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REFUGEE PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSITIONING FROM HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE  
UNITED STATES TO LIFE POST-GRADUATION

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PIM 78

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in  
International Education at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

August 10, 2020

Advisor: Dr. Alla Korzh

## REFUGEE PERSPECTIVES ON LIFE POST-GRADUATION

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**List of Key Terms**

Asylum and asylum-seekers: refers to both a formal status and a descriptor. A “grant of asylum” in the United States allows asylum seekers to apply for a permanent resident card (or “green card”). Asylum seekers in any country are people who have fled their country of origin due to conflict or other risk of harm and enter another country seeking “asylum” or international protection.

Country of origin: in this study, this refers to the country from which a refugee student and their family fled prior to gaining refugee status

Country of study: in this study, this indicates the country in which a refugee student pursued his/her university studies. It is also commonly referred to as a ‘third country,’ to indicate a country other than their host country

F-1 student visa: the most common visa for international students in the United States

H-1B visa: an employment-based, non-immigrant visa for temporary workers in the United States

Host country: in this study, this indicates the country in which a refugee student and their family gained refugee status and where they lived in a refugee camp, prior to coming to study in the United States. It is also commonly referred to as a country of asylum or a first county of asylum.

J-1 student visa: a visa status for international students in the United States, generally used for students in specific educational exchange programs or in cases in which 51% of a student’s total financial support comes from an institutional or government sponsor in the form of a scholarship or other direct support provided specifically for the educational program

## REFUGEE PERSPECTIVES ON LIFE POST-GRADUATION

National passport: in this study, this refers to a passport from one's country of origin, where one is a citizen or entitled to citizenship

Optional Practical Training (OPT): temporary employment that is directly related to an F-1 student's major area of study. International students are typically eligible for up to 12 months of OPT, with STEM majors eligible for an additional 24-month extension. In this study, I use the generic term OPT, though J-1 students are eligible for Academic Training (AT) instead of OPT, with its own terms and conditions.

Refugee travel document: a UNHCR document that provides a legal identity for refugees and stateless people by their host country, granting them the ability to legally travel internationally. Also commonly referred to as Convention Travel Documents (CTDs) or even as refugee "passports," colloquially.

Resettlement: the transfer of refugees from a host country to another State that has agreed to admit them and ultimately grant them permanent settlement, potentially with the possibility of gaining citizenship. Sometimes referred to as "third country resettlement," refugee resettlement is considered a durable solution for a refugee whose country of origin due to conflict or other risk of harm.

Rising sophomore/junior/senior: because I conducted interviews over summer, student participants were in between years of study. Therefore, I use the term "rising" to indicate the year of study they will begin in the coming fall. For example, a "rising sophomore" has completed his/her freshman year and anticipates beginning his/her sophomore year in a few months.

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**List of Abbreviations**

GRE: Graduate Record Examinations, a standardized exam required for entry into many graduate schools in North America

OPT: Optional Practical Training

STEM: Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

UNHCR: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN Refugee Agency

### **Abstract**

In 2019, only 3% of refugees had access to higher education. Using qualitative research methods of surveys and semi-structured interviews, this study explores the perspectives of two student affairs professionals and six individuals with formal refugee status granted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and in possession of a refugee travel document, who have not yet been resettled and are pursuing higher education in the United States. It focuses on the students' preparation for and transition to life post-graduation, since UNHCR supposes that pursuing higher education abroad may be a viable 'complementary pathway' toward resettlement, self-reliance, and/or legal solutions, and there has not been much research to either support or refute this. The study was guided by the following research question: What are the lived experiences and perspectives of students with refugee travel documents pursuing higher education in the United States, particularly focusing on their preparation for and transition to life post-graduation? This study provides valuable insights for various stakeholders aiming to support this often-invisible subpopulation of international students to succeed in higher education. All student participants envisioned that a tertiary scholarship might lead to a durable solution to their refugee status. While access to employment-based visas in the U.S. or elsewhere was an additional legal solution to which these students did not previously have access, the path to a permanent legal status in the United States or elsewhere remained fraught. As the findings demonstrate, it is important that any U.S. university or sponsorship organization developing a scholarship program for this population collaborate with UNHCR on its design and support these students' paths beyond graduation.

*Keywords:* refugees, refugee education, higher education, student affairs, international students, resettlement

## Introduction

As the number of refugees affected by protracted conflicts around the globe increases, refugees face extended periods of time in limbo in a host country, as they await the possibility of resettlement in a third country (UNHCR, 2019b). As of 2019, only 3% of refugees have had access to higher education, albeit an increase from the stagnant 1% of the past few years, but still far lower than the global enrollment figures for non-refugees at 37%. Still, many governments, higher education institutions, and partner organizations recognize the importance of including this population in higher education, as demonstrated by a variety of efforts to increase access and enrollment figures (UNHCR, 2019b). However, there is little existing research that actually documents these students' perspectives on and experiences in higher education abroad, and therefore can provide insights into how to best support this unique international student population.

In my work both at a U.S. university in student affairs and in Zambia, working to assist students in applying to university abroad, I observed students with refugee status facing unique challenges both in their host country and while pursuing education abroad. There are many complicated, bureaucratic systems for them to navigate, and not all parties agree on the rights of the refugees involved. I was interested in looking at these students' experiences and perspectives in the context of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, signed in September 2016, in which signatory states agreed to address increased refugee flows using a new model—the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)—that includes, amongst other elements, an increased number of pathways toward resettlement places, self-reliance, and legal solutions (UNHCR, 2018). Due to difficulty identifying these students, or even estimating their

numbers, it is challenging to assess whether this new model is realistic, or to even go further and assess whether a particular policy or practice could help make it more successful.

In a world where the number of displaced persons is predicted to increase and only 3% of refugees currently manage to access higher education, it is important to better understand the role higher education plays in their lives, and how key stakeholders can better support this vulnerable yet highly talented population to transition to successful lives after graduating from their undergraduate degrees. In this capstone paper, I will focus on one specific category of displaced persons: those with formal refugee status granted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and in possession of a refugee travel document, who have not yet been resettled and are pursuing higher education in the United States on a student visa. The overarching research question that guided this study was: What are the lived experiences and perspectives of students with refugee travel documents pursuing higher education in the United States, particularly focusing on their preparation for and transition to life post-graduation? The following sub-questions helped address the overarching question: What were students' motivations for pursuing higher education in the United States? How has their refugee travel document impacted their experience? What have their experiences been with student affairs services? And finally, how do they experience the transition to life post-graduation; how do they feel about it, what legal solutions are open to them in terms of work authorization, and how do these options interact with their refugee status and eligibility for resettlement of themselves and their families?

Given the limited knowledge about this unique international student population within existing literature on refugee education and student affairs, this study sheds light on the lived experiences and perspectives of an often invisible subpopulation of international students on

campus, providing insights for various stakeholders aiming to support this population to succeed in higher education and post-graduation. In this study, I focused on their preparation for and transition to post-graduation life, since the UNHCR supposes that pursuing higher education abroad may be a viable ‘complementary pathway’ toward resettlement, self-reliance, and/or legal solutions, and there has not been much research to either support or refute this.

In what follows, I discuss existing research on refugee education from a variety of perspectives to provide context and identify gaps in the literature, as well as literature from the field of student affairs and two of its prominent theories on student development, as they apply to preparing students for life post-graduation. After that, I present my qualitative research design and key findings, organized into four themes. I conclude with suggested practical applications for key stakeholders, recommendations for advocacy on behalf of this refugee population, and suggestions for further research.

## **Literature Review**

### **Refugee Education**

Given the broad range of categories and definitions of a refugee, I will begin by providing the definition for the purposes of my research, lay out key institutions and legislation that affect this particular demographic, and provide background on their main form of identification for international travel, including study abroad. Then I will provide a survey of existing research on refugee education, focusing on higher education.

### ***History and Definition of Refugees***

As of January 2020, the most up-to-date figures estimate that there are 70.8 million forcibly displaced people worldwide (UNHCR, 2019a). Of these, 20.4 million fall under the UNHCR mandate as refugees. A refugee, according to key legislation outlined below, is,

“someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (American Immigration, 2020). Other populations included in this global figure of 70.8 million are asylum-seekers, internally displaced people (IDPs), and Palestinian refugees under the mandate of United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Other populations of concern to UNHCR not counted in that estimate are stateless people, who have no nationality either by birth or circumstance and may or may not have ever been displaced, and returnees, displaced people who are able to return to their country of origin (UNHCR, 2019a). In these examples, the term refugee describes the circumstances of a person but more specifically refers to a formalized and protected status that is widely recognized. Not all countries, institutions, or organizations use this terminology in the same way, but international institutions offer a common framework that many employ.

**Key Institutions and Legislation.** The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was founded in 1950, with the mission of assisting displaced Europeans following the end of the Second World War (UNHCR, n.d.a). There are two key pieces of legislation relating to UNHCR’s expanded work since then: 1) the 1951 Convention Refugee Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and 2) the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which removed geographic and temporal constraints to the definition (UNHCR, n.d.c). One hundred and forty-eight countries have signed on to one or both of these documents. The United States did not sign on to the first convention in 1951, instead ratifying the 1967 Protocol in 1968 and incorporating the same definition into U.S. law when Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980 (American Immigration, 2020). Most recently, with the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, signed in September 2016, signatory states agreed to address increased refugee flows

using a new model—the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)—that includes, amongst other elements, an increased number of pathways toward resettlement places, self-reliance, and legal solutions (UNHCR, 2018).

**Resettlement.** After fleeing their country of origin, a displaced person may wait in a host country as an asylum-seeker hoping to obtain refugee status with the UNHCR. If they do, they may still wait an indeterminate amount of time in this host country, as they wait for a resettlement place to become available and to pass through the various levels of checks and bureaucracy required by different countries in order to be selected for resettlement with permanent resident status and often, but not always, a pathway to citizenship. Others remain in refugee camps for years, often without the right to work in the host country, dependent on humanitarian aid. Between 1980 and 2018, the United States had annually accepted more refugees than any other country in the world, followed by Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. In the United States, the annual “cap” of refugees to be resettled is set by the President, and the numbers have decreased significantly under the Trump administration, reaching 22,491 in 2018 (Radford & Connor, 2019). Key to resettlement is the ability to travel internationally, which requires a valid form of identification recognized by the destination country, as well as any country crossed during transit.

**Refugee Travel Document.** With its roots in the “Nansen passport” granted by the League of Nations over 95 years ago, the modern-day machine-readable refugee travel document provides a legal identity for refugees and stateless people by their host country, granting them the ability to legally travel internationally. According to the 1951 Convention, every refugee and stateless person has the right to such a document, which can open the door to complementary pathways outlined in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. Key to this study is

the fact that the refugee travel document allows refugees to pursue education abroad, one example of a complementary pathway for admission to other countries (UNHCR, 2017).

Specifically, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, under the heading, “Areas in need of support,” identifies the need for relevant stakeholders to create, “educational opportunities for refugees...through grant of scholarships and student visas, including through partnerships between governments and academic institutions” (UNHCR, 2018, p. 19).

### ***Refugees and Higher Education***

Acknowledging that all other levels of education are necessary building blocks toward higher education, UNHCR has set objectives for 2030 to achieve parity in all pre-primary, primary, and secondary education, and to aim for 15% enrollment of refugees in higher education (UNHCR, 2019b). Given that secondary school enrollment figures for refugees have remained static at 24% since 2018, the 2019 UNHCR Education report credits the increase in higher education enrollment to efforts by key stakeholders such as states, higher education institutions, and partner organizations (UNHCR, 2019b). These stakeholders can continue to build innovative partnerships and support structures for this population, so that there are viable pathways available to increase numbers of enrolled refugee students at all levels in the future. One example of this is the University Alliance for Refugees and At-Risk Migrants, or UARRM, “a group of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to harness the potential of university communities for the empowerment and protection of refugees and at-risk migrants” (University Alliance, n.d.). They identify six action areas for members of this university community, including: 1) offering legal pathways, 2) overcoming barriers to entry, 3) providing on-campus assistance, 4) advocacy and awareness, 5) research, and 6) media and

communications. My study falls under the third action area, providing on-campus assistance and the fifth, research.

When it comes to understanding the experiences of refugee students in higher education, there is a need for further research. As Lutine de Wal Pastoor (2017) points out amongst European researchers, “refugee education research seems to be falling between two stools, that is Refugee/Migration research and Education Research, and, hence, appears to be neglected” (p. 113). Much of the existing research addresses access to quality primary and secondary education within refugee camps, or examines education as a tool for integration, once refugees have been resettled (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). I concur with this group of researchers who look at a variety of locations, levels of education, and definitions of refugee, but who agree on the need to fundamentally question the “education as panacea” assumption. These researchers’ work critiques previous studies on refugee education for having “universally ignored the ways in which education is often presented as a dreamlike solution to refugees’ challenges while in reality also being a contested landscape for refugee families and students” (Wiseman, 2019, p. 1). Essentially, education itself is not a solution for refugee families and students. These researchers advocate for empirical evidence on the “actual impact” of education on students with refugee status, which is why this study focuses on the transition to life after graduation. And as Streitwieser and Madden (2019) point out, in contrast to existing literature on international students who are citizens of other countries, “there is much to learn about...those who engage in mobility for survival, and how these students experience international learning” (p. 61). In order to understand the particular support systems that these students might encounter on a U.S. campus, it was important to look at the field of student affairs more generally, how international

students and refugees fit into this field, and relevant student development theories that inform the field and its practice.

### **Student Affairs in U.S. Higher Education**

NASPA, the professional association for Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education, defines student affairs as, “a critical component of the higher education experience...[that] helps students begin a lifetime journey of growth and self-exploration” (NASPA, n.d.). By most accounts, the field of student affairs in the United States has its roots in the late 1800s, though it first began to resemble its present form in the 1940s and 1950s, post-World War II with the publication of the *Student Personnel Point of View* by the American Council on Education in 1937 (Schuh, 2011). Beginning in this era, and in response to an increased number of enrolled students after the war, student affairs expanded the role of universities beyond strictly academic and intellectual responsibilities to, “all aspects of student life, such as financial aid and assistance, residence halls..., student activities, Greek life, career planning and placement, and more” (Schuh, 2011, p. 28). In the 1970s, various federal laws brought the needs of marginalized campus populations to the fore, and student services specifically designed to support these populations arose on campuses across the US (Schuh, 2011). Since the 1980s, a focus on internationalizing U.S. campuses has influenced all aspects of campus life, including student affairs units.

### ***Internationalization and Student Mobility on U.S. Campuses***

There is a breadth of definitions, theories, and models relating to internationalization, which has been a dominant topic in the sector of higher education since the 1980s. Dr. Jane Knight (2008) developed the widely referenced definition of internationalization in higher education: “Internationalization at the national/sector/institutional levels is the process of integrating an

international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels” (p. 21).

**Student Mobility.** Although there are many other components of internationalization, I will focus on student mobility or, more specifically, full-time enrolled international students who are pursuing undergraduate degrees abroad in the United States (American Council, 2020). Since 1919, the Institute of International Education has been conducting an annual survey of U.S. universities on international students enrolled at their campuses and, since the 1950s, publishing the results in the *Open Doors* report. This data demonstrates an overall sharp increase in the number of international students enrolled in U.S. universities since 1954, with the latest figures from the 2018-19 academic year at 1,095,299 international students (Institute, 2019). Along with increased numbers of enrolled international students, many universities now have advisors or entire student affairs offices devoted to international student services, often addressing student needs ranging from navigating immigration to understanding a new academic culture and classroom expectations. Although students with refugee status also have student visas, it can be argued that students with refugee status are in some ways distinct from other subsets of the international student population. So, where do they fall?

**Student Mobility and Refugees.** Researchers focusing on the subset of displaced persons in higher education point out that, “there are three main forms of international mobility we need to account for today: mobility for enlightenment, ...mobility for opportunity, ...and mobility for survival” (Streitwieser & Madden, 2019, p. 61). They point out that these variations in motivation for pursuing international education distinguish forcibly displaced persons from students pursuing education abroad as a part of their degree (study abroad and exchange programs), or international students choosing to study in a different country.

However, it can be difficult to identify these populations, as many tools with which we track international students do not distinguish them. A key tool for monitoring trends in student mobility in and out of the United States is the *Open Doors* report. Its 2017 edition explains that people who enter the United States as refugees through a formal resettlement process are not counted amongst international students because they are not granted a student visa (Institute, 2017). However, it does not address students I interviewed, who were in possession of a refugee travel document and had been granted a student visa associated with their host country, as it is identified on their travel document. These students are indeed counted under the umbrella of international students and referred to campus services accordingly. Therefore, it is difficult to estimate the number of refugee students who may currently be pursuing higher education in the United States, whether they came through resettlement or as international students. This invisibility is emblematic of their journey through higher education more generally. Because their status is difficult to define or fit into traditional categories represented on campus, they are often grouped in with international students, but may or may not have some of their unique needs met through these services. Without this data, it is impossible to know the numbers of refugee students pursuing education in various countries or to conduct any type of large-scale, generalizable quantitative needs assessment. It is equally difficult to track these students' progress or document the impact of their experience at university.

Streitwieser and Madden (2019) argue that international educators have a “duty of care to refugees and at-risk migrants,” and that scholars and practitioners need to work to ensure that universities are inclusive and supportive places for students from a wide variety of backgrounds, including this often-overlooked category of students who have experienced displacement (p. 60). Do the services provided at universities for international students in fact serve them?

### *Student Development Theory*

The term student development connotes theories and research on young adult development but is also deeply tied to the field of student affairs. Miller and Prince's (1976) frequently cited definition of student development is, "the application of human development concepts in postsecondary settings so that everyone involved can master increasingly complex developmental tasks, achieve self-direction, and become interdependent" (as cited in Evans et al., 1998, p. 6). Essentially, these theories can be grouped into one of two categories of foundational theories: 1) psychosocial theories and, 2) cognitive structural (or intellectual) theories, as well as learning style theory. I will focus on two integrative theories of student development that I find most applicable to students with refugee status, as well as relevant to understanding their transition from university to life after graduation.

**Developmental Ecology Theory.** Bronfenbrenner's theory of developmental ecology emphasizes that development is "a function of the interaction of the person and the environment" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 160). Four main components comprise this psychological model: process, person, context, and time. This particular theory allows for a deep exploration into the individual life experiences and contexts that have shaped a person's development over time. It argues that these components interact, "in ways that promote or inhibit development" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 161). For this population, this theory provides a framework through which to consider environmental factors that might influence these students most while at university. In my interviews with student participants, I asked questions that sought to better understand how they have interacted with the university environment, in terms of academics, student activities, and student affairs offices, as well as major influences that come from outside the immediate university environment. One key objective was to see if these questions yielded any indication as

to when students might most be ready for discussions related to the transition to life post-graduation, and to assess whether there might be any logistical reasons for student affairs professionals or other actors to assist students at that stage, or earlier or later, given the realities of their documentation.

**Transition Theory.** Schlossberg's transition theory falls under the umbrella of psychosocial theories of development and is considered an established theory of adult development that student affairs professionals find applicable to young adults attending university (Evans et al., 1998). This theory is particularly interesting in the context of this study as it provides tools for understanding different types of transitions and identifies factors that influence how people cope with them and affects what the ultimate outcome is. This framework is helpful in understanding how students may experience their transition from life on campus to life post-graduation and the flexibility offered by this theoretical framework allows it to apply to a population that has not typically been included in such studies. Indeed, Evans et al. (1998) assert that "because the...theory places so much emphasis on consideration of the individual's perspective and the specifics of the situation, Schlossberg has provided a tool that readily allows for the integration of individual and cultural differences" (p. 225). This theory identifies four major factors that affect an individual's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies, or the 4 S's. Additionally, it recognizes that these four factors significantly influence a person's "appraisal" of the transition, and argues that this "appraisal," or perspective, can significantly impact the outcome of any given transition (Evans et al., 1998, p. 216).

While we know much about refugee education at the primary and secondary levels and international student support services in U.S. universities, this study sheds light on the experiences and perspectives of refugee students pursuing higher education in the United States.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### **Methodology Choice and Rationale**

I conducted a qualitative research study in which I explored the experiences and perspectives of students with refugee travel documents pursuing higher education in the United States, particularly focusing on their preparation for and transition to life post-graduation. Qualitative research methodology provided the best tools for exploring and understanding more about the social world of refugee students (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). My approach to the topic was “fundamentally interpretive and emergent,” and therefore equally well-suited for qualitative research, as detailed in the methods section below (Rossman & Rallis, 2016, p. 10).

### **Participants and Sampling**

#### ***Participant Description***

I invited individuals who had a refugee travel document as their main form of international identification (or did at the time they commenced their studies), and who had completed between one to four academic years at an institution of higher education in the United States. If they had already graduated, I limited it to those within the past calendar year (after January 31, 2019), based on the assumption that their recollection of their experiences at university would still be very fresh and recent. Given that the political climate in the United States changes quite frequently, as do a variety of laws affecting students with this status, it was also important that they have experienced higher education abroad within a relatively close timeframe to others in the study. Since I was mainly looking at how refugee status and documentation may have impacted their experience at or perception of higher education abroad, I did not place any initial limitations on their country of origin or host country. However, due to

my professional networks and the sample strategies I employed, all of my participants were from the African continent.

### *Sampling Strategy*

My sampling strategy was mixed purposeful sampling. I used two methods of purposeful sampling, namely criterion and snowball sampling, in order to identify enough individuals to meet all of the aforementioned criteria (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). It was criterion sampling because I was specifically looking for individuals who share key characteristics, as detailed above in the participant description section. In order to make contact with the relatively small number of individuals who fit these criteria, I utilized professional contacts I have with a network of administrators in around 15 college access programs that either work exclusively with, or include, refugees in their programming. Five of them were willing to share my application with their alumni who were enrolled at or had recently graduated from university in the United States, who could then choose whether or not they would like to participate, without me ever having their contact information. Considering these stakeholders were invested in the success of these students at university, they were inclined to encourage their students to participate, while also protecting their privacy, individual dispositions, and time. Given my particular networks, it was unsurprising that all six student participants were from African countries, although both administrators interviewed were American citizens.

Secondly, snowball, or chain, sampling was appropriate for my study because I asked participants whom I recruited if they could send the application form to anyone else they knew who met the criteria as well. This strategy resulted in two additional interviews. Drawing on these existing networks, with information relayed from trusted source to trusted source, addressed skepticism of the purpose of this study, lack of familiarity with myself as the

researcher, and fear of identifying themselves as refugees due to perceived anti-immigrant sentiment toward refugees and asylum-seekers in the United States. Fortunately, I was able to adhere to the criteria I laid out initially, as I received enough responses in time.

All six participants were refugees from countries of origin in either East Africa or Central Africa, living in a host country located in either East Africa or southern Africa. They were enrolled in either private liberal arts colleges or large research universities all over the United States, ranging from rising sophomores to having graduated and completed one year of Optional Practical Training (OPT). For detailed information on each student participant, please see Appendix A. Both staff participants had over seven years of experience working with refugee students, though Vanessa had worked with approximately 20 different students as a staff member through a college access organization, while Mary had only worked with three to four students as an advisor for a scholarship program at a U.S. university. For detailed information on both staff participants, please see Appendix B.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

My methods were a combination of survey and semi-structured interviews. First, I sent out an introduction to the study, emphasizing privacy and confidentiality measures that would be taken, along with a link to a brief online survey that prospective participants completed via Survey Monkey. On this platform, I ensured that informed consent protocol was followed, collected basic information regarding the criteria of the study (forms of international identification, current student status, start and anticipated or real graduation date), as well as a few other details that helped to inform the parameters of my study (including university name, country or region of origin and host country or region), and preferred contact information. I received 11 responses, two of whom were stateless and did not meet the criteria and another who

had obtained a national passport prior to beginning his studies and whom I interviewed but ultimately excluded from the study. With those who fit the criteria and elected to participate, I then conducted 45-minute to 1.5-hour long semi-structured interviews with nine individuals, seven students (six of whom I included in my findings) and two staff who work with the population of interest. Because I was seeking an in-depth understanding of a few participants' perspectives on his/her experience at university, choosing to conduct interviews aligned with my objective to gain an "in-depth understanding not possible with a larger sample (Rossman & Rallis, 2016, p. 149). With the six student participants, I asked specific questions relating to how their documentation had impacted their experience as an international student and related this to their plans post-graduation in order to establish if there were distinct, observable patterns that emerged and were worth further exploration. However, I also kept in mind that a major reason for this study was that very little research had been done on how refugee students experience higher education abroad, and whether it prepares them well for life post-graduation. I began with a set of open-ended questions, posed to each interviewee, but left plenty of room for follow-up questions more common in a dialogic interview. With student affairs staff working with this population, I focused my questions more on resources they know their institution has for this population, if any, or invited them to share anecdotes related to advising and serving this population as they prepared for the transition to post-graduation life.

## **Ethics of Research**

### ***Participant Risks and Benefits***

Risks to participants were minimal. Every effort was made to minimize any potential discomfort that might arise from speaking about their status as a refugee, and unnecessary inquiries into past events were avoided. When the participant knowingly chose to reflect on

certain events, I followed their lead and listened respectfully, but did not probe any further. Participants were informed that they would not be compensated for their participation in the study. I was prepared to refer them to SIT counseling services or remind them of the services offered by their own institutions, if they were still enrolled students.

### ***Privacy, Anonymity and Confidentiality***

Although privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality are of utmost importance in any research study, they are even more critical when working with vulnerable populations. While the participants are not currently living in refugee camps, some are still afraid regarding others knowing their refugee status, or location, or fear for the safety of family members who still live in a location where they may face persecution. Therefore, I made sure that these aspects are well-communicated and subsequently respected throughout the study, with frequent reassurances to participants.

**Participant Privacy.** All interviews were conducted over Zoom and Skype, depending on which platform a participant felt most comfortable with. Given recent privacy concerns with Zoom, I deferred to the students' preferences and also paid for a Zoom account for access to increased security features. I transcribed all interviews myself and attached both self-selected and researcher-assigned pseudonyms to individual interviews during data collection and analysis that was kept separate from any participant information gathered. I added a few lines about pseudonyms and privacy to the invitation letter, as I received feedback from colleagues that this concern was most pertinent to students electing to participate, or even take the survey, which also stated these measures.

**Anonymity.** While participants were not anonymous to me as the researcher, I took concrete measures to ensure that they would remain anonymous in each stage of writing the

study. Anonymity in the context of this study meant that I did not disclose the participants' names, countries of origin and/or host countries, nor the names of the universities that they attend(ed). Information that I do disclose includes field of study, region of origin and/or host country, and a general profile of the university, to provide context.

**Confidentiality.** Given my experience serving as a student services advisor at a U.S. university for international students from vulnerable backgrounds, some of whom had refugee status, I am familiar with and have training in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Therefore, I am accustomed to having in-depth conversations with students about their experiences at university, reminding them of the confidentiality of those discussions, and then holding their stories in confidence. I aimed to maintain this standard of confidentiality with all participants.

### ***Informed Consent***

Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and audience. They gave their consent willingly prior to completing the survey or participating in the interview and were informed that they may withdraw from the study at any time without repercussion. At the beginning of the interview, I verbally informed participants that, should they wish to, they could also ask to skip any question without withdrawing from the study.

### **Researcher's Positionality**

Due to my previous roles both as a university student services advisor for a prestigious scholarship program and as a university access counsellor who worked with other organizations across the African continent, there was an increased likelihood that participants might know me, know who I am, or be aware that I might be familiar with an access program that assisted them in reaching university. During the course of the study, however, I was not in a formal position of

power toward any participants. When I shared the invitation with former students, I clearly stated that participation was optional, and that I understood they might have a variety of reasons for choosing not to participate, none of which I would take personally nor hold against them. I also asked if they were willing to share the invitation with anyone else they knew who might qualify. Other participants heard of the study through the university access organizations that I knew worked with students with refugee status. I sent it through these organizations in order to protect the privacy of those who elected to not participate but was also aware that they might perceive a power dynamic because of who alerted them to the study. Therefore, I made it clear I would not inform the person who referred them as to whether or not they had participated and reiterated that their participation was voluntary. While there was the potential for a perceived power dynamic in this interaction, I found that my experience and networks also served to build trust with potential participants, who had been referred by a trusted source.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

I managed all data electronically through my SIT Graduate Institute Microsoft Office account and on my personal password-protected laptop. I collected participants' initial surveys and informed consent forms via Survey Monkey. I recorded interviews through voice recording applications on my cell phone (Voice Memo for iPhone), and then transcribed the interviews onto a Word document. No data was saved on a device or software that was accessible to any outside party other than a SIT administrator. After adding pseudonyms to all interview transcriptions, I uploaded them to my password-protected Quirkos cloud account in order to analyze that data. Employing deductive reasoning, I created codes that corresponded to terms and concepts from my conceptual framework. However, I also developed additional codes as I

conducted, coded, and analyzed the transcripts, so that I could fully consider unanticipated themes that emerged, employing inductive reasoning as well (Rossman & Rallis, 2016).

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness of Findings**

I worked to ensure the credibility of my research through several means: actively participating in a community of practice, including a triangulation of perspectives to produce my findings, and member checking, or participant validation (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). My community of practice was my colleagues in the MA in International Education at SIT, as we all provided input and feedback on each other's drafts. They provided feedback to specific questions I had, as well as assisted in narrowing down the focus of my study to a specific stage of these students' experiences. While the focus of my research was on understanding the perspectives of university students with refugee status pursuing international education, I also interviewed two administrators in order to gain a variety of perspectives on the situation. This variety in perspectives shed additional light on complex situations.

Finally, I elicited member checking by sharing the transcribed interview with all six student participants who indicated they would like to review and keep it for personal reflection. Then, after coding and analyzing the data, I organized an online presentation of my initial findings, during which participants could anonymously participate, ask questions in a chat box, and share their impressions via email or phone afterward. I will also share the final paper with those who express an interest in receiving it. A full participatory action research project was unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis and would have required more time than I had. Building in member checking at least ensured that participants were involved in verifying the data and had their perspectives on the findings incorporated in the final project. Given that I, the researcher, am American, and the participants all come from African contexts, these measures

were not only in order to ensure accuracy, but also to counteract the tendency of academic research to be extractive of nonwestern knowledge and people. As it is impossible to predict the outcomes or possible applications of my capstone research, I was intent on ensuring that the methodology itself not be conducted in a purely extractive way. When considering possible uses of this research produced, I also have ‘transformative use’ in mind, in that I hope that, “the process of inquiry, action, and reflection—and the knowledge it generates—will be transformative, altering some aspect of society” (Rossman & Rallis, 2016, p. 16). It is my intention that the knowledge produced will also benefit the population studied, both directly (through sharing of information on challenges of and resources for refugee students) and indirectly (through documenting experiences that can help university administrators and others better serve this population).

### *Limitations and Delimitations*

As I detailed in the sample strategy subsection of the participants and sampling section, I did not specifically set a criterion on country or region of origin. However, due to my sampling strategies and existing professional networks, all student participants were from the African continent and both staff participants had primarily worked with refugees from Africa as well. I chose to only include students who had begun their studies with the refugee document and excluded one student who had been a registered refugee when he applied, but then obtained a national passport in order to begin his studies in the United States. Although others from refugee backgrounds had much in common, the documentation was a key element to the study, and I found it did lead to particular common experiences different from those in possession of national passports. Another delimitation was that I chose not to include stateless students pursuing university in the United States from non-signatory states, who were therefore not under the

protection of UNHCR. For the country of study, I chose to focus on those pursuing higher education in one country because too many variables in immigration policies, student visa categories, work authorization rights, and student affairs structures might have obfuscated the student experience and perspective I was seeking to explore. I delimited the country of study to the United States because of my own familiarity with its policies as it relates to international students, its unique and fairly robust student affairs infrastructure that is not a part of universities worldwide, and my knowledge of multiple college access programs that have successfully assisted students who meet the criteria to apply and enroll in the United States.

Additional limitations were related to the amount of time I had in which to do this thesis; I could not engage in a phenomenological study and therefore had to limit the number of interactions with each participant, potentially reducing the depth of trust that could be established. I hope that, by providing enough details regarding the participants and the findings, that researchers and practitioners can assess the applicability of findings to individuals with the same documentation in other settings.

### **Findings**

This research study was guided by the following research question: what are the lived experiences and perspectives of students with refugee travel documents pursuing higher education in the United States, particularly focusing on their preparation for and transition to life post-graduation? Interviews with six students who fit this description and two student affairs staff with experience supporting these students yielded the following four themes: refugee students' motivations for pursuing tertiary education in the United States, experiences and challenges with the refugee travel document, experiences with student affairs staff and services, and their transition to life post-graduation.

## **Refugee Students' Motivations and Dreams**

Before looking at students' experiences transitioning to life post-graduation, it was vital to parse out their motivations for pursuing university education in the United States, as well as their dreams for their lives post-graduation. Where did they hope education would take them?

### ***Motivations to Study in the United States***

**Poverty.** All six student participants spoke of coming from poverty and being motivated to achieve something in life through advanced education. They wanted to set a good example for their siblings and others in the refugee camp, and to eventually have a career and be able to support themselves and their families. Two students pointed out that they could not afford to access university in their host country or did not have access to government bursaries available to citizens of their host country, so they pursued scholarships abroad. All six student participants had assistance from one or multiple organizations in preparing for and/or applying to university, and all six also received comprehensive scholarships to university.

**Education as a Way Out.** When competing for educational scholarships in the refugee camp, Ahmad was not focused on pursuing his academics but rather saw higher education as an escape from the refugee camp, "For me, it wasn't because I wanted to study per se. It was more like, it's your way out" (personal communication, June 6, 2020). His mother had fostered this goal in him since he was young, and he thought that other students in the camp shared it: "We don't go to school to learn- it's literally our way out of the refugee camp" (personal communication, June 6, 2020). Although the other five participants indicated they were passionate about their academics, all of them were equally intent on assisting to help their families transition out of living in the refugee camp, after they had improved their own circumstances through university education abroad.

**Gender.** Although I did not ask any questions specific to gender, both female participants cited issues related to gender as a main motivation for pursuing university, such as wanting to disprove stereotypes that girls can't succeed in higher education: "I wanted to have the independence that comes with education... showing that if I work hard, I'm not relying on the boys" (Kayla, personal communication, June 9, 2020).

**Why the United States?** The United States was an attractive option to refugee students because of the scholarship opportunities available and its advanced position in technology fields. Student participants spoke of being guided by sponsorship organizations toward educational opportunities in the United States, though they had considered studying in, and in some cases applied to, various countries. One staff participant confirmed that, when considering various countries for study, the United States is often the best option for students who need full funding, and that is the case for the majority of the refugees with whom she has worked. Two students in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields were motivated by the opportunities to gain experience and skills related to technology in the United States. Five of them, knowing that they did not have the right to work in their host country, hoped that education in the United States might be a pathway to working there in the future: "If I go to any university in [host country], I will just have to go back in the camp and not work, it's like I just wasted my four years. But if I'm abroad, I will try to stay here and work here, and just like remain here for some period of time" (Patrice, personal communication, June 7, 2020). Jonathan expressed a similar sentiment more poetically, explaining that, by applying abroad, he was searching for a place he could stay, a "home" (personal communication, May 23, 2020).

### *Dreams of Life Post-Graduation*

Five of the six student participants said they envisioned their lives post-graduation during the application process; all five responses included obtaining stable employment: “I used to have this idea that just everything is going to be so easy, you just graduate, you just have your job, you just have your house” (Patrice, personal communication, June 7, 2020). Jonathan expressed his hopes of staying, obtaining citizenship, and then helping his parents to move to the United States as well. Ahmad did not envision his life post-graduation, saying that he told the sponsors about his dreams of education and coming back to help his community, but then explaining that, in “the environment I grew up in, you're so caught up with the daily basis, like you are in a survival mode all the time, that you even never think about what I'm going to do after you graduate” (personal communication, June 6, 2020). Samuel was very academically motivated, but expressed a similar view to Ahmad; he would later go on to have other dreams and goals related to helping his community and personal growth, but his main focus at the time he applied was to get himself and eventually his family out of the camp.

### **Experiences and Challenges with the Refugee Travel Document**

As stated above, this study focuses on one specific category of displaced persons: those with formal refugee status granted by UNHCR, who have not yet been resettled and are pursuing higher education in the United States on a student visa. As a refugee, they do not have access to a national passport from their country of origin; instead, they must obtain a refugee travel document, which is issued for refugees and stateless people by their host country, granting them the ability to legally travel internationally. A common thread that ran throughout the various themes below was the stress of having to explain their documentation and their status to those who were unfamiliar with it. Jonathan articulated,

Fearing the experience of answering the questions. Because I had to do a lot of explaining. That's the biggest struggle. Sometimes you're trying to explain, and you don't really have the answers. It's only very few people that empathize and really know.... if I explain to someone like see I'm not a permanent resident of any country and I'm not a citizen of any country. (personal communication, May 23, 2020)

As he demonstrates, this document represents their unique status; it is an unusual document for international students in the United States to have. This study explored students' experiences directly resulting from having this unique status to provide further detail on how it might impact their experience during university as they prepare for life post-graduation.

### *Obtaining the Document*

Registered refugees can only obtain a travel document when they demonstrate a legitimate need for it and apply. Without it, they cannot study abroad, so it is a critical step in this journey. Four of the six student participants did not report any challenges in obtaining the document the first time. Kayla had a friend who had been denied one outright and believed that she was only successful because an official in charge of the process mistook her for a member of a tribe that she felt inclined to assist, and Kayla strategically used her language skills to play along. Patrice described a long and bureaucratic process that involved getting letters and shuffling back and forth between the UNHCR offices and those of the host country's government office that works with refugees. Patrice and Ahmad explained how difficult it was to travel from the refugee camp to the capital city, where they had to obtain the document. The organization assisting Ahmad faced so many challenges in supporting him to obtain the document that they decided not to recruit from his camp anymore. After being accepted to the academic program, he was unable to obtain the travel document in time, so his scholarship was deferred a full year.

### *The Document and Student Visas*

All six student participants were on either F-1 or J-1 student visas. Student participants reported relatively few issues relating to their travel document and their student visa. Some U.S. embassies attached the visa to the travel document itself, while others provided the visa on a separate piece of paper, but this irregularity did not seem to impact students. Three student participants experienced an issue when they applied for their student visas to begin their studies; instead of the two years that citizens of their host country are typically granted, they were granted a much shorter period of one to two months. Junior applied for his visa in June and it expired before his departure date, so he had to apply for another visa. Another student participant in this situation had only ever managed to get one-month visas, and while Junior was eventually able to successfully argue that he should have a two-year visa, he expressed frustration at this inequity. All three participants were unclear as to whether the short period of time was due to their country of origin or their refugee status. Once students were on campus, they did not report encountering any problems resulting from their documentation related to their status as an enrolled international student.

### *Renewing the Travel Document*

The most significant and consistent challenge that the student participants faced while studying abroad in the United States with a refugee travel document was the process of renewing it. The document is typically valid for two years, though two participants reported that they managed to obtain one with a four-year validity by asking UNHCR in their host country. Most students will therefore have to renew it one or two times over the course of a four-year degree, plus any professional training post-graduation. Four of the six participants had faced this challenge (the other two had only been in the United States for one year so far) and resolved it in

a variety of ways: applying for a renewal abroad, traveling home to renew it in person, or by applying for a national passport from his country of origin's embassy in the United States. If a student chose to remain within the United States during the entire four-year period, they could get by with an expired document and visa, as it is only required for international travel and the student visa is only required for entry into the United States. Jonathan faced this situation after his travel document expired, while attempting to renew it from the United States. However, if he had not been able to obtain a U.S. driver's license, which another participant expressed difficulty getting due to her travel document, he would have been unable to fly at all, due to identification requirements at U.S. airports.

Of the four students who had faced an expiring travel document, only Jonathan succeeded in renewing it from abroad, over a 7-month period and only after employing the assistance of the UNHCR in the United States. The government office in his host country responsible for issuing the document had insisted he return in person to verify his registration as a refugee, but he could not afford to travel and also feared that shifting U.S. immigration laws might prevent him from reentering the United States to complete his studies. Knowing that, if he went, he would also have to renew his visa, and with no assurance from the government office as to how long it would take to issue the document, he worried he might, "end up taking a whole semester off just to renew my travel document" (personal communication, May 23, 2020). Once UNHCR reached out to its offices in his host country, the government office finally agreed to issue it and, "where there was no way, they found a way" (Jonathan, personal communication, May 23, 2020). He and his family sensed the office was trying to force a bribe from them when it delayed another three months, but continued pressure from UNHCR resulted in the release of his document, which his family mailed to him.

Of the three other students who faced an expiring travel document while abroad, two traveled home to renew the travel document in person. For Kayla, this went smoothly and quickly, and fit into her plans to be there anyway. She noted that she did not think she could renew it from abroad and had never heard of anyone who had. For Samuel, he first attempted to clarify the process remotely, and then spent over a year sending letters and documents, following up only to be told it was not received, and so forth. Eventually, he had established contacts and verified the process, took time off of school, and traveled home to renew it before he graduated and started OPT. Similar to Jonathan, Samuel remarked that, “I was going through the immigration office, but I was also keeping the UNHCR in the loop just because I wasn't sure what was going to happen” (personal communication, June 7, 2020). Luckily, he was successful and returned to school after two weeks. Ahmad had come to the United States for a pre-collegiate educational opportunity, so by the time he was applying for university, he was in the United States and his travel document was expiring. After the trouble he had faced in obtaining the travel document, with it delaying his studies, he did not even consider trying to renew it, especially from abroad. Instead, since the university he was accepted to required documentation in order for him to enroll, he and his sponsors decided his best option was to obtain a national passport from his country of origin. He traveled to Washington, D.C. in order to get this from their embassy, and had pursued his studies since then using a national passport for a country that he had never visited.

### ***Travel with the Document***

The other main challenge that students faced with their travel documents was during travel, internationally and within the United States. For some, the main challenge came when traveling to begin their studies. Jonathan and Samuel began their studies with a manual travel

document, which has since been phased out in favor of electronic travel documents. Both reported far fewer negative encounters with officials who were unfamiliar with the document once they had the electronic travel document. Ahmad and Kayla both faced challenges traveling even with an electronic travel document. Kayla reported regularly planning for an additional two hours whenever traveling by plane, to allow for questions and delays due to a lack of familiarity with the refugee travel document. She was accustomed to this but pointed out that these encounters served as a reminder of the circumstances that had led to her refugee status: “Of course it was never fun, because I always questioned why I am viewed as an alien, as an outsider. That of course goes back to what caused this and can sometimes be stressing” (Kayla, personal communication, June 9, 2020). Ahmad expressed a similar expectation of these delays, but was particularly scared after being pulled aside one time while traveling within the United States, when airport police came with dogs and hands on their holstered guns, asking him to step away and going through his things, all because they did not recognize his document.

Beyond these vital trips, student participants also had to forego certain opportunities involving travel during their studies that might have been valuable networking or professional experiences, due to their documentation. Samuel wanted to study abroad in Europe, but decided it was too complicated and expensive, as he would have had to return to southern Africa and get another month-long U.S. visa after finishing study abroad. Kayla avoided applying for internships in other countries because she feared either being denied a visa or having to navigate the “additional layers” due to her documentation (personal communication, June 9, 2020). Jonathan had to forego academic and professional conferences outside of the United States after his document had expired.

*Refugee Travel Document vs. a National Passport*

These types of challenges, ranging from obtaining, renewing, to traveling with the refugee travel document, may be why some refugees and the organizations that support them opt for getting a national passport instead of the refugee travel document to begin their studies abroad. However, it is vital to consider the long-term impact of having the different documents, on both the students and their families. Staff participant Vanessa noted that she had observed many college access programs who work with refugee populations assist them in obtaining national passports rather than refugee travel documents in order for them to study abroad, “because they hope that will make their life easier, but it really doesn't make their life a whole lot easier” (personal communication, June 4, 2020). Instead, she noted an example of a South Sudanese refugee student graduate who had returned to her host country and been offered a phenomenal job with a prestigious company, yet was struggling to obtain a work permit: “If this girl had a South Sudanese passport, she probably wouldn't be able to get work authorization in [host country] and she'd go back to South Sudan where she doesn't even speak Arabic or any of the languages” (Vanessa, personal communication, June 4, 2020). Essentially, having a passport to South Sudan, her country of origin, would not have improved the refugee student's likelihood of finding gainful employment anywhere post-graduation.

Furthermore, findings indicated that there may be negative repercussions for getting the national passport over a refugee travel document. Samuel explained that changing documents was not an option for him because doing so would affect his family's status as refugees in their host country: “I'm old enough that my file was taken away from my family, but the case is linked...because I came to [host country] when I was young” (personal communication, June 7, 2020). His understanding was that, should he obtain a passport from his country of origin, his

family could be kicked out of the refugee camp and they would no longer qualify as refugees. When Ahmad obtained a national passport after his travel document expired, in order to continue his studies in the United States, there was no indication that he or his scholarship program considered the impact this action might have on his family: “The organization that sponsored me...I was sort of like the guinea pig” (personal communication, June 6, 2020). As stated above, given the immense difficulty in obtaining the travel document in the first place, he and the organization did not even consider applying to renew it from abroad or in-person. He said he would have preferred to apply for asylum in the United States but was more focused on the delay that this process could cause him in progressing in his studies: “I was like, I’m already two years behind. I’m not going to do that” (Ahmad, personal communication, June 6, 2020). So instead he obtained a passport from the only country for which he was eligible: his country of origin, which he had never been to, and had no intention of returning to after graduation. I will explain the implications for these students of moving to various locations post-graduation in the section on the right to work by location.

### **Experiences with Student Affairs Staff and Services**

One aim of this study was to explore students’ experiences on U.S. campuses with student affairs staff and services, to see whether and/or how their experiences and needs might differ from other international student populations that they are typically grouped with, due to their student visa status and existing resources on U.S. campuses. As stated above, there is no particular mechanism to track the number of students in this situation, unless international offices were to track the type of documentation students have, so they are typically identified only as international students associated with the country on their travel document, their host country. Focusing particularly on those resources that support students in preparing for life after

graduation, were the supports these students accessed on campus helpful? What was missing? And did students identify their unique status voluntarily or not, and why or why not?

### *Accessing Campus Resources*

Student participants varied greatly in their responses on how many student services they accessed on a regular basis. Four of the six student participants indicated they primarily accessed academic resources on a regular basis, including academic advising, tutors, professors' office hours, and academic clubs, and some expressed a strong affinity for their international office as well. Four explained that they only participated in academic clubs and activities, because they felt they were the most important. Others were also involved and even took on leadership positions in either international student and/or African student groups, and religious groups.

### *Disclosing Refugee Status*

During his first year, Junior did not tell any students or staff about his refugee status, saying that only his closest friends knew his country of origin or his status. Jonathan felt similarly but had taken a more nuanced approach to navigating different spaces on campus over his four years. He was very careful about who knew about his refugee status and had concerns about how that information might be used; if he determined that his status was not relevant to the type of support a particular space could offer to him, then he did not disclose it. He did admit that there was a particular type of support that staff who knew all aspects of him, including his refugee status, could offer and that he found it a relief to not, "leave out information when I'm trying to tell [them] something" (Jonathan, personal communication, May 23, 2020).

Patrice was worried about telling people she was a refugee when she first came to the United States, but in the end, she and Kayla both told professors and staff who they thought would need to know in order to support them adequately:

With professors, I talk to them and they know who I am ‘cause I need them to understand my background. I need them to understand where I come from, cause if I’m having trouble in that class, I need them to understand that... I didn’t have quality education, with gaps.... They cannot help me if I don’t say anything.... So, I felt like that was necessary. (personal communication, June 7, 2020)

Staff participants Mary and Vanessa both knew of students who were outspoken, even advocates for refugees on campus. Vanessa pointed out that it really depended on the individual, though; others are worried about the stigma and perhaps not ready to speak about their backgrounds: “There’s one student who... she’s relatively young, and she has a lot of pain that she hasn’t processed yet” (personal communication, June 4, 2020).

Samuel had insightful contributions on how he learned to maintain control of his own story when disclosing his status. As a freshman, the university contacted him and asked to publish an article about his unique educational journey. He did not hesitate, but later regretted how his story was received: “For me, it was like, optimize the resources. They are not evenly distributed everywhere, so we are lucky to be here, and people received it as – hey guys, I’ve suffered a lot in my life” (Samuel, personal communication, June 7, 2020). With time and growth, he saw how he could have framed his story more strategically in order to motivate others, rather than elicit unwelcome pity.

### ***Experiences with Campus Services***

In general, student participants were positive about the resources they accessed, and the willingness of staff and faculty to assist them in their academic and professional pursuits. Jonathan found a lot of support from a student group focused on black engineers and scientists, though he kept his identity as a refugee away from that space. It offered mentorship,

personalized support, and access to professional internships and jobs, which he indicated helped him a great deal.

However, some students like Ahmad and Samuel expressed gratitude for all the support they have received from student affairs staff, while also identifying gaps or ways in which the advising was not applicable to their life situations. Ahmad shared that he felt lost and disconnected from his campus for the first three years of his studies but was hesitant to blame the university staff: “They were trying to [support me]. They just didn't know how to” (personal communication, June 6, 2020). For example, he felt the distance between the life circumstances of the majority of his classmates and his own, which he represented by a common trope at liberal arts institutions: “‘It’s college, you can do whatever you want.’ No, I can’t. It has to be marketable” (Ahmad, personal communication, June 6, 2020). Similarly, Samuel was also unsure if it was the responsibility of his advisors to provide him with the additional support he identified as missing in his university years. Interviews with student affairs professionals confirmed that staff are not typically deeply involved with issues resulting from their specific documentation. Staff participant Mary confirmed that their scholarship program, “didn’t ever make a distinction” between students based on their documentation, despite supporting them to travel to the university and obtain internships or jobs (personal communication, May 29, 2020).

### *Experiences with the International Office*

All six students acknowledged that the international student office was the one place that knew of their status when they first began their studies but varied in how helpful they found it to be. Samuel went to his international office almost weekly, and saw it as a place to relax, run into fellow students, and discuss important information with staff. Sophomore Junior only attended his international office’s mandatory orientations and workshops, wondering aloud, “I don’t

think... do you really just go anytime you want? Like whenever you need something?" (personal communication, May 24, 2020). Patrice said that their office is generally considered unhelpful and unwelcoming by most international students, and that she finds this stressful.

Samuel, Junior, and Jonathan all commented that their international offices treated them the same as other students with different statuses, basing advice and guidance on their visa status instead. At first, Junior expressed gratitude that he felt his university treats him the same as other international students who are citizens of their own countries. Toward the end of the interview, however, he recognized that being surrounded by international students who have the right to work in their home countries post-graduation might have been preventing him from considering his own limitations as carefully as he should: "If you're a refugee, if you have a travel document, you don't have the same options that the rest of them have" (personal communication, May 24, 2020). This sentiment aligned with other resources student participants identified as missing. Staff participant Vanessa expressed surprise of an exceptional situation in which one student's, "international advisor supported him through the process," of successfully applying for asylum, demonstrating that some staff do take on this role, but that it is rare (personal communication, June 4, 2020).

### ***Missing Support***

All six student participants identified one of two categories of support as missing from their campuses: in-depth assistance navigating their refugee status and emotional support from someone familiar with their refugee background. Similar to the gap Junior recognized in the course of the interview, Jonathan and Samuel both pointed out that their international offices could assist with common aspects of international student issues related to their visas, but that "you are limited when you start asking the bigger questions for help" (Samuel, personal

communication, June 7, 2020). Jonathan went so far as to list out what some of these specific questions were:

What does it mean for me to have a refugee document and to travel in [and out of] the U.S.? What is the danger; will I be admitted back? What does the law say right now? .... So, if I apply for my H-1B, what are the implications? How different is my case? So being aware of what it actually means to be a refugee and knowing my rights, what my limits are, what barriers I actually have. Because I feel like sometimes, we give ourselves, refugees, we give ourselves a lot of barriers that, sometimes, they're not really there.  
(personal communication, May 23, 2020)

Neither of them expected their international student advisors to know all of these answers, because there are so few students with their status, immigration laws change so rapidly, and situations vary by country of origin and residence. Perhaps that is why Jonathan suggested that access to immigration lawyers might be the most helpful assistance, acknowledging that he understood cost might be prohibitive.

Patrice, Ahmad, and Kayla, who were at stages of education ranging from a rising sophomore to having just finished OPT, all identified that additional emotional support would help them navigate their time at university. Kayla spoke repeatedly of the “additional layer of obstacles to overcome” for refugees in university (personal communication, June 9, 2020), and Patrice elaborated on this, saying that she felt overwhelmed by having to consider so many factors and by trying to think so far ahead, and needed someone to talk to about all of the stressors, especially someone who could understand her background as a refugee. Ahmad shared how things turned around in his third year of studies, when he gained additional emotional support from someone who understood his background and could provide culturally familiar

support, a professor who came from the country Ahmad grew up in, his host country. With this professor's help, he also learned about the importance of connections and the value of the networks he has access to here, which helped him regain his focus, understand how to make the most of his time here, and motivated him to put effort into school again. This additional support coincided with him doing his first summer internship and earning money, which helped him contribute to his family's finances, relieving some of his stress and guilt about their situation.

Student affairs staff offered their perspectives on additional advising and support from which they thought this population might benefit, based on their experiences working with them. Vanessa touched on the lack of stability that these students face if they return home during breaks, particularly in summer, indicating that, depending on their situation, they may benefit from additional support figuring out their plans over these periods. She also brought up a complex "split identity" that many refugee students express and could benefit from some support navigating (Vanessa, personal communication, June 4, 2020). She explained it using this example:

I feel like I'm Kenyan, all I know is Kenya, but they don't want me because I'm a refugee. I can't get a job in Kenya, but if I go back to South Sudan, I don't speak any- I don't speak Arabic or any of the tribal languages and I don't even know this country. So, it's this major identity challenge of who am I, where do I belong? Who will treat me like a human? (Vanessa, personal communication, June 4, 2020)

Most importantly, though, she focused on the difficulty students face in transitioning from being students in the United States to navigating their right to work in various countries. For those who remain in the United States, many dream of being sponsored by a company and gaining the right to stay due to their desired skills. In reality, though, Vanessa noted there have

been very few students who are able to legally stay long-term using this pathway, given the current political climate, and who may then be tempted to overstay illegally: “For the students we have who do OPT, we have to have that very serious conversation.... Overstaying your visa is just like not smart for your future. Let’s work through this” (personal communication, June 4, 2020). This will be discussed in further detail below.

Mary focused more on the challenge refugees face in determining where they see themselves establishing their professional careers post-graduation, whether it be in the United States, their country of origin, their host country, or a fourth location. She identified that organizations looking to support this population need to think deeply about the question: “How does a refugee or somebody with a refugee background approach their career?” (Mary, personal communication, May 29, 2020). And leading up to that larger question, if there is a desire or an intention that they return to their home region post-graduation, she recognized that they may need additional support in securing internships, because their networks and opportunities may be limited there. Also, in coaching these students professionally, she thought there was untapped potential in helping them reframe their lived experiences in ways that could translate into soft skills: “If you've gone through that and you've made it to where you are, there's such a high level of resilience out of that” (Mary, personal communication, May 29, 2020). Given the resources to which they had access and were perhaps missing on campus, how did refugee student participants approach this transition to life post-graduation?

### **Transition to Life Post-Graduation**

Students with refugee status graduating from university in the United States not only face the typical challenges of any college graduate such as navigating graduate school applications or job interviews, or even those of any international student in the United States, such as navigating

immigration laws surrounding OPT and non-immigrant work visas. On top of those challenges, students with refugee status must also consider how to obtain work authorization in any country, whether they plan to maintain their status as a refugee or apply for a different status, and how or where specifically, and they must navigate all of this largely on their own, without structured guidance from a knowledgeable source. This study looked at how students felt about this transition, how they prepared for it, and how they navigated their options, which they themselves identified as the following: graduate school; working in the United States, in their host country, in their country of origin, or in a fourth country, and how these options connected to their thoughts about resettlement and their refugee status with UNHCR.

### *Feelings About the Transition*

In interviews, rising sophomores Junior and Patrice expressed feeling quite differently about their transitions to life post-graduation. Junior was not yet thinking about it, because he believed it would only cause him stress. He planned to start preparing for the transition in his junior year and said his feelings about it will depend on the particulars of his situation: “For me, it depends. I don’t feel bad, or feel good, but when the situation is good, you’ll feel good” (Junior, personal communication, May 24, 2020). At the same stage of her education, Patrice was already feeling overwhelmed about what will happen after she graduates, even as she struggled to choose a major: “Everything I’m doing, I have to think like, ok—where am I going? What’s the next step after this?” (personal communication, June 7, 2020).

Rising senior Ahmad was maintaining his renewed focus on his academics and making the most of the opportunities around him, since he felt like he wasted some time during his first three years. He planned to focus again on documentation next year but was feeling positive at the time of the interview. Super senior Jonathan was feeling ambitious about his approaching

transition, and secure about his options, particularly those that are open to him as a graduate in a STEM field. Weighing a couple informal job offers and graduate school, he was still optimistic that the end result of his education will be good for him and his family: “I’m confident at succeeding after graduation, mainly because I have found places and spaces that will help me succeed” (personal communication, May 23, 2020).

Despite being at the end of her year of OPT, Kayla still felt unclear about what the next steps will bring, though she had decided to return home in a month. Samuel was waiting for his second-year extension of OPT, available to graduates in STEM fields, to be granted and felt much more secure about this ongoing transition at the time of the interview than he did while he was in college because he felt supported by his company to pursue a variety of options.

### ***Challenges with and Preparations for the Transition***

The challenges that students said they were facing when this study took place were either related to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as travel restrictions and canceled internships, or normal international student issues, such as applying for jobs post-graduation and some companies not being willing to hire a non-U.S. citizen. After sharing how they felt about the transition, students were asked to reflect on specific, concrete steps and preparations they took in order to prepare for the transition to life post-graduation. When and how did they prepare? Which concerns were front and foremost for them?

Rising sophomores Patrice and Junior were both focusing on school as a means for preparing for their lives post-graduation. Junior knew his major and was working hard to get good grades, planned to start applying for summer internships next year, and will start looking at plans for life after graduation in his junior year. Patrice had been undecided on a major, so she spent her first year exploring and decided on business because she thought it was, “something

that will allow me to have a job immediately after I graduate” (personal communication, June 7, 2020).

In Jonathan’s sophomore year, he began thinking about his next steps and decided to prioritize his academics because they were what had “opened doors” for him and others who he admired (personal communication, May 23, 2020). He began trying harder, identifying areas of growth, and actively seeking support on campus. He emphasized that he had been very carefully following all immigration rules and laws, for example using OPT for any work he engaged in, because he wanted to make sure he set himself up for his future. Samuel shared that he began taking serious steps to prepare for graduation in his junior year. He started by renewing his travel document, so that it would not be expired when he graduated, and also learned more about research and PhDs, while applying to over 200 companies to keep both options open to him. Most of these steps taken line up with what other students might do, aside from the focus on maintaining valid documentation and following rules so carefully. One trend that came up in all interviews was an effort to keep as many doors open as possible, which can be seen as a strategy developed to cope with the large number of external factors that impact their lives.

### ***Graduate School***

For two participants, graduate school was viewed as an exciting next step in their academic and professional careers. For others, it was a clear way forward in terms of visas and documentation, but a delay on the way to earning money and being able to support one’s family or oneself. Samuel and Jonathan both wanted to pursue graduate school soon, but were also interested in working, and felt good about having both options. Samuel chose to do OPT before graduate school because he had not yet taken the GRE and was only accepted to a graduate school that did not offer him a scholarship. Ideally, he hoped to work while he is in graduate

school, so that he could continue supporting his family, but he knew he would not be able to do that without an H-1B visa. For Ahmad, graduate school was a backup option, if he were unable to find a job and do OPT: “So, the other option might be grad school, but I don't want to do that” (personal communication, June 6, 2020). Kayla, Patrice, and Junior did not say anything directly about graduate school, though they did indicate a desire to find a job immediately after graduation.

### ***The Right to Work by Location***

More important for me is the connections and the resources that I have. Like I know that if I'm a really good software developer who can do work anywhere, that like it doesn't really matter whether I'm a U.S. citizen or whatever country I'm in. (Ahmad, personal communication, June 6, 2020)

During the course of the interviews, it became clear that student participants generally thought about where to live post-graduation in terms of where they would be able to gain work authorization, and that this was not straightforward. Some were more informed than others about their rights and limitations in various countries, particularly the United States and their host country. Most mentioned where their families were, and where they considered to be home, but they focused on being able to pursue their careers and support themselves and/or their families, wherever they could do that. For staff participant Vanessa, these students' transitions to employment was the part of supporting them that she worried about the most, above any other aspect of their university experience. She spoke about the need to approach the transition for this population with particular “care and consideration,” supporting them, but also helping them be aware of the limitations they may face. She said that her program had concerns they might, “not

be able to support them through getting a meaningful and dignified job,” but that they were committed to the effort (Vanessa, personal communication, June 4, 2020).

**In the United States.** Five student participants preferred the option of trying to stay and work in the United States, and all of them said that was their intention when they first came: “This is where my life is now, and I want to take advantage of that” (Patrice, personal communication, June 7, 2020). This process appeared to mirror that of any international student with a student visa who tries to pursue this pathway: applying for jobs using their 1-2 years of OPT, as allowed by their course of study, being sponsored by a company, and then applying for an H-1B visa. Samuel had already applied for the H-1B visa this past year and did not get it, so he planned to apply again during his second year of OPT. Only Ahmad spoke concretely about applying for asylum in the United States, if he was unsuccessful pursuing this first pathway; everyone else focused solely on a pathway to staying that depended on their employable skills. Jonathan had thought about applying for asylum as a backup option as well, but was worried what might happen if it were rejected; could it stop him from continuing his bachelor or graduate degree? That was not a risk he wanted to take, and his family encouraged him to remain focused on his academics first. Kayla was the only participant who planned to leave the United States. While Kayla saw professional experience in the United States as integral to making the most of her time here and improving the likelihood she will be employable elsewhere after leaving, she said that she planned to return to her host country after her OPT ended in one month, at least partially because she was tired of navigating the bureaucracy.

Staff participant Vanessa worried that too many students with refugee status counted on getting an H-1B visa and that, as stated above, very few students she worked with were successful pursuing this pathway because there is an annual quota and recipients are selected by

a lottery process. This was particularly true given the current political climate around immigration laws and policies in the United States. However, it is important to consider their desire to stay and work in the United States in the context of what their options are in other countries with which they are familiar.

**In Their Host Country.** Five of the six student participants knew that they did not have the right to work in their host country, the place where they had grown up and their families still lived:

I cannot say that, after my graduation, I will go to [host country]. Then what? I'm going to, I'm going to live there, and go on living in the refugee camp? We are not allowed to do any other job, regardless of the skills that we have, with the document you are just sitting doing nothing because you are not allowed to. (Junior, personal communication, May 24, 2020)

However, Junior did acknowledge that, if his family were resettled in the United States and he were not able to gain employment anywhere else, he would go back to the refugee camp and said that they would then support him. Vanessa confirmed the difficult situation these students are in, expressing frustration at the state of affairs: “Countries that have these limitations around work authorization, it just leads to this dead end almost” (personal communication, June 4, 2020).

In addition to being well aware that he would not be able to work back in his host country, Samuel even questioned whether he would still be considered a refugee there, after being away for four years and missing censuses that maintain refugee registrations. According to him, these must be done in person; there is no process for helping students who are legally studying abroad to maintain their registrations.

Ahmad explained how he is only familiar with the refugee camp, not the rest of the country, but still considers his host country as home because his family is there. He had thought that maybe he could work in a foreign branch of a company he starts working for in the United States, but he knew that, now that he has a passport from his country of origin, passport holders from this particular country are typically not granted work permits. He thought perhaps having studied at a good school in the United States might make them look at his case differently, but he was uncertain.

Kayla wanted to do internships in her host country but stayed in the United States because she did not want to fight the bureaucracy. At the time of the interview, she had just finished OPT and was planning to return in one month but was still not clear on the legality of working there. Instead, she focused on a different hurdle to gaining employment in her host country – the stigma against refugees:

When I said that I'm a refugee, everything else you know becomes zero. And that's why sometimes I don't want to talk about it with people. Because I don't want them to see me as that thing... I work hard and I don't want to see people ignore my identity and have that image of people. That starving people who don't do anything, she's from nowhere.  
(Kayla, personal communication, June 9, 2020)

Both staff participants touched on the expectation from many funding organizations that international students, particularly those from low-income countries, return home after graduation to prevent brain drain, or the emigration of highly trained or intelligent people from a particular country or region. They agreed that this expectation is more complicated for students with refugee status, due to work authorization issues in their host country and indicated that

organizations working with this population should consider these constraints more carefully, a perspective that reflected the concerns raised by all six student participants.

**In Their Country of Origin.** None of the student participants brought up the possibility of returning to their country of origin. The study intentionally did not delve into the circumstances that led to participants' refugee status in order to minimize harm, but the reasons seemed related to a variety of factors, including: ongoing conflict and instability, fear of persecution, never having been there, not speaking the language, having no family ties there, or a combination thereof.

**In a Fourth Country.** Both Jonathan and Samuel indicated that they were optimistic that a company could assist them in transferring to a branch in a different country, if they faced challenges staying in the United States to work. Samuel's company had already discussed that concretely with him. However, they still wished to remain in good standing with U.S. Immigration, because of all of the professional opportunities in their fields there, no matter where they ended up being based.

### ***Resettlement and Higher Education in the United States***

Although this study's main aim was to look at studying abroad in the United States as a potential complementary pathway to resettlement, it was important to refer back to the normal process of resettlement that these students and their families were otherwise waiting on when they began university. Did studying abroad impact their eligibility for resettlement? How do these students now think about resettlement versus other pathways to meaningful employment and lawful residency?

Junior shared that his family had been notified they had been selected for resettlement to the United States earlier this year and he had been told he could either put off his education and

wait to be resettled with them, or take up his university scholarship and have his file removed from their case. He chose the latter, because the monetary value of the scholarship was too great to pass up:

What they were trying to say is – don't go to school. So, for me, stopping going to school you know, as a refugee, you have no money to fend for yourself. Everything that we do is being sponsored by the UN, so when you get an opportunity like going to university, where the school is paying for your school fees, which is like \$70,000, which is a lot of money. So, if you lost that opportunity, that means your life will be nothing. For me, I was the one who decided no, I'm going to school. (Junior, personal communication, May 24, 2020)

Although Junior did not know if he would be able to be reunited with his family later, he wanted to stay in the United States, given the increased likelihood that his family may also be here in the future. Kayla similarly decided she would, “rather go for school rather than go for a resettlement,” but then later found out from UNHCR that her decision to leave delayed her parents’ resettlement to the United States (personal communication, June 9, 2020). According to her, her family was not fully aware or informed of the impact her decision to pursue university abroad would have on her parents’ resettlement.

Patrice’s family was still waiting for resettlement, but she was unsure she wanted them to come to the United States because she had learned that it would be so hard for them to make a living with their low levels of education. However, “If they have the chance to be resettled, they have to go” wherever they are accepted. She also wanted her file to be removed from her family’s, so that her studying abroad did not delay them being resettled, as she had heard it sometimes can (Patrice, personal communication, June 7, 2020).

Samuel only holds out faint hope that his family might be resettled after living in the refugee camp for decades, but he is pursuing other pathways himself, with his main goal of obtaining a status other than refugee:

For a lot of students with travel documents in the U.S., one of the big questions is: if your family is not resettled to the U.S. or to a different country, how do you get out of that status? What is... what is the guarantee of your future? (personal communication, June 7, 2020).

Ahmad dismissed the possibility of resettlement for himself or his family outright, saying, “You don’t want to waste time on it” (personal communication, June 6, 2020). Therefore, he was fully focused on alternatives for himself, so that he could then help his family.

Vanessa recounted various situations in which students had difficulty deciding whether to take up a university scholarship in a particular country because they did not know if, when, or where their family might be resettled. She had known cases where they decided to leave university part-way through in order to be resettled in a different country with their family. Similar to Junior’s situation, she expressed that it can be easier for a student to decide to start university abroad if they know their family is going to be resettled in the same country. For Jonathan, his end goal was to reunite with his family, and he spoke about pursuing his education while keeping the door open to applying for asylum for himself and resettlement for his parents, with faith that one of them would lead to finding a home for them all:

The goal from there would be to reunite with my family, have them come here. That is a resettlement for them. But from my success, in the academic route ... That I can help that way. That's one way. But the second way is also actually, to apply for asylum here.... It’s

like they're parallel...So it's like trying to see if they can complement each other, the two methods, ways of finding a home basically. (personal communication, May 23, 2020)

These examples demonstrate the complexity refugee students must navigate in balancing their identities and legal options as both international students and as refugees.

### **Conclusions**

This study aimed to answer the following research question: What are the lived experiences and perspectives of students with refugee travel documents pursuing higher education in the United States, particularly focusing on their preparation for and transition to life post-graduation? In the context of the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, in which signatory states agreed to address increased refugee flows using a new model—the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)—to increase the number of pathways toward resettlement places, self-reliance, and legal solutions for refugees, this study's findings show that this pathway has promise, but is fraught with uncertainty in the United States (UNHCR, 2018). According to my findings, there is currently no formal mechanism for refugee students to access additional resettlement places in the United States, but access to employment-based visas in the United States or elsewhere are indeed additional legal solutions to which these students previously did not have access.

Through the course of my research, several findings emerged related to these students' motivations for pursuing tertiary education abroad, how their documentation has implications for their and their families' futures, the ways in which universities and other stakeholders could better support this student population, and the challenges these students face in transitioning to employment. In considering how students prepare for and transition to life post-graduation, it was important to first investigate students' motivations for pursuing higher education in the

United States. While most student participants were academically motivated, all six of them envisioned that a tertiary scholarship might lead to a solution to their refugee status, as well as their families'. Most identified obtaining citizenship, the right to work, or finding a home as their primary motivation for continuing their education abroad. So, although the pathway to resettlement via tertiary education in the United States is not straightforward, it is important to note that refugees and their families often hoped it would lead there. This finding highlights a tension between students and their families and some of their sponsor organizations, who expressed an expectation or obligated that these students return to their region of origin or host country post-graduation. It also represents a disconnect between the goals of the UNHCR and signatory states and some funding organizations, demonstrating a need for further collaboration in support of this refugee population.

By asking detailed questions about these students' experiences with their refugee travel documents, it became clear that this document does indeed enable those who are otherwise unable to obtain national passports from their country of origin to pursue tertiary education abroad. Students identified that the new electronic documents work much better for international travel than the former manual documents and that they generally function smoothly together with U.S. student visas, but that they face enormous barriers in renewing the travel document from abroad or in-person, and often benefitted from engaging UNHCR in the United States and in their host country in this process.

Additionally, the findings demonstrated that some organizations are supporting students to apply for national passports from their country of origin instead of a travel document from their host country, perhaps to avoid certain challenges they believe students may face with the travel document while studying abroad. However, my findings indicate that this choice could

have long-term repercussions not only on the student's refugee status, but that of their family's. Therefore, this decision must be made carefully, and in consultation with all implicated parties.

In terms of the support students with refugee status need while at university in the United States, there was quite a bit of overlap with other international students' needs, as well as a few unique needs. First of all, depending on whether the student decides to disclose their status to other offices or not, the international office may be the only student affairs office poised to know about a students' documentation. Therefore, this may be the easiest first touch point to provide support. Findings indicated that it might be best to start conversations with students about their long-term plans in their first year, as they may either already be overwhelmed or avoiding thinking about it due to stress related to the uncertainty. Transition theory indicates that how students feel about a transition may impact the eventual outcome, so it is helpful to engage with students on this, address fears, and brainstorm possible solutions. Refugee students' academic success is likely to be very important to them, as it has opened doors to opportunities which others from their background could not access, and they are very motivated to excel, if their potential is fostered. They may need additional support in finding professional opportunities in their home regions or navigating their legal options in various locations. In any and all discussions, it may be helpful for student affairs staff to reference developmental ecology theory and keep in mind that these students are strongly influenced by factors outside of their campus experience, including but not limited to: the wellbeing of their family, financial stresses (for which they may feel and/or be partially responsible), and shifting immigration policies in their host country and the United States.

When focusing on these students' experiences with the transition to life post-graduation, both in terms of lawful residency and employment, it becomes clear that even this rare and

prized educational opportunity indeed remains, “a contested landscape for refugee families and students” (Wiseman, 2019, p. 1). While student participants were often unsure exactly how, many maintained faith that university education would somehow improve their situations and lead to a durable solution to their refugee status. While students with refugee status have access to the same right to work in the United States as any other international student, the path thereafter becomes quite unclear. Students were uncertain about how their student and refugee status interacts with a desire to apply for an H-1B visa or an asylum application, though three student participants identified the support they received from companies during internships and post-graduation as instrumental in increasing their feelings of security and optimism that they could successfully transition to employment and durable legal options, highlighting the potential for companies to play a bigger role in this transition. In their host country, student participants questioned how long they would remain registered as refugees after leaving to study, or what pathways to employment might exist there. There were also questions about how being a student in the United States might affect their family’s resettlement prospects. A poignant example of the uncertainties these students are accustomed to living with was when Junior expressed that one post-graduation option for him was returning to the refugee camp in his host country with no work authorization and hoping that his family might be resettled to the United States and support his livelihood from there. This came from a student with an engineering major at a well-respected U.S. university. Given these findings, as well as remaining questions and uncertainties, I would like to suggest some practical applications of this research, as well as lines of future inquiry.

## **Practical Applications**

### *For U.S. Universities and Student Affairs Staff*

As these students are enrolled international students on student visas, universities and student affairs staff play a critical role in helping prepare these students to successfully transition to life post-graduation. If designing a scholarship program specifically for refugee students who have not yet been resettled, it is important to do so in consultation with UNHCR (Information, n.d.). If a university is unable to provide specialized support related to finding permanent and legal solutions, they could help connect the student with local community resources for refugees or contacts at the UNHCR. However, based on interviews, it seems there are some key strategies for supporting these students that could be employed. First, it was clear that having to explain their refugee status repeatedly, and particularly to those unfamiliar with it, can be a large source of stress for students, so it may be best if refugee students have a particularly informed consistent point of contact at the university to field their concerns related to their status and help connect them with other campus resources, starting in their first year. Secondly, it seems best practice to wait until a student's second or third year before asking them to participate in university newsletters or other publications disclosing their status publicly. And third, as students apply for OPT, it would be helpful to reiterate the consequences of overstaying and various pathways available to them after OPT. A final practical application of this research for student affairs staff is to consider the demonstrated similarities of this population's college experience to the experience of domestic first generation college students; these refugee students are forging a pathway for their families and communities, and they need additional support and advising to understand how higher education fits into their lived experiences and future goals.

***For UNHCR***

UNHCR played an instrumental role in these students' journeys, yet there were key moments when additional advising for refugee students and their families would have helped them to make more informed decisions. It appears critical that UNHCR offices in host countries advise students and their families on the possible implications of both studying abroad and the type of travel document a student obtains on their eligibility for resettlement prior to them commencing their studies abroad. Relatedly, if leaving to study abroad through specific scholarship programs may impact a student's refugee status in their host country, the terms and conditions of this should be clearly laid out to the refugee student and their family. Predeparture advising regarding any rights or limitations related to work authorization in their host country would be helpful, to ensure they are obtaining accurate and timely information. If at all possible, students should be granted a four-year travel document and advised on how to renew it during the course of their studies abroad. If mechanisms for renewing this from abroad are lacking, then this may be an area of improvement, in partnership with government offices in host countries responsible for refugees and UNHCR in the United States.

In addition to existing resources for scholarship programs looking to support refugees to study in 'third countries,' or outside of their host countries, UNHCR could develop materials for international student offices to consult while advising refugee students who are international students at their institutions (Information, n.d.). Some examples of relevant information would be key considerations relating to documentation and work authorization and laying out potential pathways toward permanent legal solutions in the United States, such as the asylum application process and the H-1B visa, and how these interact with their student and/or refugee status.

***For Sponsorship Organizations***

For organizations sponsoring refugee students to study abroad in the United States, or any third country, it is vital that they design their program in consultation with UNHCR and consider these students' paths beyond graduation (UNHCR, n.d.b). They should consider whether their program aims are in line with the needs, desires, and realities of the population they aim to serve. This involves factors such as: the implications of a student's travel document or national passport on their and their family's future status as refugees, whether the scholarship is intended as a pathway to resettlement or students are expected to return to their country of origin or host country and if so, how? Will they become self-reliant? What legal options will be available to the student post-graduation?

**Advocacy**

In order for refugee students to successfully navigate higher education in the United States as a complementary pathway to resettlement, they must currently navigate the following legal pathways to durable solutions: 1) applying for asylum in the United States, 2) pursuing OPT and then the H-1B visa. Since conducting interviews in late May and Early June 2020, all three of these legal options have come under renewed threat by the U.S. federal government. There is a pending federal regulation that would essentially, "end asylum in the United States for victims of persecution in other countries," rolling back the structure built since the Refugee Act of 1980 (Schrag, 2020). Per an executive order, the H-1B lottery process has been discontinued through the end of this calendar year, and many in the field fear that OPT may be challenged soon (Fischer, 2020; NAFSA, 2020). And most recently, a contested directive to revoke F-1 student visas from all international students attending U.S. institutions that will only offer online instruction in fall 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic, should it be upheld, could force refugee

students to leave the United States and attempt to participate in courses across time differences and from locations with little or no internet (Specia & Abi-Habib, 2020). There is much advocacy to be done on behalf of refugee students and others impacted by these recent orders and proposed regulations. A further step that does not currently appear politically viable would be to lobby to open up specific pathways to U.S. permanent residency and citizenship for a number of refugee students in this position.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Although this study fills in some gaps in the literature on refugee students pursuing higher education abroad, focusing on the United States, there are many further lines of inquiry to be explored. Due to the limitations of this study, I was unable to engage other stakeholders, such as the UNHCR, large sponsorship organizations, and host country government offices. Secondly, given additional challenges that female refugees face in accessing education, there is need for further study on their motivations for and lived experiences when pursuing higher education abroad, as well as the impact it has on their lives long-term. This could fall under the general call for more intersectional research on refugee students in higher education, calling upon researchers to better understand refugee students in all their complexities and upon universities to provide support structures that help refugee students thrive by incorporating “their lived experience and identity” in the creation of any program (Unangst & Crea, 2020, p. 241). Furthermore, given the challenges refugee students face in transitioning to permanent legal solutions and work authorization, there is need for further research on refugee graduates’ lives longer after graduation, comparing their successes and challenges in their country of study, their host country, and/or a fourth country. This work could also shed further light on the professional futures available to refugee students. How do they leverage their university education? What is

their impact on their families and the communities from which they come? Finally, there is another international student population pursuing higher education abroad, in the United States and elsewhere, about whom further research is merited: stateless students from non-signatory countries who are not under the protection of the UNHCR. I hope my findings will serve as a starting point for collaborative partnerships that foster the potential of this driven and talented refugee population and further research on the role higher education plays in their journeys.

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### Tables

**Table 1: Student Participant Demographics**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Stage of Education</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Region of Origin</b>	<b>Host Region</b>	<b>Type of U.S. Institution</b>	<b>Location of U.S. Institution</b>
<b>Junior</b>	Rising Sophomore	Male	Central Africa	Southern Africa	Small private liberal arts college	Northeast
<b>Patrice</b>	Rising Sophomore	Female	Central Africa	Southern Africa	Small private liberal arts college	Northeast
<b>Ahmad</b>	Rising Senior	Male	East Africa	East Africa	Small private liberal arts college	Midwest
<b>Jonathan</b>	Rising Senior	Male	East Africa	Southern Africa	Large public research university	West
<b>Kayla</b>	Graduate; 1 Year of OPT Complete	Female	East Africa	East Africa	Small private liberal arts college	South
<b>Samuel</b>	Graduate; 1 Year of OPT Complete	Male	Central Africa	Southern Africa	Large public research institution	Midwest

**Table 2: Staff Participant Information**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Professional Position</b>	<b>Number of Years Working with Refugee Students</b>	<b>Number of Refugee Students Worked With</b>
<b>Vanessa</b>	Female	Staff on college access program	7	20
<b>Mary</b>	Female	Staff on scholarship program at U.S. university	8	3-4

**Appendix A: Letter of Invitation for Student Participants**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Jessica Clarkson. I am a student pursuing my [Master of Arts in International Education at the SIT Graduate Institute](#). I would like to invite you to participate in a study I am conducting as a part of my MA degree about the perspectives of students with refugee status pursuing higher education abroad. Please read the information below and reach out if you have any questions or complete the linked survey [insert link] with your contact information and some basic details relating to the study so that I may contact you. Please forward this letter and the survey to anyone else you know who fits the criteria of the study and you believe would be interested in participating.

I am hoping to speak with students who:

- Have formal refugee status with the UNHCR and possess a refugee travel document
- Are pursuing a Bachelor degree in the United States (ideally still studying, or graduated within the past year).

In my work both as a student services advisor at a U.S. university and in Zambia, working to assist students in applying to university abroad, I observed students with refugee status facing unique challenges both in their country of asylum and while pursuing education abroad. In this study, I would like to explore the experiences of students with refugee status pursuing higher education in the United States, particularly focusing on their preparation for and transition to life post-university. There is very little research on this topic, and I hope that this information might assist students, organizations, and universities that support refugees to access and succeed in higher education.

I am asking interested students to fill out the linked survey with your contact details and some basic information about your education and refugee status, as it relates to the study, and indicate your informed consent to participate. You might expect the survey to take between 10-15 minutes to complete. Then I will invite each student who meets the criteria to participate in a virtual interview with recorded audio over Skype, WhatsApp, FaceTime, or whatever platform is preferred, lasting between 45 minutes and one hour.

If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me at [jessica.clarkson@mail.sit.edu](mailto:jessica.clarkson@mail.sit.edu).

Best,

Jessica Clarkson

### **Appendix B: Letter of Invitation for Organizations**

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Jessica Clarkson. I am a student pursuing my Master of Arts in International Education at the SIT Graduate Institute. I would like to ask if you could forward this invitation to participate in research to students you are familiar with who may fit the criteria and be interested. I am conducting a study as a part of my MA degree about the perspectives of students with refugee status pursuing higher education abroad, particularly focusing on their preparation for and transition to life post-university. Please read the information below and reach out if you have any questions.

I am hoping to speak with students who:

- Have formal refugee status with the UNHCR and possess a refugee travel document
- Are pursuing a Bachelor degree in the United States (ideally still studying, or graduated within the past year).

In my work both as a student services advisor at a U.S. university and in Zambia, working to assist students in applying to university abroad, I observed students with refugee status facing unique challenges both in their country of asylum and while pursuing education abroad. There is very little research on this topic, and I hope that this information might assist students, organizations, and universities that support refugees to access and succeed in higher education.

I am asking interested students to fill out the brief linked survey with their contact details and some basic information about their education and refugee status, as it relates to the study, and indicate their informed consent to participate. The survey should take between 10-15 minutes to complete. Then I will invite each student who meets the criteria to participate in a virtual interview with recorded audio over Skype, WhatsApp, FaceTime, or whatever platform is preferred, lasting between 45 minutes and one hour.

If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me at [jessica.clarkson@mail.sit.edu](mailto:jessica.clarkson@mail.sit.edu).

Best,  
Jessica Clarkson

### **Appendix C: Letter of Invitation for Staff Participants**

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Jessica Clarkson. I am a student pursuing my Master of Arts in International Education at the SIT Graduate Institute. I would like to ask if you could forward this invitation to participate in research to students you are familiar with who may fit the criteria and be interested. I am conducting a study as a part of my MA degree about the perspectives of students with refugee status pursuing higher education abroad, particularly focusing on their preparation for and transition to life post-university. Please read the information below and reach out if you have any questions.

I am hoping to speak with student affairs professionals who:

- Are employed at a U.S. university or college, and work in any student affairs office (for example, an international office, a career center, a scholarships office, etc.), and
- Has experience advising or otherwise supporting undergraduate students who have formal refugee status with the UNHCR and possess a refugee travel document (rather than a Green Card or national passport from any country). This support could be direct or through involvement in institutional policymaking, etc.
- Ideally has an insight into these students' experiences preparing to transition to life post-graduation (this could have to do with internship/job applications, problems relating to documentation, etc.)

In my work both as a student services advisor at a U.S. university and in Zambia, working to assist students in applying to university abroad, I observed students with refugee status facing unique challenges both in their country of asylum and while pursuing education abroad. There is very little research on this topic, and I hope that this information might assist students, organizations, and universities that support refugees to access and succeed in higher education.

I am asking interested student services professionals to fill out the brief linked survey with their contact details and some basic information about their job duties and experience working with this population and indicate their informed consent to participate. The survey should take about 10 minutes to complete. Then I will invite each professional to participate in a virtual interview with recorded audio over Skype, WhatsApp, FaceTime, or whatever platform is preferred, lasting between 45 minutes and one hour.

If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me at [jessica.clarkson@mail.sit.edu](mailto:jessica.clarkson@mail.sit.edu).

Best,  
Jessica Clarkson

### Appendix D: Survey for Student Participants

Project description and participant informed consent agreement was at the top of the electronic survey.

#### DOCUMENTATION

1. At the time of starting university abroad, did you possess one or more national passports?  
Yes/No
  - a. If yes, please include country(-ies)
2. At the time of starting university abroad, did you possess a refugee travel document, issued by the UNHCR? Yes/No
  - b. If yes, please include the country or territory in which the document was issued:
3. In which country were you living directly before starting university?
4. Please explain your status with the UNHCR. Are you waiting to be resettled? Have you/your family been resettled? [text box]

#### EDUCATION

##### Primary/Secondary

5. In which countries did you complete your primary (elementary) and secondary (high school) education? What school leaving certificate did you obtain at the end of your secondary school?
6. Did any organizations assist you in completing your education? If so, please list below and state which level of education or which activities they sponsored.

##### University

7. In which country are you currently studying?
8. Do you have a student visa? If so, what kind?
9. What is the name of the university?
10. Are you receiving a scholarship or any other form of financial aid or assistance?
  - a. If yes, please specify the name of any scholarship(s) or award(s):
11. What kind of degree (BA/BS) and major are you pursuing?
12. Which month/year did you begin your studies?
13. Which month/year do you expect to graduate?
14. If you have had any significant interruptions to your Bachelor degree, please specify here:

#### CONTACT INFORMATION

15. Please enter your e-mail address, or any other preferred method of communication, if you would like me to contact you to arrange a 45-60-minute interview:

**Appendix E: Survey for Staff Participants**

Project description and participant informed consent agreement was at the top of the electronic survey.

1. Name:
2. Name of university:
3. Job title and office name:
4. Brief description of general job duties:
5. Please describe your experience working with students who possess a UNHCR refugee travel document and are in the U.S. as an international student (not through a formal resettlement process): [text box]
6. If you have previous work experience with this population, or experience outside of work, please briefly explain that here: [text box]
7. Please enter your e-mail address, or any other preferred method of communication, if you would like me to contact you to arrange a 45-60-minute interview:

## Appendix F: Interview Questions for Student Participants

### INTRODUCTION

1. Thank you for completing the survey, and your interest in participating. [Remind them about purpose of study – acknowledge impact of COVID-19, privacy, pseudonyms, and voluntary nature of participation and ability to withdraw from study or choose not to answer any question in the interview, remind them of audio recording]. Do you have any questions about the study before we begin?
2. Can I just confirm a few details from your survey responses? [confirm year of study, UNHCR travel document, to confirm they meet the criteria, and ask clarifying details if any portion of submissions was missing/confusing]

### THEME 1: Perspectives on the goal/purpose of education (abroad)

3. Why did you apply to university abroad?
4. What was your view on the purpose of education at the time you applied to university. If you can, please recall a person, organization, incident, or other factor that played a big role in shaping your view at this stage.
5. If at all, how has your view on the purpose of education changed since the time you applied to university to now? If it has changed, to what do you attribute that change?

### THEME 2: Experiences with documentation/UNHCR travel document, as it affects education abroad

6. What challenges have you faced during your time at university (including from the time of applying for admission, travel for education, time at university, and during summers) due to your refugee travel document?
7. What opportunities, if any, have you been unable to pursue, or decided not to, due to your refugee status or your refugee travel document (optional prompt, if needed: related to travel or work, perhaps)?

### THEME 3: Experiences on campus—student support services for refugee students

8. Are you a part of any extracurricular groups or student organizations, such as sports, arts, clubs, etc.? If so, which ones?
9. Have you had any leadership roles, or do you hope to? If so, which ones?
10. From which campus resources/offices do you frequently seek support or guidance?
11. From which campus resources/offices do you occasionally seek support or guidance?
12. At each of these offices (please go through each), do you choose to disclose your status? Why or why not?

13. Are the student affairs staff you encounter familiar with your status and its implications?
14. Are there any forms of support related to your status/documentation as a refugee that you feel are lacking? If so, what are they?

THEME 4: Perspectives on life post-graduation

15. At the time you applied, did you think about what your life would be like after university? What were your goals or dreams then?
16. How do you currently feel about the transition from university to life post-graduation?
17. What challenges are you facing now, in terms of this transition?
18. At what point did you start taking concrete steps to prepare for life after graduation?
  - a. What steps did you begin/plan to take?
  - b. If any, which resources (on- and off-campus) did you seek to support this process?
    - i. Were they helpful?
    - ii. [If they do not volunteer any off-campus resources] Are there any individuals or organizations outside of the university with whom you discuss your plans for post-graduation?
19. What is your view on the possibility of formal resettlement for yourself and/or your family? [Follow up on their answer to the survey question re: their status with the UNHCR]
20. [Only ask if they have not already addressed this] What, if any, are your plans or concerns about your documentation and residency/citizenship following graduation?

CLOSURE

21. Thank you so much for your time.
22. Would you like to receive a transcript of this conversation when it is completed?
23. Are you interested in participating in a webinar (participation will be anonymous to other participants) in which I present on the initial findings?
24. Are you interested in receiving a write-up of the final study?

## Appendix G: Interview Questions for Staff Participants

### INTRODUCTION

1. Thank you for completing the survey, and your interest in participating. [Remind them about purpose of study – acknowledge impact of COVID-19, privacy, pseudonyms, and voluntary nature of participation and ability to withdraw from study or choose not to answer any question in the interview, remind them of audio recording]. Do you have any questions about the study before we begin?
2. Can I just confirm a few details from your survey responses? [confirm university name/profile, student services office and role, experience working with students who fit the criteria, and ask clarifying details if any portion of submissions was missing/confusing]

### THEME 1: Experiences on campus—student support services for refugee students

3. Approximately how many students who meet the criteria have you worked with?
4. In your experience, does this student population willingly disclose or discuss their status with staff in your office?
5. In your experience, what types of resources or support have they sought from you and your office?
6. What challenges does your office face in serving this population?
7. What challenges does your wider campus face in serving this population, as far as you are aware?
8. Which of these challenges, if any, are unique to this population?
9. Ideally, what additional support services or resources would your office or campus offer to this student population, if any, ...
  - a. In general.
  - b. As it relates to preparing to transition from life at university to life post-graduation?

### THEME 2: Perspectives on life post-graduation

10. In your experience, what challenges does this population face in preparing for the transition from life at university to life post-graduation?
11. If any, what challenges in preparing for this transition does this population face that result directly from their documentation (the UNHCR travel document)?
12. In your opinion, how does this student population feel about this transition as it approaches?

CLOSURE

13. Thank you so much for your time.
14. Would you like to receive a transcript of this conversation when it is completed?
15. Are you interested in receiving a write-up of the final study?