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**Afghan Female Students' Academic and  
Cultural experiences and Adjustments in the  
United States**

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Educational Studies, Trinity College

Professor Daniel Douglas

In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Bachelor of Arts  
in Educational Studies

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative, phenomenological study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of Afghan women enrolled in higher education institutions in the United States. The objective was to develop an understanding of the participants' perceptions of the factors that led to their enrolment in higher education and their educational experiences while in Afghanistan compared to the United States. Data were collected through remote interviews with seven participants. Findings of this study show that Afghan students in the United States, like other international students go through a series of integration and adaptation processes. These processes might take some longer than the others to get used to a new academic climate. The findings of this study also reveal that studying in the United States, Afghan students experienced a range of academic challenges (i.e., teaching methodologies, educational practices, language, class participation, etc.). They were also confronted with non-academic challenges (i.e., social, cultural, and psychological) that exacerbated their academic challenges in the United States. Despite the challenges, their education has been rewarding in the United States.

Afghanistan can be a vicious and cruel country to live in, especially for women and young girls. Most Afghan girls were not allowed to attend school even during the twenty years after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, and of those who did, only about a handful of them attended long enough to graduate. It was common for most girls to be forced out of attending school - many girls have been attacked and some have even been doused with acid. Now that the Taliban

are back in power, Afghan women have already lost the minimal human rights they have had during the years 2001 to 2021.

To attend school as a woman in a country like Afghanistan takes lots of courage. Being an Afghan woman who was born and raised in Afghanistan for seventeen years, I have first-hand experience of how challenging it is to simply live in Afghanistan let alone getting an education. Afghan women have experienced harsh learning conditions, and the few who get a chance to study abroad have already gone through rough challenges in Afghanistan. Once they arrive in the United States, they are bewildered by how learning and education is valued in the western countries. They go through culture shock, academic challenges, psychological issues, social imbalance, and much more but, because they have seen worse circumstances and times when they were denied their universal right to getting an education, they understand that studying in the United States is an opportunity not many can have. They are aware that their fellow classmates are not even allowed to go to school. Therefore, when my research participants reflect on their educational journey in the United States as overall positive, they mean it could be way worse. It is not to disregard the countless challenges they go through while in the United States and the reality that it could be alleviated by thoughtful policies and practices by the study abroad programs and higher education policy makers.

## **Introduction**

Education is one of the most important contributors to having a successful future. In developed countries such as North America boys and girls are fortunate enough to have access to a gender unbiased education system. However, in countries like Afghanistan girls are marginalized and deprived of the right to learn. Afghanistan is a country of war, where women and girls are often the worst victims, and one of the poorest countries in the world. The ongoing war has subjected Afghans to harsh living conditions, leaving most with insufficient resources to survive. Many women are left widowed, and are obligated to provide for their families, while having little to no education or skill.

The development of each country depends on the growth of its educational sector. The Afghan higher education system suffers from low quality educational resources. Most staff only hold an undergraduate degree. Most universities rely on teacher-centered approaches without focusing on modern teaching methods such as experiential learning, laboratory sessions, and technology related education. Therefore, some (relatively affluent or most talented) students embark on receiving higher education abroad even with the high cost of tuition.

For my Educational Studies thesis project, I explored Afghan female students' academic experiences in pursuing higher education in the United States to better understand the challenges they face when they study abroad. This study is important for two reasons. First, there is a lack of literature on

Afghan students' experiences studying abroad; my research contributes to the existing literature by specifically addressing Afghan students' academic experiences. Second, as more Afghan students are entering the United States, (immigrants or F1 student visa holders) every year, it is vital for the United States higher education entities to consider Afghan students' educational backgrounds and how to better address their educational needs. My research is particularly relevant given the significant number of young people recently evacuated from Afghanistan, and the tens of thousands who hope to migrate over the coming years. Studying Afghan female students who have been in America for the past two or more years, will provide people in positions of authority with a baseline knowledge about Afghan refugees' academic experiences and to make informed decisions.

This work is also intended to aid policymakers in understanding the educational challenges that exist for immigrating Afghan women, and how to craft policy approaches that can aid them in accessing all the benefits of the education system in their new home. This study seeks to answer the following research questions: 1) How Afghan female students' prior educational and cultural experiences align with the expectations and culture of the United States following immigration? 2) From Afghan female students' perspectives, what kind of challenges do they face during their education in the United States? 3) And how do they address these challenges?

To explore female Afghan students' academic experiences in pursuing education in the United States, for this study, I employed a qualitative research

methodology and a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach is used to generate an extensive amount of information from a small number of participants concerning their lived experiences. In this respect, I individually interviewed 7 participants in different sessions and provided a specified set of questions for each interview. My participants shared their experiences from the Afghan education system and their adjustment and challenges in the United States. Through this approach, I was able to collect detailed information from a small number of participants, which has provided me with the opportunity to find similarities and differences in their experiences. As a researcher, I chose this approach to keep aside my own biases and experiences in order to hear from my participants and collect a wider view from participants' involvement and attachment in relation to the topic, instead of sharing my opinion related to the topic.

In what follows, I have situated my topic through a relevant review of literature by contextualizing the history of war and women in Afghanistan, the higher education system in Afghanistan, and the challenges students face. To understand the academic experiences of Afghan students in the United States, I have also positioned my research topic through an applicable literature review of international students' experiences in the United States or other host countries. Following this, I have presented my research methodology and design. I have used Vincent Tinto's social and academic integration model as a main theoretical perspective to better understand and explain academic retention rates among international students. Next, I have presented my

research findings organized by three major themes: Afghan female students' academic, social and cultural, and psychological experiences while studying in the United States.

## **Literature Review**

In this section, I will first explain my thesis' theoretical framework which utilizes Tinto's academic and social integration model to examine the education transition experiences of Afghan female students pursuing college in the United States. I will next provide a contextual background on the higher education system and the challenges female students face in Afghanistan. Next, I will explore the challenges international students face in the United States to better understand the differences between their experiences in their home countries and adjustments in the United States - this will help me provide a better grasp on Afghan female students' experiences in the United States.

### **Theoretical Framework: Integration Model**

It is generally believed that international students have difficulties adapting to the college community and the American ways of life. The aim of this study is to investigate the factors impeding the integration of Afghan female students in the United States. There has been a significant increase in the number of international students seeking places in tertiary institutions in the United States. These students who come from different countries with different backgrounds, takes them long periods of time to assimilate into the American culture. Considering Afghan female students pre-college life, integration happens at slower and more challenging rate when they study abroad.

Vincent Tinto's (1993) student integration model was designed to explain aspects and processes that influenced an individual's decision to leave college or university, and how these processes interact to ultimately produce attrition.

Tinto aimed to do several things. First, he aimed to differentiate between different types of leaving behavior. This is important as there are a number of different ways in which a student may choose, or be forced to leave, college. According to Tinto (1993), most student integration models feature the concepts of social integration and academic integration. But what is meant by these concepts and what is the difference between them?

Tinto (1993) built on ideas developed by Durkheim, who spoke of social and intellectual integration. The former refers to that form of integration which results from personal affiliations and from the day-to-day interactions among different members of society. The latter comes from the sharing of values, which are held in common by other members of society. Durkheim's theory was based on the assertion that the likelihood that an individual will commit suicide is predicted by the level of their integration into the fabric of society. Essentially, Durkheim argued that if an individual has an adequate social support network and sufficient moral integration, it reduces the likelihood that they will commit suicide.

Tinto (1993) asserted that the act of committing suicide was the willful withdrawal of an individual from existence and was therefore analogous to dropout from higher education which was the willful withdrawal of an individual one aspect of society. While in Durkheim's model of suicide, the individual is committing suicide because they are insufficiently integrated into society, Tinto asserts that dropout occurs because the individual is insufficiently integrated into society, Tinto (1993) identified the two most important systems at college as

academic and social and contended that dropout could occur through a lack of integration in either or both of these systems.

In Tinto's (1993) student integration model, he lists family background, individual characteristics, and precollege schooling as noteworthy in goal and institutional commitment. Individual attributes cover variables such as race, sex, and academic ability. Pre-college experiences cover social and academic experiences like school grade point average, academic, and social attainments. Family background covers factors like social status, value, and presumptuous climates.

Goal and institutional commitment then determine the grade performance and intellectual development within the academic system. Peer-group interactions and faculty interactions determine the commitment level within the social realm. The extent of academic integration through academic performance and intellectual development will determine if the goal commitment is met or not. Social interactions depend on the successful interactions with peers (students) and faculty.

There were many factors used within Tinto's theory to test the students' persistence. Most of the student retention theories were based on the economic factors, psychological processes, campus climate, student learning, campus cultures, ethnic differences, college choice, and social reproduction. Tinto (1993) asserted that students enter an institution with certain background characteristics (i.e., family background, skills, abilities, and prior schooling) that have shaped their levels of commitment for completing their degrees. He further

purported that students' levels of commitment were continually shaped by their interactions within the various academic and social systems of their college.

According to Tinto (1993), if students are academically and/or socially integrated into the college life, they start to feel a sense of belonging in the community which is essential to their experience. In terms of its potential impact on retention, there is a strong relationship between belonging and student persistence, retention, and graduation. Tinto (1993) theorized that the first-year semester is a prime environment for students to consider social integration and campus engagement. Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration is a longitudinal model that explains the interaction between the student and the institution.

From an academic and social view, belonging can be defined as a feeling of college belonging, college identity, connectedness, and intellectual competence. These are moments that do not always occur in the classroom. It can happen anywhere a student makes contact with other students and faculty to become involved in opportunities for engagement and learn success strategies (Hughes, Karp, & O'Gara 2008). A sense of belonging also involves one's personal belief that one is an accepted member of an academic community whose presence and contributions are valued. In addition, in the environment of higher education, the concept of belonging has been analyzed from many perspectives.

**History: Women in Afghanistan**

Afghanistan is one of the forty-seven least progressive countries in the world, (Ahmed-Gosh 2003). Continuous years of civil war, invasion by different regimes, and insecurity have been the major causes of Afghanistan's underdevelopment. The war in Afghanistan has a long history; the country remains a battleground for many foreign and national forces since 1978, when the Democratic party of Afghanistan toppled the government of Mohammad Daud Khan. Later, in 1979, the Soviet Army invaded the country for the sake of saving the new communist regime. Under the Mujahideen<sup>1</sup> regime (1992–1996) and Taliban<sup>2</sup> regime (1996–2001), women's freedom was tightly controlled (Ahmed-Gosh 2003), particularly under the Taliban government introducing and enforcing a universal regulation that women were not permitted to leave their homes without a *mahram* (male relative) (Ahmed-Gosh 2003). Since 1979 until the collapse of the Taliban regime, Afghanistan's progress in all sectors gradually slowed down, but it significantly declined in the education sector when the Taliban closed girls' schools (Samady 2001). Girls were banned from

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<sup>1</sup> A group of Islamic warriors operating in Afghanistan during the civil war (1978–92) that opposed the invading Soviet forces and eventually toppled the Afghan communist government.

<sup>2</sup> The Taliban (directly translates to 'students' in Arabic) were largely founded by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence beginning in 1994; the I.S.I. used the Taliban to establish a regime in Afghanistan which would be favorable to Pakistan. The promise made by the Taliban - in Pashtun (the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan) areas straddling Pakistan and Afghanistan - was to restore peace and security and enforce their own austere version of Sharia, or Islamic law, once in power.

attending school after the age of eight and women could not leave their homes unless accompanied by a close male relative.

Afghanistan is a highly patriarchal society with unequal power relations between men and women and dominant modes of hegemonic masculinity. This can be seen through the strict cultural codes of gender segregation and men's policing of women's freedom and sexuality. Women's mobility, particularly in rural settings, is often highly constrained due to concerns about the policing of women's sexuality and maintaining the honor of the family, leading to *purdah* or the 'protection' and control of women through seclusion and veiling. In 2001, only one million students were enrolled in schools, the majority of whom were boys. This number increased significantly by 2013 when over nine million students, including boys and girls, attended schools. Despite this progress, the number of out of school students was 3.3 million (Ahmed-Gosh 2003).

### **Higher Education System in Afghanistan**

Higher education in Afghanistan is overseen by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). Like most North American and European countries, standard completion term for a bachelor's degree is four years, while a master's degree takes one to two years, and Ph.D. degrees take three to seven years to complete. High school students who would like to continue to higher education must take the rigorous Kankor<sup>3</sup> examination. Private universities do not require the Kankor test. To be admitted to a university, students need to score

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<sup>3</sup> Pre- undergraduate examination to certify college entrance.

a minimum of 332 from 360 points or a score specified by the field and program. The most demanding fields with the highest “market value” for which students need to obtain high scores are medical school, law school, engineering, political sciences, computer science, and economics.

Sherzad (2016) argues that the Kankor exam leaves the majority of students disappointed for many reasons: a student’s high performance in school is disregarded, the slots available in every field are not enough for all high school graduates, and high schools do not usually prepare students for this exam which sets them to failure. Students will only have one more chance to take the exam in their lifetime (Sherzad 2016).

### **Higher Education Challenges in Afghanistan**

The constant years of war undermined the development of higher education in Afghanistan. During the civil war, close to six million Afghans including qualified higher education staff migrated to other countries (Samady 2001). A loss of educated population negatively impacted Afghanistan’s higher education development. However, after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, student enrollment in higher education increased from one percent to 9.6 percent. There is not enough data suggesting the exact numbers of student enrollment in early 2000s after the fall of the Taliban. In 2018, the total number of students enrolled in governmental and non-governmental universities was 300,000, out of which 100,000 were female students. Since then, the number of universities has also increased, there are about 19 governmental and 75 private universities in the country, (Samady 2001).

The Ministry of Higher Education in Afghanistan does not have room to enroll all high school graduates who desire to pursue higher education. According to the 10-year strategic plan of MOHE, they can only accept and enroll 25 percent of the high school graduates who take Kankor exam in undergraduate programs, (Sherzad 2016). *The Resilience of Women in Higher Education in Afghanistan*, a 2014 study shows that scarcity of fundamental and primary teaching materials such as chairs, desks, electricity, specific labs for women; lack of bathrooms for female students; transportation and long commutes; limited computer and language classes for women; a lack of female dorms in rural areas; no designated prayer rooms for women; religious and cultural barriers in general; lack of emotional support for girls living in dorms; and adjustment difficulties for girls from rural to urban culture as reasons for a low enrollment of female students in higher education (Kosha et al. 2014). Another constraint is the lack of qualified teachers in universities in Afghanistan.

Afghan female students who qualify to study abroad constantly compare the challenges they have faced in the education system in their home country to the American education system. While the systems are vastly different in method and delivery of information, a comparison of both systems leaves these students with stressors such as having access to world class education and having the privilege of safety and security highlights their experience in the United States. In Afghanistan, these students have seen harsh conditions of life during the war. These students, then, expect themselves to utmost utilize the

opportunity they have been given, which often results in disregarding the challenges they face while studying abroad.

### **International Students' Experiences in the United States**

International students are non-immigrants possessing a permanent residence abroad as defined by the Department of Homeland Security and are anticipated to return to their country after completion of their purpose of study (Hegarty 2014). Colleges and universities in the United States have been a preferred destination for international students when it comes to continuing their education after high school. The American higher education system is one of the most prestigious systems in the world in terms of quality, quantity, diversity, integrity, government support, and work opportunities for qualified graduates (Eckel & King 2011). Reasons for getting an education in the United States differ for different people. For Asian students, studying in the United States is due to the following reasons: English taught programs, high quality education, the high quality and availability of modern teaching and learning materials (e.g., laboratories and libraries), and conducive learning environments.

The number of international students attending institutions of higher education is on the rise in the United States. Annually, U.S. higher education institutions enroll approximately one million international students. The overall number of international students in the U.S. has grown 72 percent since 2000. Also, the foreign student population rose from 547,867 in 2000 to 690,923 in 2010. These students come from different countries such as China, India, South Korea, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Afghan

students make up over 450 international students in the United States; 230 of these are graduate students (IIE 2018).

An increased international student enrollment has raised several challenges and issues for universities in the United States. Hudzik and Briggs (2012) concluded that although many have defined international recruitment success by the number of full-fee-paying international students enrolled, the reputation of the university may suffer if the campus experience provided was substandard and the international student population has slowly disappeared. While international students have provided countless internationalization<sup>4</sup> opportunities on American campuses, this can only be achieved if they are actively integrated into campus life (Hudzik and Briggs 2012).

Even though studying in the United States is a great opportunity to learn in a practical and participatory way that might not be practiced in students' home countries (Hegarty 2014), it is also not an easy decision to make due to the existence of the challenges prior, during, and after the journey. Studying in the United States is both rewarding and challenging for international students. From one perspective, students gain exposure to a new culture, society, and career opportunities. From another perspective, they deal with academic, psychological, and cultural challenges.

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<sup>4</sup> Internationalization is the conscious effort to integrate and infuse international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the ethos and outcomes of postsecondary education. To be fully successful, it must involve active and responsible engagement of the academic community in global networks and partnerships.

### **Academic Challenges**

According to Kim (2016), a shared and common academic challenge that all international students face is the gap between the education system of the United States and their home countries. International students who pass all the required tests to study in the United States have a high expectation from themselves. In their home countries, they are used to being the top students in their classes. The feeling of not being academically good enough negatively affects the psychological well-being of international students.

### **Academic Integration**

International students attending United States colleges and universities bring valuable cultural and educational diversity as well as economic contributions to American campuses and their communities. Internationalization on college campuses encourages cultural awareness which can provide beneficial skills for students as they enter the workplace in a globally interconnected society. As international student recruiting increases, research suggests that universities must become more aware of the adjustment and acclimation challenges international students face and provide appropriate services to keep them enrolled.

According to Hegarty (2014), there is a big push in the United States higher education system to increase international student enrollment which will provide a more diverse student population. Earmarking additional resources for recruitment has increased international student enrollment in colleges and universities in the United States. However, through a review of literature, it has

been determined that many institutions recruiting international students are unequipped to provide the necessary services to keep them enrolled.

Retention rates among international students at American colleges and universities have suffered across many campuses. "Current concerns about excellence in higher education stress the importance of educational excellence and the need to actively involve students in their own learning," (Tinto, 2009). Tinto argues that the quality and quantity of student involvement is directly related to student learning, the "effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of the policy or practice to increase student involvement in learning," (Tinto, 2009). It should be the goal of the institution that once international students have been successfully recruited, the students should be retained throughout their college career.

According to Schulman (2014), international student pre-arrival expectations and the realities of student life often differ which can negatively impact student integration rates. Creating a positive campus environment will enhance acclimation to their new surroundings, thus improve integration process. International students have not only brought a much-needed component of diversity and personality to college campuses in the United States, but they have also added to the financial well-being of the institution (Hegarty 2014). Hegarty (2014) found that international students need support, encouragement, and nurturing as they acclimate into college life in the United States. Furthermore, vital to international student acclimation is the collaborative effort of academic and student services departments.

### **Psychological Concerns**

International students can suffer from psychological problems and stress, moving to a country that is not their own. "Difficulties with the following linguistic, academic, interpersonal, financial, and interpersonal problems constitute unique sources of stress for international students" (Mori 137). This can result in international students feeling inferior, isolated, and excluded which could affect their academic performance (Johnson et al. 2018).

Crisis situations can also arise from their financial difficulties. The general assumption that most international students are wealthy is, in fact, erroneous; the lack of sufficient funds is one of their most commonly expressed concerns. Because immigration regulations strictly limit non-U.S. residents' opportunities for employment outside the schools or for federal financial aid, their monetary problems are more difficult to resolve than are those of American students.

### **Social and Cultural Integration**

Most international students struggle with social problems related to "social integration, daily life tasks, homesickness, and role conflicts" (Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009, p. 376). Social issues and cultural gaps between their host and native country could disrupt students' academic work. For some international students, integrating with domestic students in the United States is critical. The communication difficulties between domestic and international students due to the language, cultural, and social barriers and gaps make it difficult for them to get along with American students.

Ozturgut and Murhpy (2009) found a cultural gap between American and international students' friendships. According to their findings, for international students, friendship is a serious and everlasting relationship. However, this is not practiced in American culture and friendships are often superficial. For this reason, it is easier for international students to be friends with other international students rather than with American students (Johnson et al., 2018).

The journey of international students in the United States is not an easy process; it involves challenges, struggles, and learning opportunities for their personal and professional development. Even though students come to the United States with different backgrounds, their experiences can be quite similar to one another, (Tinto, 1993). Afghan students might also deal with some of these same challenges while in the United States, however, each student's experience is unique and different based on their home culture. This will be further explored in the data collection part of this study after the introduction of the research methodology and design.

### **Culture Shock**

The difference in worldwide customs and traditions is vast and it is therefore unsurprising that international students arriving in the United States for the first time encounter cultural imbalance. They are baffled by everyday issues such as relationships with peers, academics and support staff from the opposite sex, gestures that are appropriate, networking with other students and the knock-on effect this has for their privacy and religious views, especially as

some international students are from countries like Afghanistan that are particularly devout in their thinking and customs.

I would best describe culture shock as a roller coaster ride- fun and exciting, yet a little scary and daunting. Culture shock is a state of bewilderment, anxiety, disorientation, and distress as an individual is suddenly exposed to a social or cultural environment much different from their own, (Johnson 2018). It happens from country to country, from state to state, city to city, and within neighborhoods. Not everybody experiences it in the exact same way. Culture shock occurs when one enters an unfamiliar place where cultural traits, social norms, beliefs, and customs may not be in line with what they are familiar with. Culture shock happens frequently for international students and immigrants who come to America. For instance, student teacher relationships in North America are not the same as other countries.

Afghan students for instance have a high regard for their teachers. In Afghanistan students never call their teacher by their first name, because it is considered not respectful. Afghan students are taught to be modest and not to display their knowledge freely until being specially called for. All these things can lead to misunderstandings since most American professors highly promote class participation. When professors see their students listening to them, smiling or nodding, they imagine that these students understand the subject very well. Some students mask their emotions and just act like that to be polite, since they think that if they would ask a question, the teachers would be hurt for their teaching was not clear enough for the class.

In Afghanistan, students stay in the same classroom with a fixed seat every day throughout the year, while their teachers come to their class to teach them. Therefore, students can have many friends who always do the same things with them. This helps to build a closer and stable relationship between students. Students are more interdependent. Here in America, students are more individualistic. Relationships between people are often many but temporary or casual.

It has been acknowledged by several authors that unstructured and authentic intercultural relations between international students and their host society is rare and that merely being among is unusual, and simply being exposed to individuals from a variety of other countries and cultures does not result in internationalization any more than residing in the same street establishes a community. Aspects such as language difficulties, reduced knowledge of protocol and procedure, and anxiety of being considered ignorant often means that international students develop more intimate groups based on language and ethnic background, even within larger groups.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### **Methodology Rationale**

To explore Afghan students' academic experiences in pursuing graduate studies in the United States, for this study I employed a qualitative research methodology approach. The purpose of qualitative research methodology is to collect detailed information through multiple methods for a specific research inquiry (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This information could be gathered through different methods, such as interviews and observation. In sociology, interviewing, observing, and analyzing are activities central to qualitative research. Given these strengths of qualitative research, and after getting research approval from Trinity College's Institutional Review Board (IRB), through in-depth interviews of Afghan female students, I studied their educational experiences in the United States.

I interviewed seven female Afghan students, who were either currently working towards, or were holding a bachelor's degree from a United States based college/university. All my research participants have been schooled 8 to 12 years in Afghanistan prior to coming to the United States. I used pseudonyms for all of them.

### **Phenomenological Approach**

To gain in-depth understanding about the lived experiences of Afghan students in the United States' higher education system, I utilized a

phenomenological<sup>5</sup> approach for my research. In this approach, each participant's lived experience is regarded as valuable and meaningful. The data is often collected through a series of in-depth, intensive, and interactive interviews. In this respect, I individually interviewed seven participants. My participants shared their experiences from the Afghan education system and their adjustment challenges they faced while studying in the United States. Through this approach, I was able to collect detailed information from a small number of participants, which provided me the opportunity to find similarities and differences in their experiences. As a researcher, I chose this approach to keep aside my own biases and experiences in order to hear from my participants and collect a wider view regarding the participants' involvement and attachment in relation to the topic, instead of sharing my opinion (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

### **Sampling**

For this research, it was significant to interview women who had a deep understanding about the research topic and were willing to share their lived experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Therefore, I used purposive sampling in the first selection process through which I identified potential participants who had special insights; had relevant experiences; and were well articulated or appropriate for the focus of this research. In order to qualify for the interview, participants should have had some years of educational experience in

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<sup>5</sup> The phenomenological approach is used to generate an extensive amount of information from a small number of participants concerning their lived experiences.

Afghanistan, lived in the United States for at least two years, graduated or were actively enrolled in a U.S. based university, and the gap between their education and this study was not more than five years. In order to gather the findings of this study, it was important that all participants met these criteria.

After the first three interviews, I used snowball<sup>6</sup> sampling to find more participants. Following this trend, I reached out to my circle of acquaintances without any biases, asking them to connect me with other Afghan students who have completed or are in the process of studying at a U.S. college or university. I contacted my potential participants via email or social media prior to the interview to get their consent to participate in this research. I sent them the consent form and scheduled their interviews at a convenient time for all consecutive interviews.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The phenomenological approach is a useful tool in gathering information from research participants' points of view in a descriptive manner that originate from their experiences (Lester, 1999). Interviews were the most pertinent method to help me answer my research question by tapping into participants' lived experiences. The phenomenological research approach necessitates the use of semi-structured interviews to provide enough space, time, and freedom for participants to share their experiences and reflect upon them in a descriptive manner.

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<sup>6</sup> A snowball sampling is a type of purposeful sampling through which the researcher starts the interview first with the "key participants" and asks them to "refer other participants" who could meet the research criteria.

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allowed participants to share their experiences without following a restricted framework. Social scientists describe it as a list of questions on a particular topic provided by the researcher prior to the interview to lead the interview. This also provides space for participants to talk freely about unexpected topics that arise during the interview. For this reason, I developed a series of questions that helped me answer my research question during my interviews, (see Appendix A).

The interviews were conducted online due to geographical distance between the participants and myself; I conducted interviews via Zoom. All my research participants resided in the United States during my data collection. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Interviews were recorded on my password-protected laptop that only I had access to.

The interviews were conducted in my native language Farsi, and in English language honoring my participants' preferences. Because the participants were able to speak English fluently, as was required to study abroad, I sought their preference on the language in which they felt comfortable speaking. Thus, most of the interviews were conducted in English as desired by my participants.

After the completion of this study, I deleted the recordings from my laptop. After each interview session was done, I transcribed the interviews and kept the written form of the interviews in my password-protected laptop. I also

took notes during the interview. I typed all the information on my laptop and used pseudonyms for each participant.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed through deductive and inductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning is a process that is concerned with testing theory and hypothesis with specific data, observation, or findings. It generally starts with a broader or general topic and becomes more specific. In relation to this reasoning, I categorized data based on specific themes discussed in the literature review section of this paper. Through coding of each data point, I analyzed each theme such as Afghan female students' higher education challenges in Afghanistan; academic challenges or experiences in the United States; social and cultural shock while abroad; and psychological health while navigating life in their host country. Through the given codes, I made connections between different themes; one of the overarching ones was the academic challenges Afghan students face in their country and while studying in the United States.

Through inductive coding, I drew out the unexpected findings expressed by participants during interviews. The inductive reasoning is a process in which analysis moves from the specific observations to broader generalizations and theories. Keeping this in mind, during research new topics or themes emerged and generalizations were made on the basis of generated information. Since there is a lack of literature on the experiences of Afghan students in getting higher education in Afghanistan as well as their experiences in adapting

to the U.S. education system, this analysis approach was extremely important to generate new knowledge on this topic. Therefore, I identified the emergent data that was not discussed in the literature review, and it was coded inductively. Upon completion of a coding process, I compared the data gathered from the interviews and embarked on developing themes. Finally, the data was interpreted in relation to the conceptual framework developed at the beginning of this research.

### **Research Limitations and Delimitations**

One of the limitations of this research was finding people to participate in the study. The timing of my interview process was during most schools' midterms, students did not want to interrupt their classes and exams. Another limitation was for students who volunteered to participate, because of their busy schedules, I had to reschedule the interviews a few times.

It is important to note that I interviewed only seven participants, which does not represent the viewpoint of a larger Afghan population that has studied in the United States. I delimited the scope of my study by focusing on Afghan students who studied in both Afghanistan and the United States, instead of focusing on all international students. This helped me to narrow down the scope of this research and to focus only on one country. Moreover, to gain up-to-date information, I deliberately chose participants who have studied in the United States for the past, at least, 2 years and no more than 7 years. This ensured the information derived from the interviews was not outdated.

## **Findings**

I conducted this research to explore Afghan female identifying students' academic experiences in pursuing higher education in Afghanistan and the United States to better understand the challenges they face when they study abroad. My research questions were: How do Afghan female students' prior educational and cultural experiences align with the expectations and culture of the United States following immigration? From Afghan students' perspectives, what kind of challenges do they face during their education in the United States? How do they address these challenges? In the following, I will provide answers to my primary research questions through an in-depth review of my interviews.

### **Educational Experiences in Afghanistan**

The education of my research participants has been largely affected by war. As explained in my literature review, the decades of war influenced education quality in Afghanistan and resulted in several implications for Afghan students (Samady, 2001). Overall, my findings revealed that my research participants were not content with the quality of education they received in Afghanistan. Most of my participants recalled how insecurity in the country prevented them from going to school continuously.

My findings demonstrated that participants had a keen passion to receive higher Education. Two of the seven took the Kankor test. Similar to the findings in the literature review (Sherzad, 2016), my participants found the Kankor exam challenging, frustrating, and an improper way for students to be

admitted into universities. Zara mentioned that studying in the Education faculty was her last choice; she had to indicate her top 10 choices in the exam. She ranked education as the very least, and she ended up going into the English department of Education. In relation to students' failure in getting admission to their preferred fields, Donya mentioned, "Kankor test disappoints students because it does not measure students' knowledge based on their talents." According to Zara, "knowing all the school subjects in Kankor is hard, the fields need to be specific and categorized." From the participants' narratives about the Kankor test, which led to studying in a field that was not their choice, it is clear that for students in Afghanistan, getting an education in their preferred field is rare. Kankor test does not determine students' talents and competences due to the number of questions being brought from nearly all the subjects taught in school. As a consequence, students either fail or end up studying in a field that is not their preference.

In third world countries like Afghanistan, classes are mostly lecture focused and teachers are at the core center of teaching. "The teaching in the class was more of a lecture style and repetitions and the usage of participatory approaches in the class was minimal, the percentage of lecture styles and rote memorization was higher than the usage of participatory approaches," said Donya. It was affirmed by the majority of participants that their teachers' level of education was below standard. Donya said that her teachers at the university were fresh graduates. Zara stated that in her first year of undergraduate study she had a teacher whose English competency was not

good. She indicated, "I was learning English and the person who was teaching me could not speak English fluently. How could you learn English from someone who cannot speak the language very well?"

During the interviews, two of my participants talked about the existence of negative competition between Afghan students. Bahar said that Afghan students are in competition to get a higher score in order to surpass other fellow students by getting high scores in all the subjects. Similar with Bahar's opinion, Neda talked about grading students in the class. She said: "as much as I enjoyed being a top student in the class by having high grades, I have realized our education system does not support average students, for the majority students it is rather discouraging." Both Neda and Bahar underlined the negative aspects of the grading system that reinforces negative competition between students in the Afghan educating system.

Finally, to corroborate Donya's argument on how the Afghan education system reinforces students' memorization skills, it was important for me to know what competencies the Afghan education system has developed in Afghan students so they could pursue higher education abroad, or at least if it has prepared them to study abroad. The participants' responses to these questions proved my assumption that the Afghan education system does not prepare students to study abroad, mostly because the system is teacher centered, which is opposite of what Western education embraces. When Saba first came to the United States, her school placed her in high level math class which she said was over her head. "At the first day of school, they gave me a math

placement exam which placed me in a high-level calculus class. Doing math in Afghanistan was different. It was based on memorization. I remember I was fast in putting a problem in a formula, but I did not know its usage in daily life. My math was all based-on memorization. I was taught to see math in connection to life. My teacher did not like that, and I almost failed that class.” My research participants confirmed that the education system in Afghanistan schooled them with memorization skills.

Reading and writing are some of the skills that the education system in Afghanistan does not put any emphasis on. “Although I had taken English classes outside school in Afghanistan, my spoken English was decent but academic reading and writing was a challenge for me. I remember being asked to read a novel and write an essay about it. I did not know how to write an essay back then. We never wrote essays in Afghanistan. I was shocked. I got a D for the first time. I read the book, but I didn't get anything from it,” said Alef. These quotes demonstrate that the education system in Afghanistan did not help the participants to develop necessary academic skills, which contributed to the academic challenges they experienced in the United States, as the next part of the paper will follow.

### **Educational Experiences in the United States**

Like other international students discussed in the literature review section of this paper, Afghan students in the United States go through similar challenges with an added factor of war and trauma coming from their country. Along with social, cultural, and academic challenges, research has shown that

international students' mental health is of high concern. In what follows, I will discuss my research findings regarding three themes: academic life, psychological concerns, and social and cultural challenges of Afghan female students in the United States.

### **Academic Life**

Coming from a rote learning system to a system that is totally different with what they had experienced in Afghanistan, was a major impediment to Afghan students obtaining their education in the United States. Some of the academic challenges mentioned by my participants in the first days of their academic studies in the United States contained adjustments such as time management, getting their assignments submitted online and on time, and overall, getting familiar with a new education system. With a rote learning background, my participants lacked skills needed in the United States to pursue higher education. Some of the skills mentioned by the participants were academic reading, writing, working in groups, searching for books and journals in the library and online, participating in class discussions, giving and receiving feedback, analyzing and solving problems. "It was really hard for me because back home I was used to being really smart in the class and I always came first. Suddenly, when I came to the U.S. I had to work really hard to get an average B in my classes," said Fetwa. Alef added, "during my first two years, I used to study 24 hours straight every day, but my grades were not any good."

For most participants language was one of the greatest challenges they experienced in the United States. "Because of the language barrier, I couldn't

understand people. I had to pay extra attention when talking to them,” said Donya. The participants extensively mentioned reading and writing academic articles and papers as a language barrier. “Although I had taken English classes outside school in Afghanistan, my spoken English was decent but academic reading and writing was a challenge for me,” said Saba. This resonated with Zara as well, who spoke of her experience as, “during my first year, I had an assignment to write a ten-page paper, I was traumatized. I did not know how to write that long of a paper.” Another participant, Fetwa expressed a similar experience during her first years in college. “I remember being asked to read a novel and write an essay about it. I did not know how to write an essay back then. We never wrote essays in Afghanistan. I was shocked,” said Fetwa.

While the majority of my research participants had undergone some level of academic challenge, for a few others, academic challenge did not make it to the top challenges they faced during their first years in college. For example, Bahar who recently received her undergraduate degree and works as a research technician said, “I have always been strong in my math and sciences, when I came here, I was placed in higher level classes. They were challenging but fun kind of challenging.” Neda who had a similar experience said;

“The good think about the educational system in the United States versus Afghanistan is that there are fewer requirements. Especially private schools offer very creative classes like ethics, I took some social science classes and I really enjoyed them. Those were humanities, back

home I didn't like humanities at all. But I think here teachers taught what they were passionate about and that made a huge difference,” (Neda).

However, Bahar did express the fact that she also struggled with academic writing, “I struggled with writing a lot. Particularly because I was into math and STEAM<sup>7</sup> as well as the fact that back home, the schools didn't focus on writing or reading skills at all.”

Another reoccurring theme related to academic challenges that came up a lot during my interviews was class participation. As discussed earlier, international students participate in the classroom less than American students. For some participants, class participation was not easy. For Alef it was difficult to take part in some discussions: “American students talk a lot in the classrooms. One should not talk to that extent to make other students not to talk in the class.” For most of the interviewees, participating in class and in group works was challenging because they needed more time than their American fellows to grasp the topic in order to contribute to class discussion. These examples demonstrate that while equal participation in American classrooms is deemed essential, it is often not achievable. For an international student, it is more of a challenge because they are new to the system and are not native speakers. Therefore, the findings of my research assure that while students embrace the use of diverse pedagogical approaches in the United States, they face challenges with some of these methods.

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<sup>7</sup> STEAM is an acronym to ‘Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics.

To analyze these experiences, we may initially assume that language was a huge hindrance for these students to adjust to in the American educational system. However, each had a different coping strategy. Participants addressed their reading challenges by using a dictionary, asking their fellow American students about reading strategies, and eventually learning how to read faster by skimming an article. The writing challenge was addressed by asking their American fellows to proofread their papers, requesting and receiving feedback from their professors, and seeking the help of writing centers and other resources in their schools. All in all, the strategies they employed increased their confidence in writing academic papers.

The academic challenges that international students face in a host country have a correlation with non-academic challenges they face while abroad. According to Tinto (1993), international students face many non-academic challenges that influence their academic performances. Ozturgut and Murphy (2009), also argue that non-academic challenges affect international students' mental health, social, and cultural integration in a host country. For my research participants, the non-academic challenges were one of the triggering causes of their academic challenges. The non-academic challenges that emerged from the interviews are related to psychological issues and social and cultural differences, which I am going to discuss next.

### **Psychological Concerns**

College students' life is replete with various adjustments to many things beyond academics. For students, in this process, it is inevitable not to face

psychological problems caused by many academic and non-academic factors (Mori, 2000). For Afghan students coming from a war-torn country, it is especially difficult to be away from their families for long periods of time considering the insecurity of the country. My findings confirmed this, "sometimes, while hanging out with my friends, I had a survival guilt. I couldn't be happy because I kept thinking that it was not fair for me to be happy while someone I know and care about is not safe or is hurt in Afghanistan. It was really hard to get over that feeling," said Zara. Neda added, "during my time at college, my values and self-awareness developed every year which caused me many friendships. I lost so many friends back in Afghanistan because I couldn't keep in touch with everyone while I was struggling my way through American life. This affected my mental health extremely. I felt really guilty because my friends in Afghanistan went through so much and here I was with a privileged life in security." Donya who has not been able to return to her home in Afghanistan since 2016 had to distance herself from the trauma that was coming from her country in order to focus on her studies.

"The last time I went back home was in 2016 and I haven't seen my parents since then. Afghanistan's situation kept getting worse after 2016. There were explosions close to my siblings' schools and around my house. I used to get lots of nightmares. Every explosion was a horrific experience for me although I was not there. I would wake up and call everyone to find out if they were okay. We lost some friends and family members in those explosions in Kabul. It is paralyzing but at the same

time I knew I could not do anything so my coping strategy was to distance myself otherwise I couldn't function if I had the emotional burden," (Donya).

Traveling to a new society itself can be a challenge and feelings of loneliness, isolated, and excluded are a part of this. Saba who had a very smooth transition in her first year of college said that her experience got reversed in her second year of college.

"In the second year of college, however, that social and confident experience got reversed somehow. Now, when I look back, I had depression even then, but I never knew about it. I remember in my sophomore year of college, all of a sudden, I stopped talking and hanging out to my friends and to almost anyone I knew. My friends were shocked because they had seen a different personality in my first year," (Saba).

Saba's depression was also caused by academic challenges and an absence of support from her professors and school. "I wanted to be an English major, so I took an English class during my second year, after the first assignment the professor told me that I was not a good fit for an English major. That affected my mental health a lot that I went back to Afghanistan and took a gap semester. When I came back, I had to make peace with myself that I was not going to major in English."

Studying abroad in Afghanistan is seen as a privilege. Most Afghan students who succeed in study abroad programs with full scholarships are

expected to do more for their country and people. They are seen as bright future for Afghanistan and their families count a lot on them.

“It is hard to study abroad when you are from Afghanistan because everyone in the family starts seeing you as a savior and they expect you to solve every problem they have. Also, we have seen that life can be very beautiful and there are better ways to go about living. Therefore, we don't want our families to live in misery and distress. What I am saying is that whether you want it or not, you will get involved to make life better for them,” (Fetwa).

As expectations grow, these students feel pressure from both sides; their classes in the United States and their families in Afghanistan which in most cases result in mental health problems and depression.

Another reoccurring theme was stout pressure on these students to contribute to the betterment of the country by their families and communities. The underdevelopment of Afghanistan has overwhelmed families to the extent that their only hope for a better Afghanistan is their children. Saba who opened a library café and a language institute in Afghanistan reflected on her experience and said that receiving a high expectation from her family negatively impacted her life as a student massively.

“Those of us who have come to the U.S. via a full scholarship, we tend to think that we have a huge responsibility towards the country. Even when we are away, we think about ways to be useful to the country, it may be through doing a project, or working on a program to get more students

study abroad. The way we were raised in Afghanistan, our families, teachers, communities, absolutely everyone gave us a mindset that we, the new generation, will change Afghanistan and make it a better place. Therefore, most of us had seen our futures back in Afghanistan. Personally, my plans were all around going back to Afghanistan after graduation. But when Afghanistan fell to the Taliban, I think the real identity crises happened then. I had always seen myself with Afghanistan and when Afghanistan was out of the picture, I was lost. It took me a really long time to find a value or any goal in life.”

A high expectation by their families back in Afghanistan mixed with meeting all the requirements for their classes in the United States, Afghan students feel a lot of pressure mentally and emotionally. This can, in long term, impact their academic performance.

### **Social and Cultural Challenges**

Traveling to a new country with a completely new culture and a new way of life, most of my participants were left culture shocked. Culture shock is another significant finding of this research. There are many causes of culture shock faced by Afghan students during study abroad periods. “When I came to the U.S., I did not know anything about American culture and social life. I was very uneducated and uninformed about the American culture because I did not have access to internet in Afghanistan. Therefore, it was challenging for me to culturally connect with American students in my school,” said Saba. Saba who graduated from the Smith College said that she chose Smith, “because it had a

large international student body. It was easier to make friends with other international students with whom I felt I had something in common,” which helped her feel included and not so different from other students.

Zara who comes from Hazara ethnic minority<sup>8</sup> in Afghanistan recalled racial and gender biases she encountered in Afghanistan on a daily basis, whereas, in the United States she felt safer. “Back in Afghanistan, I faced racial and gender discrimination almost every day, here I am more myself. I can do what I want to do.” However, Zara continued, “I do feel being looked down at in the U.S. too at times. Labels are so important in today’s world. As soon as people know I am from Afghanistan, I can see how the conversation changes.” My findings suggest that at times, Afghan students feel insecure about their nationality in conversations with American and other international students. “I always thought I would be judged by people; I was always conscientious and aware of what I was wearing and saying,” said Zara. Saba added,

“I used to constantly compare my awareness level with students from Rwanda, Pakistan, India, and some other countries who could compare with Afghanistan. Other international students are raised with some level of western life exposure but for me, it was different. I knew nothing. I remember spending hours to watch a movie that my friend group had

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<sup>8</sup> Hazara ethnic group is a minority group in Afghanistan that has been repressed for many decades.

talked about yesterday from their childhood and I wanted to connect with them.”

### **The Impact of American Education System on Afghan Students**

As my participants' accounts demonstrate, they experienced several challenges in the American education system. Some of these challenges made them struggle. However, some of these challenges made them thrive and positively influenced their lives. For example, they were pushed to get out of their comfort zones by participating in the class discussions or taking part in other activities that barely happened in Afghanistan. These activities were not easy for them to adopt to spontaneously; it took them a while to adjust and get used to. The participants' higher education shaped their personality and characters. Bahar said that her education in the United States has made her successful in her job in terms of the application of research methods.

“Research has changed my life. Finding out things that no one knows about it yet, can be life changing. It blows my mind to be able to add knowledge to the world,” said Bahar. Despite the challenges the participants faced in the United States, each participant defined the impact of their education overall positive.

As I motioned earlier, Afghan female students come from a country of war that is largely male dominated and gender segregation has reached its peak. Afghanistan's educational system has failed these students' search for opportunities. They have been denied basic human rights. Therefore, when they are qualified to study abroad, they see it as merely an opportunity, hence, they try to make the best out of it. When my research participants reflect on

their educational experiences in the United States as overall positive, it does not mean to disregard the challenges they undergo while abroad. Afghan female students while in Afghanistan go through countless of challenges to only be able to enter the door to a school. In my opinion, when one is denied the right to education in safety and peace for so many years, once given that right back, they take it as an opportunity not something for granted because they know what it is like to have access to a universal right.

### **Additional Themes**

In this paper, through a literature review of international students' experiences in the United States, I have shown Afghan students' go through a similar process. However, for Afghan students, many decades of war and insecurity have impacted their education enormously. My data confirms that these students while abroad and away from their home country, go through an emotional burden in which they worry about something might happen to their families in the country. "Afghanistan lives within all Afghan students studying abroad," said Saba. Zara added, "what is going on in Afghanistan, has been affecting me a lot. I get really stressed and nervous for the safety of my family and friends."

Some students try to protect themselves against the trauma coming from Afghanistan by disconnecting themselves with what is happening in their country. To highlight this, Neda said that "I have always been a straight A student, but during the American troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan, it affected me so much that my GPA dropped, and I got Bs and Cs. But I have

learned to protect myself, I have disconnected from what is going on in Afghanistan. I can't really take it anymore. I consciously ignore things related to my country.” Research shows that disregarding what is happening in the present and choosing not to deal with it, can cause long term issues such as depression, (Mori 2000). Afghan students who go through an abundance of trauma caused by war and choose not to deal with it, can experience serious health issues in the future.

## **Conclusion**

The principal goal of this research was to explore Afghan students' academic and cultural experiences in pursuing higher education in their home country in order to understand the challenges they face while studying in the United States. My primary research questions were how do Afghan female students' prior educational and cultural experiences align with the expectations and culture of the United States following immigration? From Afghan students' perspectives, what kind of challenges do they face during their education in the United States? How do they address these challenges? To answer these questions, it was important to first situate the educational background and history of these students in the country against the backdrop of the ongoing war that has impacted their education in significant ways. And then, I studied their experiences in higher education while studying in the American based colleges and universities. In this research paper, my aim is to bring the voices of Afghan students to the attention of United States' study abroad program managers to take into account the needs of all international students including Afghan students while designing undergraduate and graduate programs for them.

To answer my research question, Afghan female students' educational experiences are different in the United States from those they face in their home country. In Afghanistan, they have to deal with a weak educational system that has suffered from decades of war and insecurity. Classes are teacher centered and student participation is not encouraged. Success is based

on memorization. Skills such as critical thinking, academic writing and reading, group work, and in class discussions are not reinforced. One of the main findings of this research was that Afghan students received a poor-quality education in Afghanistan prior to coming to the United States. The education system in their home country did not prepare them to study abroad and did not provide them with necessary set of skills to thrive in a developed country.

However, in the United States, they encounter a different set of challenges. The education system in the United States falls almost at the opposite side of the spectrum from Afghanistan. Unlike in Afghanistan, the American education system enriches students with real life skills. Since these students are not trained to succeed in a modern education system, during the first years of studying abroad, they undergo several academic challenges until they assimilate in the new system. Their experience is also largely influenced by other factors such as cultural differences, trauma caused by the war in their country, and other social differences between Afghanistan and the United States. Despite limited access to education facilities and their lack of exposure to modern teaching methods, such as student-centered teaching along with empowering students to be the agents of their own learning, participants were successful in achieving their goals of studying in America and completing their bachelor's degrees. Although my research participants' overall responses on the impact of the American education on their lives were positive, they underwent academic and non-academic challenges in the United States.

In this paper, I have analyzed these challenges in three categories: 1) academic life, 2) social and cultural challenges, and 3) their psychological health. One of the overarching themes in the academic life section's finding was writing. As I mentioned above, schools in Afghanistan do not teach essential skills such as academic writing, and thus, leaving these students with insufficient knacks to succeed in the American system, which is dominantly based on writing, critical thinking, and reading. My data shows that despite the differences in the educational systems in both countries, Afghan female students' academic challenges are largely influenced by the next two categories of my findings. Culture shock, different socializing methods between both countries, trauma caused by the war in Afghanistan, and being away from family and friends for long periods of time are some of the factors that indirectly impact their educational performances and integration rates.

Models of integration are in existence and the most often cited model is that of Vincent Tinto's (1993), who introduced the importance of student integration, socially and academically. The framework was based on the work of Emile Durkhiem's suicide theory (1951) that pointed to one's unsuccessful integration into society as a strong precursor of suicide. Tinto's integration model suggested that retention is related to the student's ability and actions to become a pro-active participant in university life as well as their interactions with their peers and faculties (Tinto, 1993).

The findings of this study suggest that Afghan students need more support from the program managers, university staff, and professors to

succeed in their studies or to face fewer challenges while studying abroad.

Tinto's (1993) model suggests the need for a match between the institutional environment and student commitment. A good match leads to higher student integration into the academic and social domains of university life and the notion of completion. The support system is essential to make students feel at home and welcomed as they integrate into the American culture, introducing them to the cultural system and society as well as providing them with opportunities to share their concerns and overall academic experiences with their classmates and school staff. This can be made possible through raising awareness by organizing trainings and workshops to educate all stakeholders not only on Afghan students' experiences but international students in general.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Guide**

#### **Introduction**

Thank you so much for being willing to participate in an interview about your educational experiences in Afghanistan versus in the United States. I am interviewing Afghan students who have been in the United States for over the past 2+ years for my educational studies senior project. I would like to let you know that the entire process is voluntary, this interview will take about 45 minutes, and that you can stop or withdraw at any time. I would like your permission to record and transcribe your interview, with the reminder that I will not use your name as I will use a pseudonym instead. May I start recording this interview?

#### **Afghanistan**

- So, tell me, where in Afghanistan are you from? Tell me about where you grew up- your neighborhood.
- How many years have you lived in Afghanistan?
- What kind of high school did you attend?
- Tell me about your educational experiences in your school in Afghanistan?

#### **Schooling in Afghanistan**

- What was your class setting like?
- How many students in one class?
- Did you change classrooms for each class period, or did you have to stay in one classroom all day long?

- What kinds of subjects did you have to take? How many classes in a year/semester did you have to take?
- Did you play any sports in your school?
- How far did you have to commute to and from school every day?

### **Culture, religion, and society**

- What were some cultural and religious barriers to your education in Afghanistan, if any?
- What is the perception of education in your family?
- What is the perception of female education in your family and community?
- Growing up, did you ever feel you could have more educational opportunities if you were a boy? (Ask if the interviewee is a woman).
- Did you ever receive any kind of harassment (verbal, physical, emotional) on the way of school from your community?
- At any time during your school years in Afghanistan, was there ever a time where you and your family had to consider dropping out of school for security reasons? Can you give me an example please?

### **Transition from Afghanistan to the United States**

- How did you find out about studying abroad?
- Why did you decide to apply? What influences this decision?
- How did you find about your school in the United States?
- What motivated you to study outside Afghanistan?

- When accepted into your U.S. school, what was your and your family's reaction?
- Did your family, at any time during the process, disagreed with your studying abroad before you came to the United States?
- Did you apply/receive any financial aid? Do you receive financial help outside your school?
- Before getting to your school in the U.S., what did you think it was going to be like?
- Once you arrived, did that first impression change?

### **United States**

- When did you first come to the United States? Was it for education?
- Tell me about your first impression when you first visited your school in the United States?
- Tell me about your educational experiences in the United States?
- Can you tell me about some of the things you found surprisingly different in the U.S. from your home country?

### **College in the United States**

- What are you studying and why?
- How are your classes going?
- How did you manage studying in English which is not your first language? Did you receive any kind of assistance?
- What steps do you take when you're struggling in a course?

- What is something you wish you knew when you first came to the U.S. that would have helped you succeed?
- Would you say you are comfortable in the classroom? Let's say- do you speak out a lot or ask questions?
- Are there anything you wish you could change about your social life in your school?

### **Cultural and societal metamorphoses**

- What are some of the main challenges you have faced since you started school in the United States?
- Did you have any cultural shock? Can you please tell me more about it?
- Tell me about your experience with your friends' circle/ people you spend time with?
- How do you find participating in social gatherings? Are you in any kind of clubs and cultural houses in your school?
- How does your experience differ from a "typical" collage student in the United States or in Afghanistan?
- Have you ever been particularly included or excluded at your school?
- When being at your school, have you ever questioned your identity?
- Do you think your identity has changed while at your school in the United States?
- Have you ever visited the counseling center? Or other places on campus when you needed to talk to someone or needed help in something?

**Additional themes**

- Do you experience and kind of stress and worry about your family in Afghanistan, if any? Or just the country in general?
- How do you manage the amount of stress that comes from Afghanistan?
- Do you do anything to stay connected or do you, because of the stress that it causes, disengage, at times, from Afghanistan?
- What are some of your coping strategies?

**Closing:**

Thank the interviewee. Final wrap up question: What haven't we talked about that you think might be important for me to consider as I think about education in Afghanistan now and going forward?