I mean again, we are using like the peoples’ money. I think it’s quite fair for us to come back and serve our own country.”

While Abu noted there were no particular incentives after graduation: “Honestly, they don’t really give incentive.” Asma suggested that the sponsorship opportunity was the biggest reward. It allowed the ISS to build their resumes for companies as they searched for employees and gave the opportunity to work in their home country close to family. Asma added the following: “For me, yeah (employment opportunity as an incentive). Because I’m a person, I’m a lazy person and I don’t want to search for work. So, if I get the opportunity to be employed, why not? I think they make it. And I’ll be in my country, next to my home and this is something good.” She also noted her sponsorship for a special program to become university staff in her home country. However, she also noted that this job was dependent on high academic performance. Home country jobs were hard to find due to falling oil prices. Furthermore, she noted that a job in the communications field might be more difficult than jobs in a field like engineering.

Adam stated that employment was usually guaranteed if it was related to the program: “When you have a high GPA, the management sees you in a better way like you’re doing very well.” Abu also mentioned that ISS "serving" the sponsor was program dependent: sciences was a five-year commitment; engineering six years; medicine ten years: “…and I think it based on how much is our fees. So the more they spend on us, the more we have to like serve them.”. Adam noted that if they had a high enough GPA (generally over a 3.5), then there was a possibility for a sponsor-funded masters or PhD. Neither Asma nor Abu indicated any such
opportunities. Adam noted as an incentive, that his sponsor provided one airline ticket per year for an ISS to visit back home. Neither Abu nor Asma were eligible for this, and, in fact, Asma was discouraged from visiting home for the duration of her sponsorship.

In summary, the three ISSs noted that the incentives provided by the sponsors during their education at Blue University included monetary rewards for achieving higher than required GPA, employment tied to the GPA, and also travel incentives to visit back home. That said, there were variations in the structure, level, and even presence or absence of such incentives.

ISS also discussed the various incentives that the sponsors offered them upon graduation. These often included employment upon graduation, although employment could be conditional on the type of major the ISS pursued. Other incentives included being funded for graduate school and even a national achievement award from the home country embassy.

**Research Question 3: Interaction of Environment with Sponsor Role and Attributes**

“Well, I would say maybe because of the adjustment. Maybe because I was not so used to the system here. Or, maybe I find it difficult to connect with people here. I don’t really know how they actually live here. I think it’s how, I mean that why it’s difficult last semester.” - Abu

Research Question 3 asked, “How do undergraduate ISS describe the interaction between other aspects of the environment and sponsor role and attributes as an influence on their academic experiences?”

The broader environment within Blue University influenced the ISS educational experiences as they started their academic study abroad, intersecting with the role and attributes of their sponsors. The topical areas that emerged from ISS discussion, addressing these aspects
of the environment and their interaction with those of the sponsors’ role and attributes were very fascinating.

**Bigger class sizes, english, courses and scheduling challenges.** Abu noted that there was a difference between the academic environment at Blue University and her home academic environment, especially in class registration process and class sizes. She stated: “Basically my coursework, I mean the registration in Malaysia and also in the U.S. is very different. In terms where the classes where I used to be in were small in Malaysia. But when I’m here, let’s say physics classes and chemistry classes, they are very huge.” Furthermore, Abu noted that having a lack of friends in class for academic discussions, and often times an unfinished syllabus due to huge class size, added to the difficulties faced by ISS.

ISS also mentioned challenge with English. Adam noted that courses that he had already completed in his native language were harder in English: “Yeah. And, also, it was in English. So, I had criminal justice in my native language, but in English it was a little bit harder to study about kind of literature about something. So, it was a little bit of a barrier for me to study this.”. Asma believed that she could not match the level of native speakers’ fluency in English. She felt this challenge prevented her from understanding complete ideas in the classroom and mentioned that, “I know like I have an idea what the teacher is talking about. It’s just like, there is some words that prevent me from understanding the whole idea. And for me, for a communication major, I take more for the literature, analyze courses so the English is harder in these courses. I know that. So, yeah I wish we had courses to improve our English. I don’t know, just a suggestion.”

Asma also commented on her English preparation noting that one year of English in a preparatory program was not helpful and actual English in a University class was different. Her
ability in English was shaken, seeing fluent speakers and interacting with American students. Asma found American English different from the British English she grew up with: “So my reliance and my ability to speak English was kind of shaky because first, I found people who are better than me. Second, I want to show up the program for English. It wasn’t hard, it was different from what I had been studying in my country.” On the other hand, Abu felt that the preparatory program was helpful with English language mastery.

ISS also mentioned challenge with academic courses. Adam noted that he did not know how to study for courses in the U.S. and, therefore, sought help from professors; he was able to improve his grade from a C. He also noted that he needed to get better at reading, analyzing, and connecting ideas; he found it was particularly a struggle with conceptual courses like criminal justice and easier with step-oriented courses like math. Asma stated that she enjoyed the courses as a learning experience; however, she also noted that, unlike in her home country, she found the coursework had a higher workload and multiple priorities. She found this tiring, in addition to the challenge with expressing herself in English. Nevertheless, she accepted the system and the workload. She was also working on expressing herself in English.

Abu stated that she relied on lecturers’ office hours for help and not on fellow students, due to communication issues during her first semester. She found that physics and chemistry were more challenging than English since, unlike her home country, the calculations focused in these subjects were more conceptual in the U.S. In her view, the ISS needed to understand the system, get used to bigger class sizes, and spend time in getting their coursework completed.

Abu further noted that challenges in courses such as physical mechanics led her to computer engineering courses, and she still had difficulty due to the class structure, exams, and credit structure in these courses. She also noted difficulty with the grading system, such as
policies of no partial grades and less time for completing exams. Unlike her home country, she also found that midterms and finals had equal weights, making the grade curving harder. She also found that entry level courses were deliberately hard; her perception was that this was to only retain academically superior students going forward.

ISS mentioned about issues related to course scheduling. Abu noted that it was unfair that the University had international students schedule courses after domestic students. This led to not having access to courses that the ISS wanted with certain professors. New student orientation was also later for international students. She stated that there should be no difference for freshman international students, especially as the international students have more adjustment issues and more challenges if they do not get appropriate courses.

First semester as trial/worst semester by ISS. Adam’s view of the first semester was of a trial phase where he focused on time management issues, kept the credits at a manageable level, and generally got experience being in a new environment. He noted: “The first semester was more kind of a trial semester. Just trial and error; tried to manage my time. The good thing is I got only 12 credits which is considered.” He felt his grades and classes were good. On the other hand, Asma felt that during her first semester she did not understand “college life” she did not realize the differences between her home country or the intensity of college life. She had tough classes and needed to work harder. She was barely able to achieve the minimum GPA required by sponsor (2.5) and she did not feel this was adequate to her own expectation of gaining admission to the Honors College going forward. In Asma’s words, “Well, for my first semester, I really didn’t get to understand what this college is like. College life is different. And I thought that classes would be the same as college classes. But now I discovered it’s not. College classes is more intensive; it is more; you need to work harder for them.”
Abu felt that her first semester grades represented the “worst point” she had ever been at in her entire academic life: “Alright. Since last semester was my first semester here…so basically, the point that I got was the worst point that I have gotten in my entire life.”. She had her lowest GPA due to real and unavoidable adaptation issues coupled with taking a high credit load that made the semester tougher than it should have been. During this first semester she learned that finals were unexpectedly hard. She was generally “not ready” for the semester, thinking that it would be easy and assuming that the academic system was the same as in her home country. She failed to drop courses in time and had to deal with housing issues. Abu said: “I guess it’s basically adjustment time and pretty much unexpected here compared to my prep college in Malaysia. That’s what makes my first semester and second semester different in that terms. I guess I’m being more realistic in my second semester than my first semester. Maybe because I’m getting used to the system; I’m getting used to look at how the exams going to be like.”

Reflecting upon the First semester, Asma discovered that there was more to college than simply studying. She felt that while there was a need to work hard, it was also important to enjoy the multicultural experiences and also explore her interests in her major area of study and as well as her other courses. Asma also felt that one needed the courage and willingness to immerse themselves in the college experience, understanding the new culture, system, and its laws: “You need to have the courage to ask if you don’t know and you should have the willingness to search for everything you don’t know because here is another culture, another system, another law.”

While her first semester courses were entirely based on her advisor’s recommendations, she also felt it was important to explore her own interests in courses. Abu felt confident during her second semester of reviewing grades but recalled that course drops would have to be approved by the
sponsor. Asma felt confident that she would be able to meet the GPA requirements of the sponsor as she now had more experience with academic life at the university, was more aware of which courses to take, had better time management abilities, and was confident and happy with her GPA. Abu also felt optimistic seeking help early if needed, analyzing grades to decide early if she needed to drop a course, and felt there was a healthy competition between peers.

**Professors, lecturer, TA and peer help.** ISS discussed the academic help they received at Blue University. Adam felt that he was able to get help from professors to improve his grades and find extra credit opportunities. Asma felt that the academic advisors were helpful for courses and programmatic issues, whereas the professors were obviously more helpful with course related issues. Abu felt that the Ivy league educated professors at Blue University were harder and, thus, impacted her grades since they graded more strictly: “I guess one of my previous Math lecturers, he’s from an Ivy League, because I see his CV, and he set the question difficult compared to other lecturers.” Given the lack of peers, Abu felt the TA resource was an important one. She therefore relied more on TA help during office hours and often also received extra credit and grade curving. However, ISS felt the lack of peers for academic work, Abu felt that in her home country she was able to get help from her peers. But, at Blue University she did not have many friends/peers and felt a lack of acceptance in the classroom. She was, therefore, also unable to rely on seniors. Therefore, in her second semester she tried to make more friends.

**Sponsors “did not need to” know.** Given ISSs experiences in the academic environment, ISS also talked about their decision to start keeping things from the sponsor, mainly due to the academic environment that they had to navigate themselves. Adam noted that when he was skipping classes, and even though it impacted his grades, the sponsor did not know about it. Asma noted that she had decided to do a minor but did not tell the sponsor; she knew
that eventually she would need to do so. Abu decided to change her major in the same field but did not tell the sponsor. She was also working but did not tell the sponsor since it did not impact her GPA. She stated, “I think… technically, I haven’t told them that I want to change major. But from previous seniors they will actually let us change our major as long as it’s still in engineering.”

ISS also found ways of pursuing their major of interest. Adam suggested that during the second semester he was contemplating changing majors after being at the university, meeting people, exploring interests, and just “maturing.” He added: “So, I’m mature. I think I will go for studying computer science or just some program language on my own and study that intended major with the company. So I think this is one of the disadvantages that…there is not much space for the choice of major.”

He regretted that his sponsor did not allow a change in major. He decided to pursue his major of interest on the side through additional courses in his free time, since he could not change from petroleum to computer science. Asma stated that she was pursuing a major in a different college than her sponsor intended. In her case, the sponsor did not pay attention and she kept that information to herself, since she was more interested in languages in communications than advertising, media and other such areas. Asma further noted the following “I fell that it will go smoothly since it was one of the majors they suggested for me the first place. And now I feel I can do more in it. Maybe I will still be taking communication as a minor and I will switch it back and take it as a minor… I know it’s kind of complicated but, I guess it’s fine.” She was trying to convince her sponsor to pursue a major in languages and a minor in HR and English for back-up to pursue employment (teaching English as second language) in case the sponsor does not employ her. Also, she was hoping for a competitive graduate school sponsorship that was offered
 nationally to 1000 students every two years. Additionally, her first semester experiences helped her recognize her “flair” for different majors and that the majority of ISS pursued sponsor prescribed majors. Thus, she wanted to do something different.

Abu stated that she was contemplating changing majors from mechanical to computer engineering but did not convey that to her sponsor; she was hoping there would be no resistance since computer science was on the sponsor’s approved list of majors. She mentioned “Oh, yes. So, I always wanted to be an engineer. That is always my ambition. Yeah, about am I really going to major in computer engineering right now? Right now, actually, I am still in doubt whether to go for electrical or computer engineering. But actually, both of the majors, they are very close related.” Instead, she was discussing changing majors with her parents. Even though they were in disagreement, her parents were fine with her choice. She was also strategizing how to communicate this to her sponsor, particularly from the point of view of calculating grades and whether she would be able to make her minimum requirement for the sponsor.

**Study groups, outside tutoring and time management.** Abu felt she did not have time to join study groups and keep up with their requirements. Abu noted that extra tutoring for additional academic help had to be paid for by parents as the sponsor would not pay for it. Adam noted that the first semester was really a trial phase for time management for him. Asma felt that time management was hard, given how busy she was. But she had improved since the first semester and felt confident managing time and studying better in the second semester. Asma mentioned “Actually, my time management skills, first because I didn’t handle my, the courses, material seriously, or I was procrastinating my work a lot. So I need to rush everything the last minute. I tried to fix that this semester.” Abu, too, felt that her second semester was better than the first one, and that she was getting better at time management.
In summary, the ISS shared several aspects of Blue University’s academic environment that influenced their educational experience, independent from the sponsor role in preparing them for academic life in the U.S. For instance, they found larger classes at Blue University than at their home institutions. The language challenge was consistently noted by the three ISS. They also found the courses challenging, although felt that professors and teaching assistants were responsive to their needs. The first semester was considered to be more of an exploratory time for them, given the new environment; however, it was not clear whether all sponsors saw that first semester in this view. While some sponsors encouraged the ISS to explore during the first, and critical, semester, others placed the same level of pressure for performance on the ISS as in the home country preparatory program with a high credit load.

Another issue cited was the ISS was the inability to schedule courses along with the domestic students. This added to the challenges of getting access to comparatively similar educational experiences as the domestic students. Both inside and outside the classroom, the ISS found it challenging to make friends. This impacted not just their social life but also their ability to work in groups for course work and get academic advice from peers, as they would if they were in their home country. In all of this, the challenge associated with English mastery complicated these issues given their lack of ability to communicate effectively.

ISS also mentioned starting to keep information from sponsors for certain things in the academic environment unless absolutely needed (e.g. skipping classes, working, pursuing minors, and decision-making around changing majors). The academic environment seemed to have influenced the ISS to consider other areas of study beyond the one assigned by sponsor. However, as discussed earlier, the sponsorship contract prevented them from easily making these changes. There was also pressure from parents and their home culture to continue studying in
majors associated with engineering and medicine rather than in the social sciences. All these constraints impacted ISS to keep information from their sponsor until they could find alternate ways to pursue their interests. ISS also discussed how they thought Blue University could better provide support for their educational experience.

Some of the other factors (non-academic) in the Blue University environment that the ISS discussed were prominently culture shock, social experiences and changes in their second semester. The topical areas that emerged from ISS discussion, addressing these aspects of the environment and their interaction with those of the sponsors’ role and attributes were also very captivating.

**Culture shock and differences in experiencing college.** Asma noted some of the things were not the same that she experienced and she needed to get used to: people did not wear hijabs: “I know this is weird but my country you don’t see people without their scarf of their hijab. So, ok, I will see people without their hijab but it is not something weird. Ok, this is something normal and you need to get used to it.”, walking to get to class (she was not used to walking due to heat in her home country), making friends, English (American versus British English), different holidays, and semester structure. She wishes that the student advisor at Blue University was a past ISS and that the sponsor had provided training on host country culture, education systems, and academic experiences: “So I think that maybe they should have a training program for people who want to go abroad; go more in details about the culture, about the academic experience for sure; the education system is really, just really different.” Abu noted that the preparatory college did not prepare her to schedule her own classes. She felt that the credit system of courses was different and stated “…that’s how we were prepared actually. In our prep college we don’t have the opportunity to schedule our own class. We have the kind of time table
of classes that have been drawn in. So, we don’t have that kind of system to pick and choose.” Furthermore, the beginner level classes were large (20 vs. 300) with low faculty-ISS engagement and high homework expectations.

The GPA system was the same but, she was used to getting direct help versus helping herself. She also felt that the host institution gave no partial credit for working and placed equal emphasis on mid-terms, tests, and finals with a strict GPA system. However, she felt Blue University was very helpful in providing help to ISS to improve versus was she experienced in her home country institution. Adam noted that it was harder for him and other ISS to make connections with other students than it was easier to be with those of his own culture. Asma noted another aspect of culture: she found that domestic students were better trained to multitask, such as studying and spending time on other activities while the international ISS would only focus on studying.

In terms of impacting ISS experiences, Adam felt that the University should not give any additional privileges to ISS just because ISS might appear to be students with more funds or monies. He also felt the study abroad programs could be improved but did not think the sponsor would approve participation in these programs. He also felt there should be more interdisciplinary research opportunities without having to change one’s major: “I think doing more research. Involving students in more research that they are interested in, for example, in astronomy or something. If any student can participate in it, not it has to be, he has to take certain class or something.”

Abu mentioned some specialized resources for ISS like separate offices or officers addressing ISS needs in the global office of the university, helping and addressing needs of the ISS. Abu explained that although she received help from the global office on her housing issue
during the first semester, she believed that the university should clarify the housing policy for freshman ISS and be considerate of their cultural limitations for housing. She mentioned “...the most obvious services that is related to us as international will be the Global Office. I feel that they really help me a lot throughout my first semester because I had a housing problem during my first semester.” She also felt the professors should also clarify grading, curving, and standardized tests, particularly for international students and ISS. Asma was thankful for academic office hours, I.T. services, library, and health services of the university. She was not aware of the global office unit with officers specialized in helping ISS.

ISS mentioned differences in experiencing college, “home,” and engaging with American students. Adam noted that ISS could experience all aspects of the University as they did not have to work a job like the domestic and other international students. Asma, on the other hand, noted that ISS also wanted to work, engage in other activities, and even widen their social circle. Domestic students could do all of this easily and might have lower academic expectations. She felt the ISS were taught only to care about their GPA, whereas domestic and other students came for the college experience. Abu noted that she started to work in the second semester but could not work too much as she had to maintain her GPA. However, she was also making efforts to join meaningful clubs, was planning to be a writing tutor, and was also taking a minor.

Asma noted that other students were obviously more at home, as this was their country, and did not face culture shock or language barriers as did the ISS. Abu further added that ISS were not particularly excited around holidays and breaks, unlike their domestic student peers, due to limited opportunity to travel. Adam noted that it was, of course, easy to communicate with individuals of one’s own culture given that you understand the jokes and nuances. So, he felt it was important to overcome the communication gap with domestic students. He stated: “I think
when there is 2 people, one speaks same language that you speak and you already have a lot of common between, you kind of make jokes about the same thing and laugh about it and understand each other. Sometimes, when you have that option and the other option is to hang out with, for example, an American person, it is fun but, sometimes we don’t get each other very quickly. So that’s why I am trying to overcome this problem. But, apparently, it is still there.”

Asma also felt that she tried to get into the ‘space’ of domestic students but felt afraid to enter their zone because of the environment, English communication barriers with non-Arabic speaking students, and being afraid of embarrassment. Abu stated that, in general, ISS did not socialize much. She felt that other students were reluctant to engage with ISS. She felt confused as to how to make these connections.

Second Semester. ISS mentioned Academic discovery and understanding “college” in second semester. Adam reported that during the second semester there was more focus on taking a higher number of credits and focusing more on studies, particularly by getting to better understand the assignments and grading in courses. There was also a realization of the sponsor’s approval needed to drop courses and working towards alternative options and mentioned “I noticed that the professors here are pretty good, like there’s one course that the first exam I got a C on it, which was like, it would be hard to improve. And I talked with the professor and I told him that I’m aiming for an A, and is this possible or not? He told me to push harder and stuff. And thankfully at the end of the semester, I got an A in that course.”. Asma reported similarly that the second semester brought better time management, better study schedules, and closer monitoring of courses.

Abu noted that during the first semester there were certain peer-interaction challenges, particularly due to the difficulty of “navigating” social nuances with peers in classrooms. This
impacted social and academic communication. ISS also preferred to go to office hours; however, due to heavy course load in first semester, the combination of these factors negatively impacted classroom experiences. In the second semester there was much more “comfort” in peer interactions. Abu went to office hours less as she developed friendships, found helpful classroom and lab partners, and discussed academics with peers.

Abu noted that she had assumed being in the U.S. would be easy but as it turned out it was not: “Well, I would say maybe because of the adjustment. Maybe because I was not so used to the system here. Or, maybe I find it difficult to connect with people here. I don’t really know how they actually live here. I think it’s how, I mean that why it’s difficult last semester.”

Sponsor preparatory program did not prepare for “adjustment” and for the unexpected experiences in the U.S. In the second semester, Abu noted that by second semester, she had developed an understanding of college, felt more prepared, and had more knowledge to navigate campus life. She was happier and more realistic knowing the system and communicating move effectively about things like grades in courses.

Adam also confessed that he understood college life more in his second semester. Earlier, he thought attendance wouldn’t matter but it impacted his grades; he also did not manage his time well. He mentioned “Well, actually there’s one class that is; the class with the 5 credits. In the middle of the semester I thought that it’s not important to attend the class. So I only, in the whole semester, I attended only Fridays, when there are quizzes. But in the final it turned out that wasn’t a good idea.” Asma felt understanding college meant self-awareness of her own abilities, evaluating her own mistakes, time, courage, and getting used to academic life. In the second semester, she felt more confident about meeting sponsor requirements: “Well, for my first semester, I really didn’t get to understand what this college is like. College life is different.” Abu
used to study alone in the first semester but then she found friends in classes for discussions. In
the second semester, she better understood course requirements, went to office hours, prepared
for exams, and was more relaxed.

**Additional academic services and processes at Blue University.** Adam noted that
tutoring was not part of the program and needed sponsor approval. Asma said that it was good
that Blue University offered resources such research help, libraries, a writing center, tutoring, a
health center, tech support, textbook rentals, and busses for transportation. She also noted that
the university could provide more halal food, have international advisors, and separate academic
advisors for ISSs who could relate to their issues. She said “maybe provide more halal food. In
the university. Because it hard. Outside is very expensive and if I have a meal plan; if I buy a
meal plan from the university, it’s expensive by itself and I won’t have that much choices.” Abu
noted that ISS can utilize free resources such as tutoring. She also found the university process of
having international students register for courses after domestic students unfair, as it did not
provide an equal chance for academic experiences. She noted that the following services could
be of further value: a global office with resources, office hours, exceptions to on-campus housing
for international freshman students.

Abu also felt that ISS could not do certain things like their domestic student peers, like
the sponsor housing requirement to live on campus; thus, the university should have a clear
exception process for ISS. Adam and Asma both noted that while the Global Office helped the
ISS on issues related to adjusting and issues with their home country, this resource was not
shared by the sponsor. Adam said “actually, just me feeling that there is this Global Office if
anything goes wrong, I could go to it. Thankfully, I didn’t need to but, just knowing it is there,
it’s a good thing.” Abu added that the Global Office was helpful and went the extra mile for
international students as they sought housing and organized break events such as the Thanksgiving dinner. At the university, Adam noted that he engaged in the Toastmasters club to enhance his skills and abilities; he also participated in his country student club. Asma noted that while it was enjoyable to be in clubs, it took time and effort. She was an international student orientation leader but did not particularly like the commitment. Abu stated that while the home country clubs took time, it is a good place to meet others from one’s home country and get academic advice. That’s where ISS generally mad most of their connections; the club was also in contact with the sponsor.

Asma noted that she could not work at her job as many hours as non-sponsored students could and could only work if it did not impact her academic performance. Abu noted that she would like to work on campus for the engagement and cultural interactions: “…but, pretty much I think the only advantage is just that your tuition fees is all being paid, and you have like allowance. It’s not that much, but you didn’t really have to work to find money. I mean that’s all; that’s enough, good enough I guess.”

Asma said that she wanted to get work experience and her sponsor was not opposed to it as long as it did not impact her academic performance. Therefore, in the second semester, she started to work as an orientation leader, organizing events, volunteering, and later also did internships. Abu added that while there were no financial reasons for the ISS to work, it certainly provided extra money for travel and other purposes.

Social Life. Adam noted that during the first semester he faced communication challenges. However, in the second semester, he began getting out of his comfort zone and interacting more with domestic and non-sponsored international students. He mentioned “well, in the Christmas break I thought I didn’t want to be the guy that always stays in his room and
spends a lot of time in it. After the Christmas break, I tried to dive in more and to get out of the comfort zone. I tried to find new friends, not Saudi friends, just new friends. I think the reason is because I became more comfortable here so I started to dive in more.”

Asma felt the same and noted that she was doing more in the second semester than just studying; she also felt that non-sponsored and domestic students’ social lives were more engaging: “I know it’s important but, I cannot do it right now and don’t know why exactly but feel like something is stopping me from doing it. But, for them this something normal that they have been living with it their whole life. So, apparently they engage in more activities, they party more, and they have social life, I think.”

Abu noted that she was working in the second semester to get experience and an opportunity to mingle with people beyond just studying. She was also making new friends from different nationalities in each class, which helped her to stay happy and calm, enjoying campus life; the exchange of information and engaging in discussions helped her with making connections with the local community. ISS first semester social struggles intersected with sponsor attributes of being responsive to ISS needs and ensuring that they had a smooth social transition at the university. Asma noted that she used to be an outgoing and friendly person, but now found it hard to make friends in college given that there were “borders.” She said “…but, I mean I have been my whole life a very outgoing, friendly person. Now I just cannot do that in college. It’s just like, more like I feel there’s borders and I end up just meeting people from my nationality, from my country.”

ISS also compared themselves to non-sponsored and U.S. students. Adam suggested that ISS generally made friends with only ISS. Abu felt that other students were more relaxed, worked more hours, and took fewer credits. ISS, on the other hand, worked more to make future
connections. Adam stated that, in comparison other students who have the opportunity to work and interact with people, ISS don’t need to work. ISS perceived other students had less stress, less competition, and better social lives whereas ISS only interacted in class. Adam further added, “…less competition. Less stress, I guess. And I believe more focus on social life and other aspects.” Asma also noted that in comparison with ISS, other students (domestic and non-sponsored international) had a good time and freedom or balance between studies, work, and activities. They were able to have friends, a social life, and time to do activities whereas ISS are self-enclosed: “There is this type that doesn’t do their work because they want to party, they want to have a good time. I know university is the only time of your like when you’ll have all the freedom to do anything, anytime. But, you need to pay attention to your studies.”

Abu further noted that in comparison, other students had no pressure to graduate in four years, could make their own decisions regarding working, spend time how they wanted, and be excited for weekends, holidays, vacations, parties, and movies. ISS cut down on activities and sports to save time; they relaxed by staying inside. Abu further added that ISS were evaluated by their sponsors for engaging in meaningful activities and connections. For example, being engaged in the Malaysian and Muslim student clubs. Generally, she said the following about her social life: “I do my social life; my social life is… I will not say that it is very active because not really that active. But, I will say it’s more looking for a connection that can last long compared to non-sponsored students.”

In talking about engaging in student clubs, Adam noted that while he was engaged in his home country clubs during the first two semesters, he was not engaged in any other clubs. Asma, on the other hand, believed that involvement in ISS clubs was time-consuming and, given the sponsor pressure, she was not involved in any of the clubs. She further noted that her
commitment to academics was more important than a desire to be in clubs. Abu mentioned that she was less engaged with clubs and ISS associations due to work and because she needed more time for studies. Adam noted that he found it hard to join student clubs other than the one of home country as it was harder to communicate with U.S. students. Abu stated that in the home country student clubs there was sharing of the sponsored student bond, it was easy to engage in mutual discussions, and ISS made alumni connections for potential job opportunities. The home country clubs also invited ISS to the embassy. She said “…maybe because one of my non-sponsored students, he joined the Pokémon Club. (laughter) I would not join that kind of club because I think it’s not going to be, not going to benefiting me.”

In elaborating on reasons to engage with other students, Adam noted that the reason he wanted to engage with other students was to learn other cultures and practice English and mentioned, “the first two months, or the first semester was like harder because I was getting used to speak English most like all the times. So, in the spring, I started to dive in more with people; talk with others; have some social activities like playing football or going horse riding with some friends even not from my home country.”

Asma noted that engaging with other students would help diversify her group of friends, exchange class and exam notes, and engage in discussions. She was not sure in the first semester and mentioned, “I had more time in the fall but maybe I didn’t have maybe the willingness to do that because it was my first semester. I was all overwhelmed with that. People would judge me; people would not like me.” She also noted that this would allow her to share interests, beliefs, goals, and also a belief in god. She found that other people were also looking for friends with ISS to learn through discussions. For instance, she gave an example of how in a linguistics class
students were discussing stereotypes against southern people and views on Columbus being a segregationist.

**Cultural perception of major and parental support.** Asma was worried that her communication major was considered a lesser degree than engineering or medicine in her home country, even though the final decision of the major was her sponsor’s. She also mentioned “as a sponsored student I need to stick with limited majors, so I need to find what I like in the limited majors they offer; my sponsor offer.” Asma noted that, culturally, engineering and math fields were considered superior to communications and there was pressure of having to be in the top of the class if you were graduating from any other major than those on the “superior” list. Abu noted that her parents provided money for the extra tutoring that she needed. Abu’s parents also supported with managing the pressures of being an ISS, especially calming her down when she was under pressure or worried: “Maybe I need to have someone else, like my mom, or just call my mom and say that I’m worried or at least tell my friends that I’m worried. Whenever someone say back to me, “You’re going to do fine;” “Its ok, don’t be worried,” I’m going to be calm back again. So that’s how I need help from other people.”

In summary, the ISS generally agreed that coming to Blue University was a culture shock for ISS. They found several key things were different at Blue University. One of those was just the difference in the college environment compared to their home country. For instance, the home country emphasis was solely on grades whereas in the U.S. they found that students were not only concerned about grades but also their overall experience in college. ISS also found it challenging to get to understand the grading system. The issue of being unable to communicate with domestic student was repeated in these discussions, too. ISS noted that they were afraid of engaging with domestic students due to a fear of not knowing how to do so. They also noted the
challenge of the finer points of social interactions such as knowing the social nuances, jokes, and other aspects of communication. That said, the ease of being an ISS, managing time, and interacting with domestic students seemed to improve over time as the ISS gained more experience.

The ISS noted that host universities such as Blue Universities could consider providing more specialized services for the ISS. Such specialized services could include more day-to-day changes such as access to more halal food as well as more structural things like allowing international students the same fair access to course registration as domestic students. The theme of ISS engagement with domestic students remerged at several points in these interviews in context of clubs, how ISS could be better integrated into the broader range of these clubs, and engage beyond their home-country clubs. Finally, the sponsored ISS also expressed interest in working on campus; even though they did not need the money, they felt the experience would be important.

The ISS felt that they could be better prepared by their sponsors for culture shock and the new environment they would face coming to Blue University. The availability of academic support services, or not, impacted the decision-making and roles that sponsors undertook for ISS, thus impacting their experiences. This was important not just to ensure ISS had a positive set of experiences but also to ensure they maintained their academic performance, given the pressures and expectation from the sponsors. ISS shared that due to the changes in their social lives, they faced several challenges as they adjusted to their new environment. This include communication challenges due to language struggle, and social challenges in making friends. Social challenges were partly also due to language barriers in interacting with domestic students. While over time these struggles lessened, there was a belief among the ISS that the domestic students were at an
advantage by having fewer struggles. The ISS also commented on their lack of preparation to be at Blue University and how the sponsor’s preparatory program could have better prepared them. The social pressure was not just in interactions with others but also related to their major area of study. Given sponsors’ requirements for taking certain majors over others, ISS may feel that their major is not as well regarded by the sponsors and the community back home, even though the sponsor assigns the major.

The lack of social interactions with other international and domestic students also extended into the choice of student clubs that the ISS participated in. For instance, there was a greater level of comfort in participating in home country clubs than in other student clubs. This was largely attributed to their inability to effectively interact with other students. While the ISS realized these social shortcomings in their student life at Blue University, they also felt helpless in their ability to make any changes. They felt restricted by time and the time pressures to make the additional effort given the academic pressure coming from the sponsorship contracts. Once ISS were in the academic environment, there were many challenges and opportunities that presented themselves and intersected with sponsors’ roles and attributes. The ISS were constantly reminded of in their contractual relationship with the sponsor.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The number of international “sponsored” students (ISS) is consistently increasing at U.S. universities. However, there is still a significant lack of understanding of this student group and the complex relationships between these students and their sponsors. The results of this study identified numerous aspects of the ISS-sponsor contractual relationship that impacted the academic experiences of the ISS participating in this study. Using these results to improve the educational experiences of the ISS will positively influence the educational outcomes for ISS under the sponsorship program.

The following section presents the implications of the findings and identifies topics for future research. The discussions are presented in accordance with the research questions that directed this study of ISS attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors related to their contractual agreements with their sponsors and the impact of these factors on their academic experiences.

Discussion

Primary Finding #1: ISS Underestimate the Cost of Sponsorship Agreements During Initial Decision-Making

Consistent with Perna et al.’s (2015) theory that program participants perceived benefits that were greater than costs of participating in such programs, the current study participants’ “perceived benefits” of the sponsored programs were greater than the costs of participating in such programs. The costs and benefits in this study were interpreted semantically through the discussions of the ISSs and were assessed as both monetary (for instance the financial sponsorship of tuition and fees, housing, other expenses), and also non-monetary (such as time, effort, and opportunity costs). From here on these would be referred to as ‘costs’ and ‘benefits’.
Study participants identified the “benefits” as the significant financial benefits, guaranteed employment, high esteem, and value attached to receiving a sponsorship opportunity. However, the ISS seem to have underestimated or minimized the “costs” associated with the sponsorship as not being able to choose or change their major of study, the obligation to return to their country for employment, the pressures of being monitored for academic performance (particularly grades), and other restrictions.

In terms of the holistic decision-making process and evaluating decisions within a cost-benefit framework, it appears that these ISSs did not explicitly evaluate the question of whether or not they should accept a sponsorship. And, if affirmed, how the costs and benefits (as defined above) compared. For instance, study participants consistently noted how they were mentally prepared to sign the sponsorship agreement with whatever conditions the sponsor set; they did not appear to have a “Plan B.” ISS admitted not having read the agreements, not keeping a copy of the agreement, and solely focusing on the financial help they were getting to study internationally. However, once they were in the U.S. pursuing their education, the ISS realized the limitations and constraints attached to the sponsorship agreement. Upon arriving to Blue University, concerns surfaced when they realized that they did not really have a choice in selecting their major, changing their major, or adding a minor that was aligned with their own interests. While it is understandable that teenagers would focus on the monetarily funded opportunity, it is perplexing that their parents did not try to better advise them. This may speak to a need for better parent education in holistically evaluating the sponsorship opportunity for ISS.

However, once enrolled, the ISS gained a better understanding of their own abilities, interests, and preferences, causing their choice of desired major to change. The ISS usually attributed this to meeting people and just “maturing” from the time they signed the contract.
Parents and sponsors would be wise to consider the psychological development of young adults as they encourage them to enter into binding contracts that will affect their lives throughout college and into their working years. Understandably, the sponsors seemed to discourage any changes to the contract when such changes might result in additional costs to the sponsor, extend graduation timelines, and/or impact on ISS’ academic performance. It was more difficult to understand the limited process available to change sub-specialties in the same major and policies that seemed designed to discourage ISS from any change in major once these were assigned by the sponsor.

Inability to change their major often led ISS to keep information from the sponsor or to come up with alternate plans to pursue their major area of study interest. At the time of the study, the ISS participants were contemplating a major change within the approved list of sponsor prescribed majors (but not the one assigned to them). They were withholding that decision to figure out a way that the request would meet with least resistance by their sponsor. Clearly, the sponsors and their ISSs were not operating from the same set of goals. Given the goals and design of such sponsorship programs, sponsors must find ways to strategically incorporate the choice of major aligned with their ISSs’ preferences to lay a foundation for genuine trust and strengthen the sponsorship program. It was unclear from interviews what concerns sponsors had in allowing ISS to pursue a double major or add a minor area of study if they were performing well academically.

Given these findings, it would be valuable for sponsors to consider how sponsorship programs can be designed in alignment with sponsor goals to strategically allow ISSs choice in selecting their majors and deciding whether to pursue a double major or minor area of study.
Such a strategy could be mutually beneficial as it would serve the goals of the sponsor while keeping ISS more engaged in their field of study.

In the context of understanding the true costs and benefits of a sponsorship agreement, the sponsors should strive for more transparency in the sponsorship contract. They should help ISSs and their parents evaluate the pros and cons of accepting a sponsorship agreement within a holistic cost-benefits framework. Such a strategy would positively impact the academic performance and experiences of ISS while pursuing their studies in the U.S. Sponsors should help ISS in considering the long-term benefits of the sponsorship contract, such as guaranteed employment, with the short-term and long-term impacts of limitations in selecting or changing a major. These are critical considerations that need further investigation given that dissatisfied ISS may begin to withhold vital information or disengage from their studies.

**Primary Finding #2: ISS Trust Their Sponsors and Sponsor Advisors**

The ISSs’ predisposition to sign the sponsorship agreement suggests trust in the overall process, affected by the financial value and prestige attached to receiving such an opportunity or incentive.

The trust in the sponsorship process was coupled with a sense of gratefulness for having received a sponsorship. The ISS revealed that they had trust in the contracting because of their desire to get the sponsorship as well as the prestige and value placed on such sponsorship opportunities within their home country. Again, trust was transferred to the sponsor because of desire, prestige, and value.

Family background played an important part in shaping ISS’s attitudes towards the sponsorship contract. In cases where the ISS was the first in his or her family receiving such an opportunity, family placed a high value on the opportunity. The sponsorship alleviated a familial
financial burden, allowing the ISS to feel like he or she was helping the family. Additionally, guaranteed employment promised the students that they could be close to family after graduation, an important consideration in countries that value proximity to family. Again, trust was transferred through family and family values.

In fact, the ISS repeatedly referred to their sponsor advisors as “family” who they could count on for anything they needed. The advisors were the ones who essentially monitored performance and periodically assessed needs and progress. ISS reported a sense of trust and relief at having someone from the sponsor’s side looking over them, particularly when the social and political environment changed in a way that might create anxiety or uncertainty for the them in a foreign country. During such times, the ISSs knew they had the sponsor advisor to guide them and take care of any issues. The sponsor advisor-ISS relationship appeared to play a critical role in building trust between the ISS and the sponsor.

Sponsorship opportunities also instilled feelings of immense responsibility and diligence for the ISSs to make the best of their sponsorship opportunity and at their university. The ISSs seemed to even justify the sponsor’s close monitoring of their academic progress, whereabouts, and other restrictions as a way for sponsors to rightly protect their own rights. The ISS’s trust in this process and the opportunity they were receiving played a huge role in their tolerance of the drawbacks and limitations of their contracts.

Future investigations into this phenomenon of trust in sponsorship programs should assess how this trust in the process and program benefits the sponsors. Does the ISS’s trust in the process help to ensure acceptance and cooperation from the student towards accomplishing the sponsor’s programmatic goals? It would be interesting to assess how this “trust” in the sponsor process begets cooperation and acceptance from the ISS in fulfilling the sponsor goals through
sponsorship programs. What was the source of the gratitude that caused ISS to willingly give up their own interests and passions in exchange for a sponsorship opportunity? What are the impacts of such tradeoffs for ISSs’ future, both in their professional and personal lives?

This trust could be due to conditioning from the family and community, or the prevalence of such contracts in the home country. It could also be based on the gratefulness and value that the ISS place on having the opportunity to study abroad, particularly as their families would likely not have the resources to provide them with such an opportunity without the sponsorship program. For future studies, it would be valuable to assess the factors that impact the level of trust in this relationship and how that trust influences the ISSs’ academic expectations and experiences (Ensminger, 2001).

**Primary Finding #3: ISS Adaptation Challenges Are Real (Especially During First Semester)**

Discussions with the ISS revealed significant challenges during the first semester associated with academic credit loads and the pressure to perform well academically, the latter largely determined by the sponsorship agreement requirement. There is enough research and evidence that these adaptation and adjustment challenges are real for international students (including ISS) and does impact their academic experiences abroad. Some of the challenges were unique to ISS; others were shared by all international students.

**Academic preparation.** Like most international students, ISS realized that studying in the U.S. was different than studying in their home country. Essential aspects such as the grading system, course registration, classroom interaction and the ability to socially interact with domestic and other students were challenging for the ISS. Bigger class sizes, credit load differences, and working on group projects were identified by the ISS as academic challenges.
Additionally, preparatory programs did not help them with the cultural and social changes they faced. Faculty training in effectively supporting international students (including ISS) could be helpful in better integrating these students into university academic and extra-curricular activities.

Furthermore, the sponsor-provided preparatory programs appeared to be less effective in helping ISS have a positive academic experience than the ISS were lead to believe. In the first semester, the ISS were adapting academically, culturally, and socially; they were adapting while speaking a foreign language in which they discovered they had limited mastery. This suggests a need for better preparatory programs in both the home and host country to help these students adjust and thrive. Thus, ISS have a need for their preparatory programs to be holistic and not just focused on academics. ISS need training in social and cultural issues. And, they need to hear more from former ISS so that know the realities of what to expect.

**First semester course load.** Unlike other international students, the first semester experience of the ISS was also influenced by whether the sponsor allowed them to adapt to and explore the new environment during first semester with less academic pressure. The single ISS who was allowed to take a lighter credit load, explore, adjust, and focus on getting settled in the first semester reported a better first semester GPA and had a greater positive orientation towards the academic experience. Overall, ISS’s first semester experiences seemed to have been dependent on sponsor policies (e.g. maintaining credit load) and the sponsor’s approach towards the semester expectations. The first semester experiences influenced ISSs’ educational experiences and performance while at Blue University. It might therefore be beneficial for the sponsors to consider policies that would encourage exploration and settling time for ISS rather than exerting pressure immediately during the first semester for ISS to be full engaged and at
peak performance in the new academic environment. This would benefit both the ISS, by reducing stress, and the sponsor, by creating a foundation for long-term academic success.

**Tutoring.** Another academic issue raised by the ISS was their inability to get sponsor funding for tutoring. The need for tutoring may reflect inadequate academic and English language preparation prior to arriving at the university. Academically, ISS found their learning curve was steep, perhaps unnecessarily steep if sponsor-designed preparatory programs were more effective. Financial need and the inability to hire tutors impacted the ISSs’ educational experiences and their academic performance. Since costs such as tutoring are directly associated with the contracts’ academic performance requirements, it would make sense for sponsors to consider providing a tutoring allowance for students.

**Interactions with peers.** Amongst the challenges that ISS consistently noted, like most international students, was their inability to socially interact and engage with other students, particularly domestic students. This lack of engagement could create both social and academic stress given that peers are often considered as an important support system in college. While some of the reasons for these challenges were attributed to the inability to communicate effectively with the U.S. students, language and cultural barriers were also identified as critical factors in this context. Including student orientation segments on creating welcoming communities for international students would go a long way in alleviating this challenge.

**Awareness of resources.** As with all international students, there was variance in ISS awareness of the resources available within the global/international unit of Blue University. While two of three sponsors seemed to have strong ties with the international/global office to ensure help and guidance for ISS, one ISS did not seem to have any resource information from their sponsor. Overall, ISS were very pleased with the resources available at Blue University
(libraries, transportation, classes, health services, etc.). They mentioned difficulties integrating in classrooms, participating in group projects, and reaching out to the office that specialized in helping international student challenges. Given these findings, there should be selected areas (e.g. classroom integration, housing issues, onboarding/orientation) where host universities dedicate resources to address specific challenges faced by ISS that will positively impact their academic experience and performance.

**Travel home.** The ISS participants in this study were often unable to get financial support from their sponsors to visit home during their education abroad. It is easy to think about the ISS as if they were any other adult under a contractual agreement with an organization. However, these are very young adults with very limited life experiences. The lack of sponsor funding to travel home to visit family likely impacts personal wellbeing, potentially causing loneliness, homesickness, and even depression. These, in turn, can manifest as insomnia, trouble focusing, memory problems, and even physical illnesses. A lack of wellbeing impacts not only the campus experience but also academic performance. Even though travel costs are not directly associated with the GPA and on-time graduation, it is nonetheless an important indirect factor that sponsors should consider funding as part of the foundation for learning and success.

**Monitoring by the sponsor advisor.** Unlike other international students, there were additional pressures identified by the ISS just by virtue of being an ISS. They felt constantly monitored for academic performance. This was understandable given the high financial investment sponsors make in an ISS. However, it caused significant stress and a sense of being unsafe for fear of not knowing if the sponsor might end their sponsorship due to low academic performance.
Another aspect of the sponsor monitoring was the monitoring of non-academic activities to ensure that ISS did not engage in higher risk activities such as participating in political rallies and other behavior that might bring undue attention to the ISS. Given the political climate at the time of this research, sponsor concerns were understandable. However, the ISS perceived these actions to be restrictive in the context of not being able to experience the fullness of student life. It is important to understand the other aspects of non-academic life that ISS consider integral to student life experience. Perhaps engaging ISS in developing reasonable expectations would address their resentments. Additionally, there is a need for research into how these restrictions impact ISS educational experiences and academic performance. For example, what learning value might there be in observing a U.S. political rally or attending a candidate debate?

Despite this, the ISS did feel a sense of gratefulness for the opportunity the sponsorship program had provided them and felt an increased sense of responsibility as a student. The ISS suggested that the stress of being in the new environment and the fear of being reprimanded by the sponsor did impact their educational performance in both negative and positive ways. While they felt constant pressure to repeatedly calculate their grades to make the minimum requirement of the sponsor, it also helped them to keep going and stay focused on their academics. Future research should address how this stress for academic performance while being monitored by a sponsor impacts the academic performance and experiences of ISSs.

These social, cultural, and academic adaptation challenges are real and significant for the ISS. Sponsors should be intentional in preparing the ISS for these potential challenges. Furthermore, U.S. universities should provide more effective support services to help ISSs better adjust to the new environment and the new academic system. Future studies should investigate
how support services provided by U.S. universities and better preparation by the sponsors can reduce ISS challenges to better integrate and find academic and social success on campus.

Furthermore, future studies should investigate whether enhanced understanding of the factors that impact the social and cultural integration of ISS would increase the ability of U.S. universities and sponsors to prepare ISS for student life. Better preparation to be socially and culturally integrated on U.S. campuses could likely improve performance both academically and in their educational life experiences.

Host institutions can help by ensuring programs, processes, and faculty trainings are adequate to help ISS (and all international students) integrate well in their educational environment. ISS need help with cultural, social, and academic adaptation to their host country and institution to be successful. Along with sponsors, this responsibility also lies with the host institutions. Sponsors could lead these changes, since it is in their interest to ensure ISS success.

**Primary Finding #4: Sponsor Preparatory Programs Must Address Key ISS Adaptation and Financial Challenges**

Sponsors provided preparatory programs for the students in this study once they were accepted for sponsorship and before they started their education in the U.S. The ISS felt that their preparatory programs were mostly designed to ensure that they were academically ready. ISS reported that these programs included aspects of studying in the U.S., such as taking prerequisite and preparatory course credits related to their major, language classes, and other functional aspects of student academic life.

However, the study participants felt that the preparation programs offered by sponsors did not cover the key academic challenges or the social and cultural realities that they faced once they started studying at their host universities. For instance, two of the three ISSs noted that
during the preparatory stage their sponsor did not facilitate former students sharing their experiences to help prepare the prospective ISS better. Being high caliber students in their home country and having completed a preparatory program, the ISS felt confident they could handle the U.S. academic environment with ease. However, two of the three ISS struggled with low GPA in the first semester even with transfer credits. All three ISS noted that the academic reality (credit requirements to graduation, larger class sizes, academic rigor, language competency) was much different than what they had anticipated and they found themselves unexpectedly ill-prepared. All three ISS participants felt dejected with their first semester GPA, despite having anticipated they would never struggle academically.

Findings from this research study point toward a need for a comprehensive preparatory program designed to incorporate the social and cultural aspects of campus life in addition to academic issues for ISS studying abroad. Such a comprehensive preparatory program would reduce the adjustment gap and unnecessary challenges faced by the ISS in a host university, factors that eventually impact ISS academic experiences and performance. Sponsors might consider having outside experts, perhaps from the U.S., assist with developing these preparatory programs to increase their effectiveness and better prepare ISS for the reality of studying abroad.

Additionally, even though the sponsor provided the preparatory program and other systematic guidance to the ISS, in the process of applying for study abroad there was no sponsor-provided funding available for the program participants to visit the host university campus. The ability to visit a host university during the decision-making process would give ISS a real-world experience of what it would be like to be an ISS on a particular campus. It would inform decision-making, alleviate stress, and potentially avoid costly changes in institution mid-program.
This raises a broader issue associated of the “true cost” of the sponsorship program, particularly during the preparatory stages. The activities designed in the preparatory stages for the sponsorship program impact the total program cost and, more importantly, the ISS’s attitudes and perceptions towards the sponsorship program and their study abroad. Further research is needed into building more transparency in the decision-making process of the ISS. Given the sponsors’ vested interest in ensuring ISS’ success, sponsors should consider how to best ensure that ISS are making the right choice of institution and major; they must do all they can to ensure ISS are prepared to deal effectively with academic, social, and cultural adaptation challenges at their host university.

**Applicability of Principal-Agent Theory**

In view of the findings from this study and the study implications addressed above, there appears to be evidence of a classic agency relationship between sponsor and ISS. Agency relationship is the relationship between a Principal and an Agent based on fiduciary responsibilities of the Agent towards the interests of the Principal (Ross, 1973). While this idea has been extensively studied in economic scenarios, there are several aspects of this relationship that are thought-provoking from a theoretical perspective and should be explored in the Sponsor-ISS relationship.

First and foremost, sponsors are trying to reduce adverse selection problems, thereby institutionalizing the recruitment process for future ISS from the time of their high school enrollment (Eisenhardt, 1989b). What are the ethical boundaries in this contractual relationship (Jones, 1995)? How might an initial effort to reduce adverse selection bear on the future perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and success of the ISSs?
Second, sponsors are typically able to resolve information uncertainty in the initial stages of engaging in these relationships with the ISSs. However, in the later stages, the information the ISS are seeking is not as clear cut. In other words, the selection process and preparatory programs ensure some certainty for achieving sponsor’s program goals. However, when ISSs are at the host university and engaged in their academic pursuits, many other factors impact ISS attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. Reacting to this proportional lack of control, sponsors exert monitoring efforts that cover the ISSs’ academic and non-academic environments. What is the cost of this monitoring, both to the sponsor (principal) and to the ISS (agent), and does it provide justifiable trade-offs in light of the anticipated outcomes from the sponsors (Demougin & Fluet, 2001)?

Third is the aspect of trust between the sponsor and the ISS (Casadesus-Masanell, 2004). The sponsor (principal) and ISS (agent) enter into the relationship with significant trust transferred by the ISS to the sponsor; however, trust can become depleted over time. And, in fact this seems to be the case with ISS, who reported hiding things from their sponsors. Does lack of flexibility (especially in choice of major), repeated engagement, and intrusive monitoring into ISS’s personal lives impose costs on the sponsors and ISSs in the form of loss of trust? If so, how might that reinforce the Principal-Agent problem in such conditions of repeated engagement within imperfect information (Levinthal, 1988)? The findings of the current research study argue for further investigation into this aspect within international sponsorship programs and the Sponsor-ISS relationship.

Fourth, there appears to be an element of information asymmetry given that sponsors do not always share all information with the ISS (Mishra, Heide, & Cort, 1998). This information asymmetry could lead to costs within the agency relationships. In the context of this study, the
ISSs did not completely understand the sponsorship agreements, yet they were still conditioned to accept the opportunity, including acquiescing to the major assigned by the sponsor. What is the nature of these costs, and how might the presence of such potential costs influence sponsors’ willingness to reduce information asymmetry?

The aspects of Principal-Agent theory could provide nuances by extending this theory into investigating the true cost of the sponsorship (Müller & Turner, 2005). Could the sponsor be under-committing to the sponsorship costs, as indicated by the ISSs’ lack of preparedness for the holistic realities of study abroad? Could the sponsors be transferring some of the cost burdens to the ISSs by not preparing them adequately for the international study program?

Additionally, further extending Principal-Agent theory into the phenomenon investigated in this study could enrich and extend this theory by looking deeper into defining principal-agent roles and relationships between the sponsor, ISS and the academic host institutions. This could present a novel case of a multi-Principal-Agent relationship in a non-business context. Factors of fiduciary responsibilities, interests, information uncertainty-asymmetry and trust could be explored and investigated between relationships of ISS-Sponsor, ISS-Host academic institutions and Sponsor-Host academic institution.

Given the initial findings of this research study, there is a strong foundation for focusing future research on studying the relevance of Principal-Agent theory to the Sponsor-ISS relationship.

**Limitations**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influences of the contractual agreement on international sponsored students’ (ISS) academic experiences. Despite deliberate efforts to
ensure a systematic inquiry into this phenomenon, and like any research endeavor, this study was bounded by certain limitations highlighted in this section.

**Snapshot of Student Experiences**

The study design that framed this research used a qualitative case-study methodology focusing on three ISSs representing three different nationalities. These three ISSs were followed throughout their entire first year of academic experience at Blue University. Even though the data was collected over the entire academic year through successive interviews, these observations represent a snapshot of their academic experience at Blue University (Hanssen & Fægri, 2008).

In order to comprehensively capture the perceptions and attitudes of these ISS, the interview questions were designed to gather the ISS’s viewpoints from the point of their application to the sponsorship program to the current stage of being at Blue University. This allowed the researcher to gain a more in-depth view of the ISS’s thought processes up to the point of these interviews. Even though the research showed the ISS’s viewpoints from their past experiences, they still only provide a historical and present-time perspective. In other words, the findings of this study were restricted to the first-year experiences of the ISSs. Even though the one-year longitudinal assessment was able to help understand the various dimensions of this phenomenon, future studies should focus on assessing and even comparing how ISS’s perceptions and attitudes about the sponsor program evolve during their full educational tenure.

**Recall of Experiences, Perceptions, and Emotions**

The historical viewpoints of the ISSs were critical to assessing how they felt during the application, selection, and preparatory process before arriving at Blue University. In this study the students were asked to recall their experiences and reflect upon this phenomenon. Recall
memory invariably imposes cognitive effort and assumes awareness of the phenomenon (Ownsworth, Turpin, Andrew, & Fleming, 2008). In order to avoid undue recall challenges for the study participants, they were provided with a subjective judgment or assessment of the situations within the phenomenon. Therefore, the findings avoided any objective or specific accounts of their past experiences.

**Limited to the Student Point of View**

The design of this study was to understand how the contractual agreement influenced ISS academic experiences and performance. There were several aspects of this phenomenon that were shared by the students but presented subjective opinions about the sponsor and Blue University. One way that this study attempted to avoid response bias was by triangulating the subjective opinions when possible. However, several of the ISSs’ experiences were specific to the terms of their contractual agreement. Therefore, some specific opinions about the sponsor were unavoidable. However, the subjective assessments associated with the experiences of the ISS at Blue University were relatively more relatable across the three students. In future research, it would be insightful to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the sponsors as well as host universities.

**Limited to Study Sample**

The study design that framed this research used a qualitative case-study methodology focusing on three ISSs representing three different nationalities. These three ISSs were followed throughout their entire first year of their academic experience. Thus, the study data is limited to these students representing one specific sponsorship program in their respective countries (Saudi Aramco, Saudi Arabia; Public services Department of Malaysia, Malaysia; and Ministry of Higher Education of Oman, Oman).
Conclusions

International sponsored students consider their sponsorships to be beneficial and see the sponsorship in itself as an incentive. However, the sponsorship contract is typically designed to ensure that ISS are prepared in a particular field of study that will be of benefit to the sponsor. These majors may be of less interest to the sponsorship recipient. Among the most discussed concerns, the ISSs in this study found the restrictions around the field of study to be the most discouraging and least beneficial. It is important to investigate whether such contractual arrangements are producing optimal outcomes to benefit both the sponsors and the ISSs? In the short term, it would appear that sponsors gain an employable individual with a targeted skill set. However, in the long term, this same person employed by the sponsors may become demotivated, disinterested, and lacking in enthusiasm given their lack of interest in the assigned career path. Sponsors should explore how to balance their needs for targeted skill sets with the needs of the ISSs they fund.

Assuming that the findings of the current research study are generalizable, then the core incentive that was designed to benefit the ISS might in itself be creating a disincentive that eventually negatively impacts academic experiences. The actor with the most incentive in such programs is the sponsor; thus, the sponsor should be focusing on the needs and attitudes of the ISSs towards such sponsorship programs. Sponsors must make changes to the sponsorship programs, creating a win-win situation both for the sponsor and the ISS.

The sponsorship agreement often leads to over-monitoring to ensure compliance. This over-monitoring is designed to ensure ISSs do not engage in restricted activities and stay on course with their academics. However, the monitoring seemed to add another layer of disincentive, which ISS referred to as “lack of freedom.” Sponsors must work to find the
appropriate balance between monitoring and creating disincentives which work against their
goals and those of the ISS.

This early evidence into the sponsorship agreement and its influence on ISS has been
informative, but much work still needs to be done. The conditions under which such
relationships exist could tell researchers and practitioners more about how to make these
relationships more effective.

For the researcher, this curiosity arose out of her own professional engagement at an
international office as an administrative professional. Observing the ISSs and other international
students within the larger picture of an academic institution made her curious about how
institutions can be more inclusive and live true to ensuring academia’s greater mission for all
students.

International students in general face many challenges in adapting to a new academic
environment. These challenges could be such as feeling a sense of loneliness, inability to
integrate socially, dealing with home sickness, and language barriers coupled with navigating
social, cultural and academic differences in the new academic environment. Along with all the
challenges faced by international students in general, ISSs face additional pressures of various
formal contractual limitations including being constantly monitored by their sponsors. This adds
additional layer of challenges, anxiety and pressure for this student group. Therefore, in this
critical phase of initial college experience, ISSs deserve support from the institutions to adapt
successfully and develop connections with the institution, faculty, and their peers.

In the case of ISSs specifically, it is time that U.S. institutions begin to ask the harder
questions that go beyond the financial attractiveness of inviting ISS to enroll. These questions
must be more focused on ensuring that the institution is a part of a responsible and meaningful
effort to educate students who have decided to entrust their education and career success to a college or university experiences—whether domestic or international, sponsored or non-sponsored, with parental support or self-supported. The ISS demographic presents an interesting and important microcosm of how institutions must learn to facilitate and support learning for all students, irrespective of their backgrounds and experiences.
APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDELINES AND PROTOCOL

INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

1. The International/Global office at Blue University was requested to help with contacting all freshman ISS from the three identified countries (Saudi Arabia, Oman, Malaysia) to participate in the research study.

2. The ISSs were contacted by the researcher requesting them to participate in a face-to-face interview and offering $100 at the end of each semester as an incentive to compensate for their time and effort.

3. If the participant agreed, they were asked to participate in a face-to-face interview at a mutually agreed upon day and time.

4. At the day and time of the interview, the researcher made introductions and described the research project.

5. The participants were reminded of their consent at the time of establishing the first contact.

6. The researcher explained the guidelines of the interview and then introduced a set of sequential discussion questions.

7. Discussions were audio recorded.
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date: ____________________________

Location: _________________________

Please State your: Name, gender, country of citizenship, name and country of your sponsor, program of study at Blue University, year and semester of your education at Blue University.

1. Could you tell me how did you find the sponsor or become a sponsored student?

2. Did your previous academic performance have anything to do with your selection by your sponsor?

3. Overall what do you think how it will be for you to perform academically at Blue University?

4. Can you talk to me about how your sponsor is involved with your academics here at Blue University?

5. What are your contractual agreements about academic performance with your sponsor once accepted in this sponsorship program?

6. How are the terms of your contract as you just described communicated to you? Who do you review these contracts with?

7. Does your contract allow for you to change your major or the institution of study?

8. Do you use any kind of additional academic support services offered to Blue University students? If you required additional academic support like, tutoring, additional class fees for specialized classes or study abroad experience, would that be supported by your sponsor?

9. How does your sponsor monitor your academic performance at Blue University? How often does this occur? Where does this occur?

10. Does your sponsor provide you incentives for your academic performance at Blue University?

11. What do you feel are the benefits of being under contract where another entity is funding your education?

12. Are there any drawbacks to having this entity fund your education here?

13. What would happen if you identified employment here in the U.S. after graduation? How
do you think your sponsor would react if this were to happen?

14. If you weren’t here on contract, how do you think that might affect your attitude about your academics?

15. How do you think you spend your time differently than other students from your country that are not on a sponsorship contract?

16. How do you think your social life is different than other students from your country that are not on a sponsorship contract?

17. How do you think your academic experience is different than other students not sponsored, from your country and those from the USA?

18. Compared to what you thought before (after first semester) what do you think now about your academic performance at Blue?

19. How much do you use Blue University services such as the Global /International office? How do you think the Global /International office has contributed to your academic experience here at Blue University?

20. Are you involved with any student clubs/associations here at Blue University? What purpose do you think they serve in your academic experience here at Blue University?

21. How do you think Blue University could help improve your academic and non-academic experiences at Blue University?
Bibliography


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