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The International Student Border Commuter Experience: An Investigation On The Southern U.s. Border

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THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT BORDER COMMUTER EXPERIENCE:
AN INVESTIGATION ON THE SOUTHERN U.S. BORDER

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Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Administration

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THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT BORDER COMMUTER EXPERIENCE:
AN INVESTIGATION ON THE SOUTHERN U.S. BORDER

by

KRISTIN ELIZABETH OBERHEIDE, B.A., M.P.A.

A DISSERTATION

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In 2013, I got a call from Customs and Border Protection (CBP) asking for the location of one of our international students, sounding very concerned. It came to light that CBP had left synthetic drugs in the students' car, erroneously, after placing them there as part of a training operation "at the bridge." The CBP officer expressed urgent need to retrieve the drugs from the students' car.

The student was completely unaware of this having occurred. He had not consented to being involved in training or having something placed in his car. When I informed the student of the situation, he immediately was fearful that this incident could cause some problem in his immigration history, the drugs could leave a trace, or otherwise impact his immigration abilities in the future. It struck me, and stuck with me, how afraid the student was rather than angry.

My goal throughout my doctoral journey, which I began in June 2012, was to bring to light some of the everyday experiences that international student border commuters face. In May 2022, I am pleased to have finally achieved that. I hope you find this study informative.

Abstract

Prior literature on transborder (*transfronterizos*, *transfronteriz@s*, or *transfronterizx*) students in the Mexico-United States border region focuses predominantly on United States citizens and the San Diego-Tijuana region. This phenomenological study focuses on Mexican citizen international students, who live in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and commute across the border with student visas daily to attend college in El Paso, Texas. The study sought to determine “What are the everyday experiences of Mexican international student border commuters?” Twenty-three international student border commuters were interviewed with a series of open-ended questions, during June 2016 in El Paso. The following seven themes emerged as the essence of the international student border commuter experience:

1. Waiting on the Bridge: Stress
2. Power and Helplessness: *Impotencia*
3. Getting Used to it: Adaptation
4. Self-reliance and Resilience: Strength
5. Sacrifice is Worth it: Opportunity
6. Benefit from Both Sides: *Fronterizos*
7. Needing a Louder Voice: Help

In the Paso del Norte region, the Mexican international student border commuter experience has elements of similarity with the general transborder student experience. However, international student border commuters face more extreme challenges than, and unique experiences from, U.S. citizen transborder students. International student

border commuters do not have the power to resist questioning, and thus cannot destabilize the power of the border. International students cannot be fully engaged in the U.S., because they lack the citizenship that provides security to work, live, and resist.

Glossary

Bridge

The bridge is a colloquial expression for the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Port-of Entry locations between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso.

CBP

Customs and Border Protection, a subunit of the Department of Homeland Security. Responsible for admitting people to the United States or denying entry.

DoS

The United States Department of State. A branch of the U.S. government. Responsible for diplomacy. The DoS issues entry visas at consular posts outside the U.S.

DHS

The United States Department of Homeland Security. A branch of the U.S. government. Responsible for overseeing national security. The DHS oversees immigrant and non-immigrant legal statuses in the U.S.

DSO

Designated School Official. Usually an employee in the International Office of the School/College. Allowed to access SEVIS to produce I-20s for international students and required report data on international student status.

F-1

International student immigration status. Usually has a full-time enrollment requirement. Border Commuters recently are granted F-1 status instead of F-3.

F-3

International student border commuter status. Does not have a full-time enrollment requirement. Is only possible at schools located within 75 miles of the U.S. border with Canada or Mexico. Associated regulations are partially implemented by DHS and DoS.

I-20

International student immigration document produced by the DSO through SEVIS. The I-20 is the contract that allows an international student to reside in the U.S. (for traditional full-time international students) or to cross the border daily as a commuter. Part-time border commuters are required to renew the I-20 every semester.

I-94

CBP arrival permit/entry record issued to travelers showing the length of stay granted upon entry. At most Ports-of-Entry, the I-94 is a paperless electronic and accessible online. However, in the Paso del Norte region, the I-94 is still a paper record.

ICE

Immigration and Customs Enforcement. A section of DHS. CBP and SEVP are units within ICE.

INS

The former Immigration and Naturalization Service. This unit ceased to exist upon creation of DHS. The INS created the regulations for F-3 status in 2002.

Immigrant

According to U.S. immigration law, an immigrant is a person who intends to establish permanent domicile inside the U.S.

Non-Immigrant

According to U.S. immigration law, a non-immigrant is a person who intends to stay in the U.S. temporarily, for a specific purpose, before returning to their permanent home country. Students are classified as non-immigrants and are required to establish they have non-immigrant intent at the visa interview and the Port-of-Entry.

OPT

Optional Practical Training. A twelve-month period of work authorization for international students holding F-1 student status, usually authorized post-graduation. Students can work in the U.S. on an unlimited basis during that one year only, provided all employment is directly related to the field of academic study. Border commuters can only work within 75 miles of the border.

PoE

Port-of-Entry. The physical space where a prospective immigrant or non-immigrant applies for entry to the U.S. to the CBP officer. Admission may be granted or denied as per the CBP officer's discretion.

SENTRI

Secure Electronic Network for Traveler Rapid Inspection. The Express pass. This system allows border commuters to go in a quicker line with less manual security checking.

SEVIS

Student and Exchange Visitor Information System. System is overseen by SEVP in DHS.

SEVP

Student and Exchange Visitor Program. Part of ICE and DHS, has oversight of SEVIS and international students.

USCIS

United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. The paperwork processing center of DHS approving certain immigration petitions and benefits including OPT.

Visa

Entry document issued by DoS. The visa is a sticker inside the passport with scannable biometrics of the holder.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Abstract.....	vi
Glossary	viii
Chapter 1: The Problem.....	1
Introduction	1
Problem Statement.....	3
Purpose	6
Significance	8
Research Questions	9
Parameters	9
Assumptions.....	11
Bias Control.....	11
Researcher Positionality	12
Chapter Summary	15
Chapter 2: Literature Review	16
Introduction	16
Government Policy and Practice.....	16
The Regional Context	22
Interdependence	23
Access to Education	23
Disparity Between Countries	25
Increasing Alienation.....	26
Maintaining the Borderplex.....	29
Transborder Commuters	31
Student Development Theory.....	36
Chapter Summary	39
Chapter 3: Methodology	40
Introduction	40
Phenomenology.....	40
Interview Schedule	44
Participants.....	45

Instrument.....	46
Data Analysis	47
Themes Processing	49
Themes Result: First Round.....	52
Themes Result: Second Round	53
Themes Result: Third Round	54
Themes Result: Fourth Round	55
Chapter Summary	55
Chapter 4: Findings.....	57
Introduction	57
Demographic Overview	57
Participant Profiles	60
Ale	60
Alexander	61
Ana.....	62
Andreas.....	63
Brian.....	64
Carlos.....	65
Daniel	66
David	67
Fernanda.....	68
Gabby	69
Hiram.....	70
Jaime.....	71
John	73
Lorenzo	74
Luis.....	75
Marcos	76
Mila	77
Neza	78
Pamela	79
Ricardo.....	80
Roberto	81
Sofi.....	82
Xochitl	83
Themes Presentation.....	84
Waiting on the Bridge: Stress	85
Power and Helplessness: <i>Impotencia</i>	89
Getting Used to It: Adaptation	92
Self-reliance and Resilience: Strength.....	96
Sacrifice is Worth It: Opportunity.....	100

Benefiting from Both Sides: <i>Fronterizos</i>	104
Needing a Louder Voice: Help	107
Chapter Summary	109
Chapter 5: Conclusion	111
Introduction	111
Study Positionality	111
The Trump Presidency	111
The El Paso Shootings.....	114
George Floyd’s Murder	114
COVID-19.....	115
Policy Developments	116
Data Developments	116
Themes Discussion and Analysis	119
Waiting on the Bridge: Stress	119
Power and Helplessness: <i>Impotencia</i>	121
Getting Used to It: Adaptation	126
Self-Reliance and Resilience: Strength.....	128
Sacrifice is Worth It: Opportunity.....	132
Benefit from Both Sides: <i>Fronterizos</i>	134
Needing a Louder voice: Help	136
Additional Analysis: Alternate themes	138
Campus Participation	138
CBP Mistreatment.....	141
U.S. Citizenship	145
Confusion.....	149
Clandestine Practices	152
What is Left Unsaid	154
Study Summary	155
Conclusions.....	156
Limitations	157
Future Research Recommendations.....	158
Participant Recommendations: Border Colleges	161
Participant Recommendations: Government Agencies	164
Researcher Recommendations: Border Colleges	166
Researcher Recommendations: Governmental Agencies.....	169
Chapter Summary	171
References	173

Appendix A: Interview Questions Protocol	184
Appendix B: Letter to Border Colleges' International Offices	186
Appendix C: Letter of Introduction to Eligible Participants.....	188
Appendix D: Questions for Validation Panel	191
Appendix E: Participant Consent Form.....	194
Vita	202

Chapter 1: The Problem

Introduction

The Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua - El Paso, Texas borderplex is a bustling bi-national metropolitan area of about 2.5 million people, with five land ports-of-entry between Mexico and the United States located within several miles (De La Piedra, Araujo, & Esquinca, 2018, El Paso Regional Economic Development Corporation, 2013). This region is referred to collectively as the Paso del Norte region, including both cities from both countries. Two institutions of higher education in El Paso provide courses and degrees for many students from the Paso del Norte region. One institution is a large research university and the other is a community college. These two post-secondary institutions are referred to in this study as collectively as Border Colleges, and distinctly as Border University and Border Community College. These Border Colleges are rich environments to explore educational aspects of the borderland in El Paso, Texas.

Not surprisingly given the geographic proximity, Border Colleges enroll a significant population of Mexican non-immigrant international students, predominantly from the sister city of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, directly across the Rio Grande. Border University has about 900 Mexican national students (CIERP, 2022), while Border Community College has about 180 (personal communication, 2022). One group of Mexican international students studying at Border Colleges lives in El Paso, either in on-campus housing or in apartments or houses in the surrounding neighborhoods on the U.S. side of the border. These students experience a somewhat “traditional”

international student experience since they maintain a U.S. residence in or near campus.

Another group of Mexican international students at the Paso del Norte Border Colleges have a non-traditional international student experience. These students do not reside in the United States in El Paso, instead, they live in Ciudad Juárez in Mexico. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) sub-unit of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) grants the students entry with a visa on a daily basis to come to school. Then the students depart the country to return home to Mexico on the same day after their school commitments are over. The students are classified as “international student border commuters” in U.S. governmental terms and will be identified as such in this study. Border University has approximately 400 Mexican international student border commuters and Border Community College has 56 (Border Colleges, personal communication, 2022).

In the United States, international student border commuters are those students who live in countries bordering the United States by land, only Canada and Mexico. These Canadian or Mexican citizen students live in their home country and commute across the national border daily to go to school and return home to family and vocational responsibilities. This study focuses on the Mexican international student border commuter experience, to determine common themes that describe the essence of that experience. It aims to provide stakeholders, including higher education administrators, governmental officials, and concerned community members, a better understanding of the experience of international student border commuter students.

Problem Statement

The vast majority of international students studying at institutions of higher education in the United States live in the U.S. during that period of study. These students are classified as F-1 non-immigrant visa holders within the U.S. government's visa system, and they are required to study on a full-time basis (Martin, Chapa, Dussord, Kalionzes, and Petryshyn, 2012). While F-1 status is by far the most common international student visa type, the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) established a new classification, F-3, for border commuter students through the Border Commuter Student Act of 2002.

The 2002 Act contains little information and ambiguous language about requirements for border commuters (Bowman, 2013). According to what guidance and provisions do exist, border commuters require greater effort in status maintenance and additional time-consuming procedures for the student and educational administrators (Martin et al., 2012). One of the major burdens for both is that international student border commuters are issued I-20s semester by semester, rather than for the entire length of study.

At the Mexico-United States border, particularly in the Paso del Norte region, Mexican student border commuters often are living with extended family and/or holding jobs in Ciudad Juárez while studying at Border Colleges (Border Colleges, personal communication, 2014, 2022). These responsibilities at home might add an additional layer of complexity to the focus needed to complete a course of study. In addition to responsibilities away from school and additional procedures with the U.S.

government because of their border commuter immigration status, border commuters experience varied daily wait times for entry to the U.S., unexpected changes in border and bridge policy, and unexpected interaction or questioning from border officials on a far more frequent basis than a traditional in-country residing F-1 full-time international student (Bowman, 2013, Martin et al., 2012).

One of the likely factors in a student's choice to engage in border commuting is due to economic need. The Border Commuter Student Act of 2002 was clear, specifying that a border commuter's course of study permits part-time enrollment, whereas "traditional" F-1 students, those with permission to live in the U.S., must maintain full-time enrollment each semester. Some students may afford to take one class at a time while saving up or paying off a previous semester's tuition debt. Therefore, the border commuter option may be an attractive option for Mexican international students to be able to continue to progress in study on a slower basis while residing in the Ciudad Juárez area and working or tending to other duties. In addition, border commuters do not need to prove they have ample living expenses to obtain their status, whereas F-1 full-time students do need to establish they have one year of liquid funding to support their residence in the U.S. (Bowman, 2013, Martin et al., 2012).

Some border commuters do study full time, and some students classified in the traditional full-time international student status also border commute. Anecdotal evidence shows many Border College students attend both the community college and the university for economic and academic reasons. There is some fluidity in the

academic experience in the Paso del Norte region that reminds me of writer Gloria Anzaldúa and her *Nepplanta* third-space concept (1987).

Reports from both of the Border Colleges also suggest that international student border commuters lose valid immigration status more frequently than traditional international students (Border Colleges, personal communication, 2014, 2022). Border commuters seem to “stop out” or temporarily discontinue their programs more often than traditional international students (Border Colleges, personal communication, 2014, 2022). They also seem to lose their valid immigration status more often than traditional international students (Border Colleges, personal communication, 2014, 2022). Border commuters anecdotally report stress and conflict from time management, family pressures, and problems with immigration officials stemming from their commuter practices (Border Colleges, personal communication, 2014, 2022).

Targeted research inquiry has not addressed these anecdotal accounts. The insufficiency in research on the international student border commuter experience means that Border Colleges have only anecdotal information about an important group of their students’ experience, and how their experience may influence their success. Border College administrators do not know how the international border commuter student experience is affecting students learning, persistence and completion. It is important to attempt to discover how the international student border commuter experience impacts academic experience, so that Border College administrators can address student needs. Improvement of the student experience can translate to increasing enrollment and institutional tuition revenue, as well as improved student

retention and completion rates. More financial resources at the higher education institutions, as well as increased higher educational attainment in the border region for Mexican students, will benefit both sides of the border from economic and social standpoints.

Purpose

I undertook an extensive literature review over the years 2012-2022 and used multiple research articles and dissertation database search strategies. Through my searches, I found that students who cross borders have been researched to some extent. When focusing on the Mexico-U.S. border, they are often referred to as *transfronterizos*, *transfronteriz@s*, *transfronterizx*, or transborder students. Most of the research focuses on U.S. citizens, and most in the Tijuana-San Diego area (see Chapter 2 Literature Review). I did not find any research matter that specifically addressed the experience of international student border commuters at Border Colleges in Paso del Norte, nor elsewhere on U.S. land borders, nor along other borders around the world.

When little research exists on a topic, following, replicating, or expanding on a particular research framework is not possible. Therefore, a study exploratory in nature is required since there are no previous studies to provide inferences or deduction, nor a framework for continued research on a previously researched topic. Phenomenology is a research framework concentrating on collecting, sharing, and interpreting a person's experience. It is a particularly valid qualitative approach to research inquiry, particularly when little previous knowledge exists (Churchill & Wertz, 1985).

This phenomenological study of Mexican international student border commuters is the first known contribution to our knowledge base of their specific experience. Phenomenology can make connections between individual experiences (of unique students) and commonalities may emerge. Making the connections though, could result in much subjectivity and interpretation. This problem of subjectivity or lack of clarity in methods for phenomenological research was addressed by social science researcher Amadeo Giorgi in the 1980s. Giorgi developed a particular method to restrict previous knowledge or assumptions during the phenomenological examination.

Giorgi's method is useful to provide additional structure to an introductory exploration of the Mexican international student border commuter experience. Therefore, I chose the topic because I wanted to study the essence of how it is to be an international commuter student. And because the topic lacks former research, I chose Giorgi's phenomenology method because it is a useful one to begin with when little research already exists.

The study included students at both Border University and Border Community College. I interviewed twenty-three Mexican international student border commuters, analyzed their statements, and identified similar themes that emerged between participants. Most simply, the study aims to provide information about a primarily unstudied student group with a unique student daily life. In addition, that information provides opportunities for better understanding of the international student border commuter experience. Better understanding of the experience of border commuters

could lead to institutional administrators and governmental officials initiating interventions improvement to improve the experience of students in this group.

Significance

As discussed above, government officials and higher education administrators, particularly those who work at institutions situated on the Mexico-U.S. border, should be interested in this initial advancement of knowledge about the experience of international student border commuting. Public universities hold an important role in educating leaders to grow industry and infrastructure to develop society and improve conditions on both sides of the border (Staudt, 2010). The Paso del Norte region's economic growth and stability may directly relate to its inhabitants' educational attainment and social mobility, so international student border commuters are a group that should also matter to the local community at large.

Understanding experiences of international student border commuters may be of interest to a wider range of stakeholders. As border regions expand, locally and globally, and internationalization impacts educational, economic, social, and political contexts, this study is an important step to advance understanding about border commuter students. Understanding the international student border commuter experience holds value related to knowledge-sharing, economic growth, and social and political relations across national lines. This study is intended as an initial exploration, and further study of this population and other related populations may be prompted by this effort.

The study's significance also includes additional information about governmental policy, procedure, and treatment of international student border commuters. This is of importance due to the recent attention to securitization and enforcement on the Mexico border to the United States. Immigration reform advocates interested in the overall structure of the immigration system may benefit from understanding the experience of international student border commuter students in the Paso del Norte area. In addition, scholars of immigration policy and border commuting worldwide may be interested in comparison with this study's findings.

Research Questions

I began to consider research questions with one overarching question, "What are the experiences of Border Colleges' international student border commuters in the Paso del Norte region?" and one concluding question, "What everyday experiences and themes emerge among study participants that can establish an essence of the experience?" Then, I broke down areas of inquiry in between these two questions, which I found important to address to extract the essence in the study, and from there my interview questions emerged.

Parameters

The main purpose of phenomenological research is to identify meaning in the experiences described by individual participants. The interviews for this study were conducted in June 2016. It is important to note that these interviews were conducted prior to Donald Trump being elected to the presidency and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, among other developments. These issues will be discussed in Chapter 5.

The study participants were limited to Mexican nationals currently attending Border Colleges as border commuter international students, and those border commuters who had discontinued study or graduated in the last four years. This time period of four years was chosen to allow a large possible pool of participants, but also restrict for various policy and administrative changes, which would make the experience of a student who studied longer ago very different. For example, in the preceding four years, Customs and Border Protection implemented a policy that is beneficial to the student: not requiring re-processing arrival documents on a semester basis, as well as a policy that can delay students: additional database checks for all students upon each entry.

The study includes students who were granted non-immigrant border commuter international student status at the port-of-entry by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, as well as students who border commuted while holding “traditional” non-immigrant international student full-time F-1 status. Full-time F-1 status does permit residence in the United States, but these students did not choose to reside in El Paso, rather Ciudad Juárez. Some students switched back and forth during their studies. Former students who attended Border Colleges within the past four years, but were no longer enrolled, were included in the study because their previous border commuter student experience is still worthwhile to explore. In addition, their stories, having either recently discontinued study or completed their program successfully, are worthy of exploration and are relevant to current and future student experiences and retention.

Assumptions

In this study, I assume that the participants who answered my call for study participation represent a suitable cohort of international border commuter students to provide general overall meaning about the experience. The study assumes that students were honest about their experiences and their recollections were conveyed to the best of their ability. This study also assumes all participants had a binary gender identity that matched their passport.

While the majority of Mexican international students attending Border Colleges speak English proficiently and have proven so during admission, some are still learning English during their studies. The call for participants was in English and it stated that the interview will be conducted in English. This study assumes that current or recent former students had ample English language capability to communicate their border commuter experience in English, with enough accuracy for me to grasp the meaning of their statements.

Bias Control

As with all survey and self-selected interview techniques, a basic validity concern is response bias. Some students may be extremely frightened about their immigration status, some because of traumatic previous experiences. That could cause someone not to participate; however, a negative experience could also cause someone to more actively want to participate. There could be a possible disincentive for some students hesitant to participate due to possible political retribution. Perhaps

those who self-selected into the study had certain factors in common, making them more willing or interested to share their story.

Study participants who responded to my call for participation and agreed to be interviewed signed consent forms and scheduled for one-hour in-person interviews in English. I advised that if the participant felt the need to convey an idea or phrase in Spanish that was acceptable, and we discussed together during the interview what might be an English equivalent. As for responder bias, I advised in my communication that I was looking for all participants who were current, or had been recently, border commuters. I also communicated that I was interested regardless of their current status or previous experience, whether it was a negative or positive experience.

Researcher Positionality

From August 2011 to 2014, I worked directly with international students at Border University, including international student border commuters. Earlier in my career, I also held a position at a different university, working with Canada-U.S. border commuters. These previous experiences allowed me anecdotal insight into unique aspects of the international student border commuter experience and prompted the idea for this research inquiry. Due to my prior experiences, I was particularly vigilant to avoid personal bias and assumptions that could lead me to expect certain results during data collection and interpretation. Bracketing is the official term for limiting a researcher's personal previous experience or bias and remaining as objective as humanly possible when collecting, reviewing, and analyzing data (Giorgi, 1985). The

researcher must divide their personal thoughts and experiences from the current research with constant cognition of this issue.

Another significant and impactful disclosure is that I am Anglo, raised in metro Detroit, close to the Canadian border, with limited Spanish knowledge. I do not share experience, culture, native language, or race with many of my study participants. I have been constantly cognizant of how this could influence my research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The lack of shared identity could cause me to misunderstand some statements or ideas. I tried to prevent or mitigate this situation by having my findings reviewed by my dissertation committee chairperson, who is of Mexican origin and who has worked in border educational organizations for 30 years.

I also have been involved professionally in international education for almost 20 years and this is another aspect of my positionality. I have worked with international students in a variety of institutions by type and location, including the federal government. I come with knowledge and background experience related to international students that impacts my perspective and presents potential for pre-conceived notions.

According to Guba (1990), for post-positivist research, I needed to be detached, neutral, and distant, as much as possible, again, related to Giorgi's concept of bracketing previous assumptions. Key to the post-positivist concept is recognition that full detachment is impossible (Guba, 1990). I will need to ask questions to which the answers I think I already know and remain neutral (Yin, 2006). Given my prior

professional position, in which I gained some anecdotal knowledge of the border commuter experience, concentration on etic methods was very important.

I took my responsibility to clarify to participants that their statements were confidential, and maintained that confidentiality with their email communications, contact information, consent forms, interview recordings and transcriptions safeguarded in secure files only accessible to myself and my dissertation committee chair. I reported experiences using participant-chosen pseudonyms and took care to obscure any major personal characteristics. This was important as participant students' trust or mistrust in the separation of my research from their daily interactions with government and college contacts could directly influence their honesty and openness to report their actual experiences.

I addressed these issues specifically in my statement calling for participation request. I stressed confidentiality and separation of the research findings from any administrative reporting or any identifying factors about participants to Homeland Security and Border Colleges. The call for participants also clearly stated the intent of the research to gain knowledge of the shared experience of many students, not just one student, and that participation in the research could help others understand what many border commuters experience.

The intended purpose of this study was not for my immediate use to apply action research, rather as an academic work to examine the phenomenon of border commuting. My primary findings are reporting of experiences of border commuter students in an attempt to describe the essence of the phenomenon. However, I did

include some reflective analysis using my own judgment and developed my own recommendations for both government and academic administrators. In areas where I included my own reflective analysis, I distinguished this from the participant accounts and recommendations.

Chapter Summary

The above introduction established that international student border commuting, in this context, entails holding Mexican nationality, living in Mexico and crossing the border regularly to attend schooling in the U.S. The general purpose of the study is to provide academic inquiry into the experience of international student border commuter students attending Border Colleges, higher education institutions in the Paso del Norte region. The proposed study's overarching research questions relate to these students' reported experience of border commuting and what it means to be a student border commuter in general. This section also outlined possible stakeholder impact or benefits of the study, as well as basic study structure, limitations, and my own personal bias related to the study's theme.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The literature review in this chapter is divided into four distinct sections. The first is an overview of some technical details about border commuter policy and practice of the United States government. This background section is necessary for this study, as regulations and procedures are critical to the international student border commuter experience. The second section covers existing scholarly literature about the bi-national border regional context. The third section discusses prior research on *transborder* students who commute across borders. The final section connects the idea of persistence, retention and success in higher education to these border commuters' experience.

Government Policy and Practice

The following section contains introductory information for international student advisors in higher education who work with international students. International student advisors are usually Designated School Official (DSO) with DHS. This model created by DHS puts the burden of much oversight regarding students on education institution employees. In addition, clear information is disseminated by non-profits rather than the federal government. For example, the best training information for DSOs can be found in the *NAFSA Adviser's Manual*, which is a tool for and education on the regulatory policy and practice details they need to perform their jobs appropriately. The NAFSA Adviser's Manual requires a paid subscription with the non-profit organization NAFSA: Association for International Education, which supports international student advisors.

The information below is not collectively housed in any public domain, although the U.S. government entities involved provide sporadic pieces of public information related to the content below. The actual written regulations governing international students are public record, but the written regulations in the Federal Register are brief and do not contain complete program and practice summaries related to international students, and therefore are not a useful resource for the information that follows. DHS's lack of clear communication/information puts the burden for correct information dissemination and oversight on schools and non-profits.

To become an international student in the United States, an individual applies and gains acceptance to a U.S. school with permission from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to host international students and use the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) database. The prospective student demonstrates to the school that he or she has enough liquid funds available to afford the standard estimated cost of the first 12 months of study at the school including full-time tuition and fees, living expenses, and other costs such as health insurance and books. Border commuter students are the exception who do not need to demonstrate living expense funding. A DSO issues and signs an immigration document unique to the individual via the SEVIS database and sends it to them.

Next, the prospective student pays fees of approximately \$350 to DHS and interviews for the student entry visa at a U.S. Consulate abroad. U.S. Consulates and visa policy fall under a different agency than DHS, the Department of State (DoS). Visa approval by DoS costs at least \$160 and requires a determination from the Consular

Officer that the applicant has a temporary intention to obtain a specific educational objective. Significantly, the U.S. government specifies, by law, that students must be non-immigrants and intend to depart the U.S. after completing their studies and any post-completion work permission, Optional Practical Training (OPT). Since many undocumented individuals in the U.S. became so after receiving a visa and then overstaying their legal window of stay, the most frequent reason for visa denial is failure to establish sufficient ties to the home country indicating an intention to return home.

If DoS grants a student visa, the individual travels to an official entry point to the U.S., where DHS officials in the sub-agency of CBP, located at the airport, land, or sea port-of-entry, make another determination of eligibility for the international student non-immigrant classification. A CBP officer performs an appraisal and grants the individual official entry approval to the U.S. and a legal window of stay as an international student. Therefore, while the student receives an entry visa from the Consulate, under the DoS, which reports to the Secretary of State, the DHS, reporting to the Secretary of Homeland Security, has oversight to decide if a student will actually be granted entry to the U.S., and for how long.

During studies, an international student must comply with detailed regulations associated with their status, including reporting to the school, and complying with regulatory limitations from DHS on academic flexibility, taking time off or reducing academic load, and employment. The school is also required to comply with detailed regulations established by DHS for reporting in the SEVIS database on that individual

student for myriad cases, such as validating student presence on campus, change of home address, verifying full-time enrollment each semester, and authorizing certain benefits like employment or re-entry to the U.S. DSOs use SEVIS to communicate to DHS whether a student is abiding by the regulations. DSOs are required to report in SEVIS on all the international students hosted by the institution on a semester basis. The DHS sub-agency governing SEVIS, student regulations, and DSOs is called Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP).

Traditional international students, who live in the United States while pursuing full-time study, hold F-1 nonimmigrant student status. Very few students (exchange visitors primarily sponsored by their home countries or a host agency like Fulbright) hold J-1 status, overseen by DoS. The former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) established a new classification, F-3, for border commuter students through the Border Commuter Student Act of 2002 (Martin et al., 2012). Later in the same year, the U.S. government disbanded INS and DHS took over its duties (Martin et al., 2012). Since 2002, the Department of State (DoS) has updated their Foreign Affairs Manual multiple times with guidance to Consular Officers about issuing F-3 visas (Martin et al., 2012). The 2002 Act contains little information about requirements for schools and students regarding F-3 border commuters (Martin et al., 2012). As of present, DHS has not provided regulations or written guidance to further clarify details about the initial 2002 Border Commuter Act, nor updated SEVIS functionality to include the category.

In the years following, border schools started reporting that certain U.S. Consular Posts (DoS) began granting F-3 border commuter visas without notice to educational institutions (Martin et al., 2012). For some time, CBP (still granted these students traditional F-1 status, but eventually started writing F-3 classification on entry documents to match the visa (Martin et al., 2012). This change happened gradually, and procedure varied widely at different border port-of-entries across the Northern and Southern border (Martin et al., 2012). CBP historically granted F-3 status upon presentation of an F-3 visa, despite their parent agency DHS still lacking regulations to govern F-3s (Martin et al., 2012). SEVP's position was that F-3 border commuters should not exist until additional policy guidance is generated, despite the federal legislation to the contrary (Martin et al., 2012). In 2015-2016, the DoS stopped issuing F-3 visas and reverted to F-1 visas for border commuters.

Schools sponsoring border commuters struggle to provide these students clear advice and benefits of their status given conflicting guidance from the now-disbanded INS, DoS, and DHS sub-agencies CBP and SEVP (Martin et al., 2012). According to what regulatory provisions do exist, border commuters require greater effort in status maintenance and additional procedures for schools and students alike. One example is the requirement for DSOs to issue a new I-20 to border commuters on a semester-by-semester basis, for which students must meet application deadlines each time. This causes border commuter students to have more potential chances to miss deadlines than traditional full-time F-1 students, who are only issued an I-20 one time, generally. It is unclear whether DSOs should issue all border commuters an I-20 every semester

or whether this is only required for part-time enrolled students. There are numerous issues associated with the lack of clarity of border commuter policy, which fall outside of the scope of this study.

One clearly established parameter of the border commuter classification is that border commuters may only enroll at a school within 75 miles from a national border (Student Border Commuter Act, 2002). As such, the majority of schools in the United States are not eligible to sponsor border commuters, nor would it be logistically feasible in most cases. Many schools within the 75-mile radius of the Canadian and Mexican borders have just a couple or few border commuters studying at one time. For example, the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor is located about 45 miles from the Canadian border city of Windsor, Ontario. Michigan sponsors under ten border commuters, despite having a total international student population of over 6,000 (University of Michigan, personal communication, 2013). Border University's official border commuter population was around 400 students in Fall 2021, with 868 Mexican nationals overall and 1,313 international students total (CIERP, n.d). This higher proportion at Border University is due to its location in El Paso, Texas, directly adjacent to Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

However, there are an unknown number of unofficial F-1 full-time international students who also participate in border commuting despite having the regulatory permission to live in the United States. It should be noted that many others participate in border commuting in various other non-immigrant, immigrant, or U.S. citizen statuses. This is discussed later in the section on transborder student research.

The Regional Context

Some basic information about the setting of this study and the educational environment can provide context for why this study is worthy of pursuit. The metropolitan area of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso is called the Paso del Norte region, which loosely translates to the “pass of the north.” The Paso del Norte region is “a sprawling transnational urban space [that] swells with over two million people whose livelihoods depend on global manufacturing, trade corridors, and government jobs” (Staudt, 2010, p. ix). Appropriately, many of the regions’ community members are migrants or relatives of migrants, migrants from deeper south in Mexico seeking jobs in the maquiladora industry, immigrants who have crossed into El Paso, or migrants to the Chihuahuan Desert from other areas in the U.S. (Staudt, 2010). Residents of the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso metropolitan area share history, desert, growth, and economic ties, “plus the distinctive feature of an international border that divides families, friends, and businesses” (Anderson & Gerber, 2008, p. 1).

In my review of research on the local border context, I highlight the following concepts as relevant to frame why student border commuting exists locally and why there may be inherent difficulty in the experience:

1. Interdependence
2. Access to education
3. Disparity between countries
4. Increasing alienation
5. Maintaining the borderplex

Interdependence

Oscar Martínez codifies the Mexico-U.S. borderlands as interdependent (1994), and El Paso and Ciudad Juárez are certainly “a place of ‘hybridity.’ People cross frequently; bilinguals mix languages; cultural patterns blend and mutate” (Staudt & Coronado, 2002, p. 29). Many of the residents of both El Paso and Ciudad Juárez maintain strong linkages to both countries, and Martínez called these citizens transnational borderlanders (1994). “Transnational borderlanders...are individuals who maintain significant ties with the neighboring nation...thus their lifestyles strongly reflect foreign influences...for those who are deeply immersed in transborder interaction, foreign links govern central parts of their lives” (Martínez, 1994, p. 60).

Although the cities of Tijuana and San Diego form a larger metroplex than Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, the distance between the two cities is also bigger, and “El Paso has more economic, political, and social interactions with Ciudad Juárez than San Diego has with Tijuana” (Anderson & Gerber, 2008, p. 24). Paso del Norte community members demonstrate “the importance of economics as a motive for engaging in transnational interaction” through commuting to work in the neighboring nation and being “binational consumers” (Martínez, 1994, p. 61).

Access to Education

The border region has lower educational attainment than the rest of the U.S.; however, educational attainment has been significantly increasing in the last 60 years on both sides of the border (Anderson & Gerber, 2008). Public universities educate over half a million students in the binational Paso del Norte region and play a critical

role in educating leaders to improve economic and social conditions (Staudt, 2010). The Texas-Mexico border region has lower educational attainment than the rest of Texas and the Mexico-U.S. border is one of the poorest zones in the U.S. (Daly, 2012). At the same time, Daly found that the positive impacts of obtaining education, such as social mobility, are extremely high along the Mexico-U.S. border, regardless of a student's national origin or ethnicity (2012). The Paso del Norte region's economic growth and stability may directly relate to its inhabitants' educational attainment and social mobility, so border commuters are a group that should matter to the local community at large.

Border University is known for its “open-access mission and reasonable tuition costs” as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (González, 2013, p. 7). As Benjamin Sáenz wrote, the campus sits on “the edge of the piece of paper that [is] America” (1992, xi). Border University primarily serves Mexican American students native to El Paso County, but throughout the institution's 100-year history, has placed emphasis on educating citizens of the entire Paso del Norte binational region (Payan, 2010).

Border University's very first graduating class of fourteen students included a Mexican mining engineer, and that tradition has continued, creating economic and social development for the El Paso region, Texas, and Mexico. In the 1970s, Border University created a unique program to coordinate admission and academic advising for Mexican students. In the 1980s, Border University was the first school to implement a Texas-legislated program granting in-state tuition to Mexican nationals who

demonstrate financial need and remains the heaviest user of this waiver program (Border University Internal Document, 1987).

On the opposite side of the border, the University of Chihuahua opened in 1954 and the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez followed in 1973, in addition to a variety of private universities and technological institutes (Anderson & Gerber, 2008). Though higher educational attainment has improved, there is still disparity. Although interdependent and linked in many aspects of culture and lifestyle, borderlanders do not share equal opportunity for post-secondary education.

Disparity Between Countries

One of the largest income gaps between neighboring countries in the world exists between Mexico and the U.S. (Anderson & Gerber, 2008), and yet the interdependence of the region benefits both countries proportionally, albeit asymmetrically (Martínez, 1994). Therefore, the United States benefits more from the binational relationships in the region. Mexico, while benefiting, still does not benefit equally.

While the Texas side is poorer than the rest of the U.S. and the Chihuahuan side is richer than the rest of Mexico, the U.S. and Mexico have one of the biggest income gaps in the world (Anderson & Gerber, 2008). According to some researchers, the disparity between the U.S. and Mexico economies is more substantial than anywhere else in the world (Orraca, Rocha, & Vargas, 2017). “The interactions between the regions that lie on the border, however, help lessen the level of economic disparity and may lessen the effects of poverty on both sides” (Anderson & Gerber, 2008, p.164).

Martinez confirms, “The prevalent pattern in binational regions throughout the world has been one of asymmetrical interdependence, in which one nation is stronger than its neighbor and consequently dominates it... while asymmetrical in nature, nonetheless yields proportional benefits to each side (1994, p. 9).

Though the relationship between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez is generally symbiotic and connected, alienation is another aspect of borderland existence. Such alienation could develop from socio-economic disparity, or by demonstrations of police force in the name of national security. In 1979, Mexican writer Octavio Paz stated, “Our countries are neighbors, condemned to live alongside each other; they are separated, however, more by profound social, economic, and psychic differences than by physical and political frontiers” (p. 402). If Paz was still alive, he might now have a different opinion, given dramatic physical changes having occurred at the border in the past decades.

Increasing Alienation

The Mexico-U.S. border marks an edge of territory separating differing legal, economic, and political systems (Jones, 2012). The primary function of the border is to control interactions between people and keep people in particular spaces (Martinez, 1994). Over the past several hundred years, the border function has shifted from the archaic purpose of defensive lines to guard a settlement, with spaces of unclaimed or disputed territories in between, to “sites for preventing the movement of undesired people” (Jones, 2012, p. 9).

The 2,000-mile border between Mexico and the U.S. was established in 1848 and has been adjusted several times thereafter in favor of the U.S. (Jones, 2012). Before the U.S. Border Patrol came to be in 1924, movement across that border was relatively unrestricted. In 1965, a major U.S. immigration reform required visas for entry. Undocumented individuals are those who either entered the U.S. without documentation or overstayed the legal window of stay provided to them upon an entry with a visa. In 1986, additional reform imposed more requirements and sanctions for entry violations, overstay, or employment of an undocumented worker. Then, in the 1980s and 90s, the Border Patrol executed aggressive operations to control flows of drugs and immigrants (Jones, 2012). However, this past incremental growth in enforcement was minor in comparison to the policy initiatives after September 11, 2001, when security and inspection efforts increased dramatically (Anderson & Gerber, 2008).

In 2001, following the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, President Bush signed a law to create a new Office of Homeland Security, which soon became the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). In 2002, DHS took over the former function of the INS, subsumed several other agencies under its umbrella, implemented the SEVIS system to track international students and scholars, and the US-VISIT program to track exit and entry of foreign nationals. The reason the SEVIS system was implemented was because one of the nineteen hijackers had entered on a student visa. Eighteen of the nineteen entered on tourist visas.

The former Border Patrol became Customs and Border Protection (CBP), under Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) within DHS. “Funding for the Border Patrol increased from \$268 million in 1986 (in constant 2002 dollars) to more than 1.6 billion by 2002, while staffing over the same period rose from 3,628 to 11,663” (Anderson & Gerber, 2008, p. 213). This brought about additional militarization in the Paso del Norte Region. The Secure Fence Act of 2006 established a literal wall dividing the El Paso-Juárez border, as well as other sections of the entire Mexico-U.S. border. It forced all movement in the Paso del Norte region to the five port-of-entries on bridges over the Rio Grande, “however, the immigration checkpoints at the bridges were not updated to accommodate the increased traffic, which results in routine waits of two or three hours” (Jones, 2012, p. 106). Then the 2009 passport requirement for U.S. citizens visiting Mexico emphasized, “that it is law enforcement agencies that impose all sense of order in the region and determine who can move where, when, and how” (Payan, 2010, p. 237). By now, “the fuzzy frontier in the 1800s between the newly emergent sovereign states of Mexico and the United States - which was still fuzzy between Juárez and El Paso through the 1990s - is hardened and demarcated” (Jones, 2012, p. 124).

The estimated 35% effective control that CBP has attained through its heightened border policing is the most expansive government presence on the border ever (Jones, 2012). Is it worth it? Now in the Paso del Norte community, industry and economy enjoy somewhat more freedom than people do. “This turns the border into an

‘open’ border for global economic interests of the maquiladora industry but into an increasingly ‘closed’ border for the local binational community” (Payan, 2012, p. 228).

Additional scholars have explored policing elements of the Mexico-U.S. border. Border policy may “facilitate mobilities for some, while delaying, intercepting or otherwise immobilizing others” (Helleiner, 2012, p. 101). People of color regularly experience policing and suspicion of their wrongdoing based on race, particularly in the border context (Helleiner, 2012). Potential reasons for heightened suspicion of Mexican students and workers crossing the border is the assumption that they pose a threat to U.S. labor and educational systems (Vargas-Valle, 2011). The racialized policing phenomenon at the border should negatively influence Mexican international student border commuters.

Maintaining the Borderplex

Because of the increased restrictions in cross-border travel, the symbolic and practical distance between Juárez and El Paso has increased (Anderson & Gerber, 2008). The border fence now forces all movement to the bridges with long wait times. Long delays and increased violence in Juárez resulted in El Pasoans no longer traveling to Juárez, and Juárezenses traveling to El Paso less frequently (Jones, 2012).

Most of the population in El Paso opposed the border fence construction and “continues to propose alternative approaches to immigration that emphasize shared connections between the United States and Mexico” (Jones, 2012, p. 104). The El Paso County government joined a lawsuit against the Border Fence Act, later dismissed. In 2013, the state Representative successfully lobbied for a bill that would

allow local businesses to provide additional resources to DHS in order to lessen border wait times.

Bridges now have express options for travelers who can afford to pay for a program called SENTRI which currently costs \$122.25 USD and can require several months processing time (U.S. CBP, 2021). SENTRI provides commuter access to a shorter line and expedited review. But those who cannot afford this program, or are deemed ineligible based on SENTRI program requirements regarding background history, have no expedited options.

The community on the border knows that the region suffers from increased policing, since the cost of moving goods and people across the border significantly increases and inhibits efficient economic and social functioning. “The application of inspections and technologies that slow crossings hurts a substantial proportion of the exchange benefiting both sides of the border and severely limits the gains from Mexico-U.S. economic integration” (Anderson & Gerber, 2008, p. 216). However, despite the government’s costly attempts to increase security and stop undocumented migration flows, the Mexico-U.S. border is still the most traveled in the world, with both illegal and legal crossings (Jones, 2012).

Security measures now in place may even have an adverse effect. “Congested crossings and long border waits create so much background noise and chaos that it becomes harder to detect the presence of security threats or criminal elements” (Anderson & Gerber, 2008, p. 219). Mayor John Cook of El Paso candidly echoed this concern (Jones, 2012). Border Colleges’ border commuter students experience the

border environment daily to attend school. What effect does their experience crossing between two nations daily have on their student experience?

Transborder Commuters

Students, teachers, and researchers situated in and navigating frontera (borderland) communities are *transfronteriza/os* (border crossers). Each is fluent in different types of border crossings and these multiple crossings, whether physical or metaphorical, shapes their identities, lives, perspectives, and actions (Fránquiz and Ortiz, 2017, p. 111)

There is a body of research that explores border commuting, or *transborder* activity, or experiences of *transfronterizos*, *transfronteriz@s*, or *transfronterizx*. However, none of the research directly addresses the experience of international student border commuters. Below is some of the relevant work done in this area, summarized up to the time of my data collection (June 2016).

In 2003, Bae analyzed transborder activity in Tijuana-San Diego, which is the first instance I found of the term (2003). The researcher stated the region has received “little national or international attention, apart from studies by local scholars” (Bae, 2003, p. 463). Bae concluded the border is “quite porous, especially for work and shopping, but less so than the past” (Bae, 2003, p. 475). Bae does not mention students, except when stating that some people violate tourist or student visas in order to commute to work.

In 2006, Chávez Montaña appeared to be the first to specifically explore the transborder student commuter experience. In this Master’s thesis, 40 people were

surveyed and 40 were interviewed, some being current high school and college students and others were former students, ages 15 to 36. We know the majority of the participants were born in the U.S., which means they have U.S. citizenship, but it is not clarified whether others were non-immigrants. Chávez Montaña said that transborder students develop social ability to exist in both spaces of Mexico and the U.S. (2006). More specifically, the subjects develop cultural capital through socializing in Tijuana, and pursuing academics in San Diego (Chávez Montaña, 2006).

In 2007, Relaño Pastor built on this research and analyzed identity development in transborder students in the Tijuana-San Diego area. Relaño Pastor conducted 40 interviews with *transfronterizo* high school students, who were defined as holding “legal status as U.S. citizens, either by birth or naturalization, and this provides them with the territorial flexibility to reside in both sides of the Tijuana-San Diego border” (Relaño Pastor, 2007, p. 264). The majority of the students lived in San Diego at the time of the interview. Relaño Pastor documented the “emergence of a transforming border identity that challenges exclusive ethnic and cultural identifications” (p. 265). She also found that the “cultural capital they accumulate in terms of bilingual skills, the knowledge of two sociocultural realities as well as their educational experiences across the border allow them to move at ease both in Mexico and the United States” (Relaño Pastor, 2007, p. 274).

In 2010, an essay by Bejarano explored the experience of students in Columbus, New Mexico who crossed the Mexico-U.S. border. The students profiled deal with “ritualized violence” of the Mexico-U.S. border crossing, describing the “checkpoint

interrogations, citizenship probing questions, vehicle and document inspections, merchandise checks by federal agents, and ID background checks by scanning passports and processing drivers' licenses" (Bejarano, 2010, p. 395). Bejarano reported on the "infringement of human and civil rights through 'border inspections' as these young people are surveilled, inspected, harassed, and transformed into policed border citizens" (2010, p. 2). She argued that the students are "resilient and resourceful enough to manage these obstacles" (Bejarano, 2010, p. 393).

The students Bejarano profiled are U.S. citizens and permanent residents living inside the U.S. while studying in the U.S. The experience she wrote about is the border crossing to visit family in Mexico while residing in New Mexico. The crossing is the reverse of the Paso del Norte Border Colleges' international student border commuters, who live in Mexico and cross to attend school. Similarities in the interaction while entering the U.S. may exist. However, status differences between non-immigrant border commuters and those who have permanent permission to reside in the U.S. could result in diverging treatment in border processing.

Also in 2010, a master's thesis by Cordova explored the experience of transborder commuters in the San Diego-Tijuana metroplex. Cordova defined them as:

Transborder commuters or transmigrants constitute a unique population in border regions that have access to both countries, move between two distinct social, economic, cultural and political systems, who experience border policies and the fortification of the state on a frequent, sometimes daily basis (Cordova, 2010, p. 1-2).

Cordova conducted six oral histories with people commuting between Tijuana to San Diego and one with an undocumented person in the area. Two of her interviewees were transborder students, but with U.S. citizenship, who may or may not have the same experience as international student border commuters.

In 2012, de la Piedra and Araujo published two articles about transborder students' "funds of knowledge" that are used to navigate elementary school in El Paso, Texas. According to de la Piedra and Araujo, educators should rid themselves of "deficit views" of transborder students, and rather that "Mexican children bring a rich array of linguistic practices and cultural resources that schools should acknowledge and benefit from" (2012, p. 710)

In 2013, Rodríguez and Curlango Rosas surveyed 31 border crossers from their organization, the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California in Mexicali, about their emotions while crossing. These border crossers went shopping across the Mexico-U.S. border, presumably to Calexico. They found that "commuters express boredom, stress and feeling that they are wasting time which they could otherwise employ to a better end. Others express feelings of frustration and powerlessness while waiting to cross" (Rodríguez & Curlango Rosas, 2013, p. 38). It is unspecified what immigration status these participants held, but I can hypothesize that international student border commuters may feel similar emotions.

Also in 2013, a Master's thesis by Falcón Orta explored identity development in twelve transborder college students in San Diego. Falcón Orta referred to Relaño Pastor's 2007 definition of these students being U.S. citizens. She found that there

were two factors at play in development of a hybrid identity as a transborder student, 1) “Coping with Obstacles through Unity; and 2) “Adapting to Obstacles” (Falcón Orta, 2013, p. 76).

In 2015, Orraca Romano studied the differences between the Mexican-born population that resides and works on the U.S. side of the border region, and Mexican-born commuter workers who live in Mexico but work in the U.S. Using census data from both Mexico and the U.S., Orraca Romano showed that from 2000 to 2010 there was a substantial decline in the number of cross border workers (2015). Results also showed that the immigrant workers were younger, more educated, and more likely to be in high-paying jobs (Orraca Romano, 2015). While this research did not address transborder students, it is the first quantitative study of transborder activity I found.

In 2016, Tessman’s dissertation looked at the experiences of seven U.S. citizen K-12 border commuter students and nine parents in Arizona and revealed language disconnects between school and home. Using Furman’s ethic of community and Yosso’s community cultural wealth, Tessman suggested that “educational leaders could create communal process at schools to build the capacity of teachers and parents to create relationships and shared cultural competencies” (2016, p. 9). While parents may not be as critical at the Border College level, it is important that Border Colleges listen to international student border commuter needs, both academic and non-academic.

Also in 2016, Tannenhaus’s dissertation focused on the educational experiences of eight U.S. citizen transborder students, attending a public high school in South San

Diego. In the qualitative study, Tannenhaus used social capital theory in focusing on social ties and peer groups helping to explain high school course selection, success in high school, fulfillment of college prerequisites, and admission to college (2016).

Identity development, social capital and community cultural capital are clearly well-supported in prior transborder literature. How does the experience of international student border commuters relate or differ?

These studies of transborder students serve to inform of prior work in the area before my dissertation data was collected. Later, I will discuss some recent studies that occurred after my data collection in Chapter 5. These post-study advances are used as discussion context for my study analysis. A final section below discusses how student development theory relates to this study.

Student Development Theory

Plenty of research and discussion in higher education focuses on retention of students. Although efforts are made at higher education institutions to improve retention, studies have shown enduring rates of attrition (Reason, 2009). Border commuter students may experience factors that increase their risk of stopping out temporarily or dropping out entirely. Studies about persistence have not addressed border commuters and potential unique influences about their success. Retention is an organizational phenomenon, while persistence is an individual phenomenon, although these terms are often erroneously used interchangeably (Reason, 2009). Most literature on persistence and retention assume graduation is the ultimate goal, but research focuses on within-year or next-year persistence as well as graduation (Reason, 2009).

Student socioeconomic status and income background are significantly related to college persistence, more clearly than racial, ethnic, and gender differences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). There are other factors that may relate to persistence for Mexican-U.S. border commuters, but socioeconomic difficulty may be one possible commonality. Kuh suggested that higher education institutions are responsible to shift culture to engage students towards persistence (2005). This student development framework gives me ideas as to what questions are important to ask about student academic experiences and why they may have persisted, stopped, or dropped out of higher education at Border Colleges. Therefore, some findings from this study may be useful to the administration's attempts to guide individual students to persist in higher education on the Mexican-U.S. border.

Because external pressures from the commute are likely to affect border commuters' ability to achieve through intrinsic motivation alone, schools like Border Colleges, that place high value in providing education to the binational border population, must provide the support for commuter students based on their unique cultures. Magolda explored collaboration in education between different cultures. The researcher found that educators must "provide border crossers with the technical, political, and cultural frameworks to support these efforts once they cross into new territories" (Magolda, 2001, p.357). While Magolda's study of border crossers was about metaphorical crossing rather than physical, it may apply to Border Colleges' border commuters.

Not only do students experience an obvious geographical crossing, they encounter a constant shifting of cultural and social expectation from their family and/or professional life in Mexico and their academic life in the U.S. Border Colleges do strive to provide all students with ample advising support, ESL courses, writing assistance, and developmental courses to orient them to local norms. This study aims to examine whether these systems are effective for border commuter support indirectly, by asking students about their experience with support from the educational institution.

Understanding how a students' experience relates to their development is a basic premise of Student Affairs' missions and Student Development theory. Understanding of the students' experience provides the opportunity for student affairs professionals to implement interventions to support the student's success in education and beyond. Lack of research on international student border commuters corresponds to the lack of particular support mechanisms for this population. Hopefully my study will help to establish understanding of the international student border commuter experience and later steps from Border Colleges will be developing ways to better support international border commuter student learning.

The previous academic writings serve to provide some foundation for possible topic areas to be explored in my inquiry about the Mexico-U.S. student border commuter experience. However, as previously stated, I found no evidence of a study specifically about the experience of international student border commuters, despite a thorough and continued search in research journals and dissertation databases. Many new research studies are framed by questioning assumptions in previous research or

generating new questions from existing conclusions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Since this is not the case for my study, I started with this initial phenomenological effort.

Chapter Summary

The previous literature review covered four distinct topics. First, I reviewed practice and policy in the United States regarding international students, including border commuters. Next, I provided a description, using academic texts, of the bi-national border society of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, where the border commuters live their experience. A third section introduced prior research on transborder students. The final section briefly addressed how student development theory related to persistence, retention, and success intersects with border commuter student experience, and what issues are likely to be relevant for students participating in the study. Discussion of the study's methodology occurs in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

As stated in the previous two chapters, while there is some research on transborder students in general, it tends to be focused on U.S. citizens. There is a dearth of previous research on non-immigrant international student border commuters. This makes framing my study through questioning assumptions in previous research or generating new questions from existing research conclusions, as recommended by Alvesson and Sandberg (2011), impossible. This study intends to explore the topic in a structured qualitative research inquiry.

The purpose of the study is to determine the meaning and describe the essence of the lived experience of international student border commuters, who cross the Mexico-U.S. border daily to attend school at Border Colleges. Phenomenology is an approach concentrating on collecting, sharing, and interpreting a person's experience. It is considered a valid means for qualitative research inquiry, particularly when little previous knowledge exists. Phenomenology can make connections between individual experiences and commonalities may emerge. The method is useful to provide additional structure to this introductory exploration of the Mexican student border commuter experience.

Phenomenology

This section reviews the concept of phenomenology, which is underpinning the method of this study. Due to a lack of previous academic exploration, my research reasoning process was inductive, from the ground up, moving from the observation to

a principle (Creswell, 2012). This research is non-experimental, studying without intervention, and listening for, but not acting upon any experiences of student border commuters. The intention of the study is to make this small aspect of the world visible to others (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Research findings in this kind of study are heavily descriptive and interpretive due to the phenomenological method, studying one point in time, to seek to understand how an international student border commuter has experienced life enrolled at Border Colleges (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006).

The research approach called phenomenology is well aligned with the type of inquiry I desired to conduct. Phenomenology explores the “lived experiences of those who have lived with or experienced a particular phenomenon” (Lichtman, 2013, p. 85). To gain a rich understanding of the phenomenon, qualitative data is gathered directly from those experiencing the phenomenon (Lichtman, 2013). The researcher uses interpretive analysis to look for patterns in the gathered data, potentially developing constructs or themes about the phenomenon. If findings reach a threshold for categorization, it may be possible to generate a theory, although subjective through the data analysis during a phenomenological study (Berends, 2006).

Because the phenomenological approach is inherently subjective, a researcher must use a well-designed and previously tested approach to this inquiry (Peshkin, 1988). Husserl established the concept of phenomenology as a philosophy in the early twentieth century. In 1906, Husserl wrote about the concept of bracketing, or the deliberate withholding or restriction of prior knowledge or assumptions during an exploration on a subject, and Husserl gradually established the framework for

phenomenology in his later writings. Sartre, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and others further developed the philosophy and methods of application (Churchill & Wertz, 1985). Late in the twentieth century, Amadeo Giorgi developed the Descriptive Phenomenological Method, an empirical research strategy to capture qualitative aspects of phenomena, intended to be scientific, rigorous, and produce general findings (1985, 1989).

Giorgi asserted that his qualitative method provides more substantial access to a phenomenon, understanding of how individuals assign meaning to the phenomenon and a more nuanced description of the phenomenon than a quantitative method would (2006). He designed the Descriptive Phenomenological Method so that it can be used across various disciplines of social science research. Olive's 2014 phenomenological study of Hispanic first-generation students' motivation to study counseling at the master's level is just one example of higher education research using his framework. Giorgi's structure is useful to employ, since the study is inherently threatened by researcher interpretation bias, and the structure helps to alleviate that issue. I chose this method because I found it to be most precise, with clear steps, which I preferred to be as objective and methodical in interpreting participants' statements as possible.

Giorgi's method (2012) is used to describe the lived experience for multiple individuals using a five-step method, as summarized below.

1. Read the entire description to grasp the holistic sense of the entire statement
2. Read again to discern "meaning units" focusing on the phenomenon. This is referred to as the process of "constituting parts" (p. 5).

3. Transform the meaning units from the words of the subject into more general expressions of what the subject said. This is the “heart of the method” (p. 6).
4. Synthesize all the transformed meaning units into a statement regarding the individual’s experience. This is called the “structure of the experience” (p.6).
5. Use the structure to help clarify and interpret the raw data of the research.

After developing the “constituents of the structure,” the researcher compares these constituents to the original data, asking the following:

1. What does the statement reveal about the phenomenon?
2. Is the statement relevant?
3. Is it important to the essence of the experience of border commuting?
4. If this statement were deleted, would the structure collapse?

During the analysis process, the researcher must undertake a methodological pose coined by the father of phenomenology, Husserl. The pose is called phenomenological reduction. Phenomenological reduction requires two main ideas: first, the researcher should avoid assuming a specified description is an existing reality, and second, the researcher must suspend their own experiences and assumptions away from the data, to avoid preconceived ideas entering the analysis.

Giorgi gives an example of the first aspect of the phenomenological reductive stance: “I would say ‘the table presents itself to me as a really existing table.’ That is more rigorous than saying ‘it is a real table’” (1997, n.p.). The second aspect does not mean the researcher must remove all past knowledge about the phenomenon from their mind, but that the researcher should put it aside or mark it as “non-influential” so

that the phenomenon can present itself fully. This is “bracketing past knowledge” (Giorgi, 1997, n.p.).

According to Giorgi, findings are valid if another reader can step into the researcher’s role and see what the researcher saw. The reader for validation in my study is my study and dissertation chair. Because the phenomenological reduction posture is supposed to eliminate researcher bias, validity does not necessarily depend on that reader agreeing with the researcher’s findings (Giorgi, 2006). Examining validity in absolute terms is impossible with the phenomenological approach; findings are meant to help add further insights, not exhaustively describe the phenomenon (Churchill & Wentz, 1985).

The data transformed through the analysis could potentially be relevant to a larger group beyond the interview participants (Giorgi, 2009). However, the researcher should be careful not to force a conclusion or theory if the data does not provide a rich shared element of experience. No matter the finding, it can contribute to the existing body of knowledge. Continued exploration, from different viewpoints and with various research methods, will add to our greater understanding of the international student border commuter phenomenon.

Interview Schedule

All interview related activity occurred post-Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. As previously mentioned, before I conducted the in-person interviews in El Paso, I conducted a pilot phase interview. The test participant responded to my call for participants, met the criteria for the study, and consented to participate in writing, just

as the other participants. This interview was held remotely via Skype for logistical reasons, but otherwise was conducted as I planned to run the interviews with the cohort of study participants. I used that experience to verify if the questions in my protocol made sense to the participant and they were comprehensive enough to produce data that could be useful.

During interviews, I used a combination of open-ended interview questions that remained consistent, and informal conversational follow-up questions. This combination gave me standardization in the questions I asked all participants, to compare answers to the consistent questions. At the same time, during interviews, I also deviated as appropriate to ask participants dynamic follow-up questions, unique to the experience they described, which fell outside of my standard questions. This flexibility allowed me to capture the richest narratives, since individual experiences differ substantially.

Participants

I used purposeful sampling for participants, which means that I called for participation from individuals who met specific criteria (Patton, 2002). The criteria were that participants were current or recent (past four years) Border College or Border University students, holding Mexican citizenship, who held an international student visa status during their study, and participated in border commuting activity (residing in Ciudad Juárez and border crossing to get to school) consistently for at least one year. Current and former students were invited to participate from both the university and the community college. Upon IRB approval from both institutions and my written

request, Border Community College and Border University international offices assisted me to send out my call for participants to current and former Mexican international students meeting my participant criteria.

Instrument

The study included a panel of expert review, to triangulate whether my questions were clear and were likely to provide useful and robust information. The panel of experts included my dissertation committee chair, a former staff member of Border University who worked closely with Mexican border commuter students, as well as a former Mexican border commuter student. This former student was excluded from participation in the study. After this review of my interview questions, I conducted a pilot interview remotely via Skype with one Mexican border commuter student who attended a Border College, where I tested my interview questions and technique, to see if I was able to conduct the interview in the anticipated time period. This pilot interview went successfully. I then scheduled further interviews with participants who answered my call and traveled to El Paso to conduct in-person interviews. Participants were asked to commit to a one-hour in-person interview on the U.S. side of the border in El Paso, within a specific window of dates in which I was present in El Paso. Participants were sent a copy of the consent form in advance to review. They were then required to read and sign a physical consent form when they arrived at the interview, agreeing to the terms of the study.

With the participants' consent, I recorded the interview for later transcription. I notified them they could stop the interview at any time. The participants were also

asked if they were willing to respond to any follow-up questions with me at a later date through Skype or phone. I scheduled the interviews individually via email with the participants and then conducted the interviews with them personally. Each participant chose a code name which I used to label my recordings and transcriptions.

To gather rich data for Giorgi's phenomenological method, as planned, I used both standard questions and deviation to follow-up on individual detail in each interview. The purpose was to explore the student's experience in his or her own words. Some students were more vocal and descriptive than others, so interviews varied in length, but most lasted just under one hour. After the interview, I transcribed the recordings.

After I transcribed the interviews, I reviewed them each carefully and noted if follow-up questions were necessary. Follow-up questions were sent via email as they all ended up being relatively simple questions to clarify a point, or to ask a small question if I found I neglected to ask a specific detail. All data from this process was kept electronically in my personal computer with dual-factor authentication restricted access. This is a security method to ensure confidential details in my files are not exploited or made public in any way. My validation readers only received the recordings and transcriptions with the participant code names, with no identifying characteristics.

Data Analysis

As previously discussed, Giorgi's method of phenomenological study is a specific process. I first carefully read through each participant's interview transcript

three times in a row so I was very familiar with the transcript contents. Then I employed Giorgi's bracketing technique, which intends to separate the contents of the transcript from my mental preconceived ideas using notations and breaking up transcripts into themes.

Giorgi's bracketing strategy is to transcribe and look at words only, in a regimented manner. I created a spreadsheet with the basic questions and demographic content as rows and recorded remarks for each participant in columns according to the rows, which helped me conceptualize the rich data from the interviews without using preconceived notions. Reviewing all the participants' response summaries together in the spreadsheet helped me to move into generalizations from the specifics. I produced a large list of themes found in the interviews and coded each individual transcript by areas that contained specific themes. Then I created thematic non-individual transcripts, by transferring specific parts of each participants' individual interview transcript into a different document, labeled by theme.

Once the narratives were broken up into themes, I collected common themes together into a group to reduce the themes to a more overarching essence. Common elements of experience within the common themes did emerge between the participants in many cases. Because of this, I found I was able to report aspects of shared experience, which are discussed in the following chapter. Giorgi's bracketing method emphasizes cross-checking and confirmation of what I saw in my coding process. This entire analysis process, documentation/notes, and the findings were

shared and discussed in detail with my doctoral committee chair for validation purposes.

Themes Processing

I started with 23 individual text documents where I transcribed each of the participants' interviews in entirety, including all the participants' words, including colloquialisms and grammar mistakes. I labeled each document with a number (1-23) for the participant and their chosen code name. I went through each transcribed interview document and formatted each transcription to include headings for the interview protocol questions as subtitled sections. Clarifying questions were included within each subtitled section of the main protocol questions.

To start analyzing the large sample of 23 participant interviews in a structured manner to bracket my assumptions, I made a spreadsheet that contained all the participant interview numbers and code names as rows, and each question asked in the interview protocol as the columns. I went through each interview transcript one by one, read their response to each question, and cut and pasted their response into the appropriate spreadsheet cell.

The cutting and pasting of the response involved making a decision about which part of a long paragraph response to include in order to capture the response. In some cases when the response was long and detailed, or included follow-up prompting questions from me, I summarized the response in the spreadsheet or took out sections of the answer to keep it brief for this initial step. I was very aware of my personal judgment involved in this stage and did my best to continually go back and check to

see if I was leaving out any meaning from the participant or accurately summarizing their response.

This spreadsheet was large and unsuitable for printing or use in a traditional spreadsheet sense, but it was very useful to begin to be able to scroll through and see the responses to each question by both participants and by question for all 23 participants. I used spreadsheet to gather summary data on the demographics of participants for the beginning of my findings section (for example, summarizing the ages, level of study, gender of the participant pool). I transposed the spreadsheet into two versions to read the responses differently, one with participants listed by column and the questions listed by row, and the other sheet with questions by column and participants by row. After this spreadsheet was completed, I also converted the spreadsheet into a text list in a single word document, in order of each participant's interview number. I used this document listing the shorter, more concise answers of each participant to review their interview as a shorter synopsis and to create the participant profiles.

To summarize the very first stage of organization for analysis, I used text and spreadsheet documents to distinguish the individual answers to the interview questions. I broke up the lengthy transcripts into isolated, shorter answers to each question and reviewed multiple times in two directions, both by all answers from one participant and all participants by one question. This allowed me to start to see some initial patterns in responses. For the next stage, I went back to the original text

documents of each interview, which were now broken up with subtitles by interview question, but included all the transcribed text answers in full.

On the first round of analysis of the full interview content I started making a list of a few themes that immediately emerged as consistent among multiple participants. After reviewing the transcripts multiple times, I continued to work on this rough list of themes. The list of emerging themes grew as I continued to go back and read each transcript again to find the common threads. I highlighted each transcript in areas I found themes in common. I continued this process of marking the transcripts and making notes about how the greater theme of the participants' answer might be summarized as a word or phrase. This was a process that I did by hand with printed paper transcriptions and a highlighter and a pen.

I did this back-and-forth review multiple times, reading through and marking each transcript, comparing it to my list of themes, with several iterations and adjustments to my theme list. Once I determined I had read each transcript over to the saturation of making a list of themes, I went to the electronic documents of the transcriptions and highlighted each transcript in the areas I had marked as themes on paper. Then, I created a new document with headings for themes and cut and pasted participant responses that fit into the categories, adding themes and combining themes, taking out themes that I realized were not shared among multiple participants, and so on.

This process of refining the theme topics continued as I went through all the transcripts again electronically multiple times. In the iterative process, I continuously

manipulated the 23 interview transcripts into these theme areas, combining certain related topics as I moved forward. As a result of this first round of analysis of all 23 interview transcripts I determined 17 initial themes in common. To conclude my first round of analysis, I reviewed my list of 17 first level themes, and read through my document that organized responses by these themes multiple times. I also went back to the original transcripts again highlighted by theme to make sure I was not missing any parts of the responses that fit within these themes, and also make sure there were not any additional themes I was missing.

Below I present the four rounds of processing I went through to develop and organize the themes. Through these process iterations, I produced seven final themes related to the essence of the international student border commuter experience. These themes begin to capture the lived experience. The themes will be further discussed in the remaining chapters.

Themes Result: First Round

1. Anxiety/stress
2. Frustration
3. Waiting
4. Time wasted
5. Tired/sleep
6. CBP rudeness
7. CBP confusion
8. *Impotencia/Helplessness*

9. Benefits of both countries
10. The community of border crossers
11. Being late
12. Getting used to it
13. Self-reliance/resilience
14. Sacrifice is worth it
15. Needing a voice
16. Helping others
17. Advice to others

Themes Result: Second Round

Creswell (2007) states that theme clusters are formed by grouping units of meaning together. In my second round of analysis, I grouped the list of 17 themes into higher level concepts that included multiple themes. I did this by reviewing the themes and responses again multiple times to find where the themes were associated with each other. My goal was to consolidate the themes and reduce the total number of themes, so that each first-round theme was included in a related second round theme grouping. Once I found a way that one theme might relate to another, I moved them together in a group. In some cases, one of the themes emerged as a more dominant theme and other themes could be grouped as sub themes relating to the main theme. After this round, which included multiple iterations of reorganization, I produced a list of seven major themes which included all 17 first-round themes.

1. Anxiety/stress

Frustration

Waiting

Time wasted

Tired/Sleep

2. *Power/Impotencia/Helplessness*

CBP Rudeness

Confusion on right answers

3. Getting used to it

Being late

4. Self-reliance/resilience

Advice to others

5. Sacrifice is worth it

6. Benefits of both countries at the same time

The community of border crossers

7. Needing a voice

Helping others

Themes Result: Third Round

Next, I reworded my seven theme areas into seven descriptors which are more expressive of the key idea and inclusive of multiple sub themes.

1. The Wait to Cross: Emotional and Physical Stress

2. *Impotencia*: Power and Helplessness

3. Transitioning: Getting Used to it

4. Self-reliance and Resilience
5. Seeing the positive: Sacrifice is worth it
6. *Fronterizos* Perspectives: Benefits of both countries at once
7. Needing a Voice to Help Others

Themes Result: Fourth Round

In the final round of theme development, I adjusted the wording for some of the theme titles to better capture the essence of the international student experience.

1. Waiting on the Bridge: Stress
2. Power and Helplessness: *Impotencia*
3. Getting Used to it: Adaptation
4. Self-reliance and Resilience: Strength
5. Sacrifice is Worth it: Opportunity
6. Benefit from Both Sides: *Fronterizos*
7. Needing a Louder Voice: Help

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided further details about this study's method. The process included calling for eligible participants with the assistance of Border College and University staff, making arrangements for individual in-person interviews, asking a set of standard questions as well as individual follow-up deviations during the interview, transcribing the interviews, and reviewing the transcript contents multiple times with multiple methods. The review of the transcripts is the key part of this method to generate findings, and the review process was iterative, with external review to check

that my findings were logical and my bias was limited. The following chapter will provide the findings resulting from this method.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the primary findings of this study. First, I provide a demographic overview of the international student border commuter participants in this study. Next, the 23 participants are profiled individually, to provide an initial basic description of each. Then, I share my four-round process of developing the key themes to reflect the essence of the international student border commuter experience. Finally, the seven themes that emerged are discussed in conjunction with excerpts from the participant interviews.

Demographic Overview

Of the 23 participants in the study, 18 were born in Ciudad Juárez. The others were born in Acapulco, Delicias, South Mexico, and Mexico City. Twenty-two grew up in Ciudad Juárez, and one participant was raised in Chihuahua City. Twenty of the participants were currently living in Ciudad Juárez at the time of the interview, two had recently moved to El Paso, and one lived in Mexico City. Therefore, the vast majority of the study participants had spent most or all of their lives living in Ciudad Juárez.

The age range of participants was from 20 – 45, with the mean and median age both being 25 years old. Seven participants were female, while the remaining 16 were male. According to other researcher's data, transborder commuters do skew predominantly male (Rocha Romero & Orraca Romano, 2018).

Five participants were married at the time of the study, and eighteen were single. Of the married participants (all male), three had two children, one had four

children, and one had no children. The five married participants were all living with their wife, and their children, in the four cases who had children. One participant lived with his girlfriend, one lived alone, and two lived with roommates (both of these participants recently moved to El Paso). The rest of the participants (13) lived with family members (nine with parents, two with “family,” one with mother only, and one with father only).

Six participants had studied at Border Community College, and 21 had studied at Border University. The overlap is because four participants had studied at both Border Community College and Border University. Thus, only two of the participants studied solely at Border Community College while 17 studied solely at Border University. The larger number of University respondents is likely due to their larger proportion of total number of students. Border University has about 400 international student border commuters, while Border Community College has 56 (Border Colleges, personal communication, 2022).

Eight participants studied a form of Engineering (with two in Computer Science), six studied in Social Sciences (with two in Education), five studied in Natural Sciences (with two in Nursing), two studied in the Humanities, two studied a form of Business, and two were in Multidisciplinary Studies. As previously stated, two participants had only attended Border Community College and were therefore at the Associate’s level, but both expressed intentions to pursue Bachelor’s level study in the future at Border University. Thirteen participants had studied at the Bachelor’s level only, while eight participants had studied at the Graduate level. Of the eight participants having studied at the Graduate level, one had studied at Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctorate level at

Border University, one had studied at both the Bachelor's and Master's level, one had studied at both the Master's and Doctorate level, four had studied at Master's level only, and one had studied at Doctoral level only.

The number of years each participant had spent border commuting as a student ranged from one year to ten years, with the average time being about four years of experience with student border commuting. Fifteen participants were still actively studying as a border commuter at the time of the study, five had completed their studies, two had discontinued study, and one was still pursuing study while living in El Paso. The earliest year participants had begun border commuting for their studies was 2006 (two participants), and the earliest year participants had ceased border commuting was 2012 (one participant).

Eight participants had border commuted in F-1 full-time international student status only, nine in F-3 border commuter status only, five had commuted in both F-1 and F-3 statuses, and one had commuted in F-1 and TN (Trade NAFTA working visa) statuses. Seventeen participants had only been studying full-time while commuting, while five had been both full and part-time during their studies as a border commuter, and one had only been part-time. Twenty of the 21 participants who studied at Border University held a special tuition discount, through a Texas legislated program providing in-state tuition for Mexican nationals demonstrating financial need. The remaining participant from Border University had a tuition waiver due to a Graduate Assistantship. The two participants who studied only at Border Community College intended to apply for the tuition discount at Border University in the future.

Participant Profiles

In order to create summaries of the extensive information the 23 participants shared in their interviews, I read each of their transcribed interviews several times, and made a template for their answers to demographic questions and their responses to the broader questions. To condense sometimes expansive answers to the open-ended questions, I highlighted key parts of the statements that reflected their answers most succinctly for each question. Below are overviews of each participant's interview, reflecting the main ideas each conveyed in response to the questions. These profiles should be read with the understanding they have been condensed into a much smaller story, with only brief excerpts of what each participant shared in the interview. All names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves.

Ale

Ale is 23, majoring in Dance at Border University, living with her parents at home in Juárez. She has been commuting for five years to save money on rent, both part- and full-time. Her commuting methods have included walking, bus, carpooling, and driving herself; she now holds SENTRI. On border commuting's impact on her, she says:

I think it's a love-hate relationship because it has great opportunity, but it adds some worrying, and sometimes makes me feel anxious to cross...Everyone gets stressed and mad in the line, and there's people fighting and yelling, and it's stressful to be there.

She has been taken to secondary inspection and reports CBP confusion/mistreatment. “It's very confusing. They may say, ‘Oh, your I-20 or your visa has expired’, and I will be like, I know everything is good, but they can do whatever they want.” She has had trouble participating in campus life. “It was harder for me to join anything. Sometimes I cannot join a certain group, in my case it’s harder to go to rehearsals, if it’s late, it feels dangerous.”

Ale feels the school is “something in the middle,” towards their supporting or not supporting border commuters. She advises other students who consider commuting to get SENTRI, or better, if they can pay rent in El Paso, to not commute. The best thing about commuting to her besides saving money, is seeing “these cities are together, it’s like one city but they’re still different.” The line and wasting time are the worst aspects to her, but overall, she sees border commuting as positive because she is “able to study something that’s not offered in Juárez.” She participated in the interview because, “I get excited when I’m able to help out...and because every experience is different even if we’re doing the same thing.”

Alexander

Alexander is 21 and lives with his parents in Juárez, where he was born and raised. He has been studying Biology at Border Community College for three years and will transfer to Border University soon, where he plans to earn a Bachelor’s in Nursing. He says border commuting means “brotherhood” to him.

All the people I know that cross every day just be here, we are very close. I think about all of the sacrifice and we're working hard. I also feel proud to come from

Juárez and we tried to help each other to be better. I feel very proud when I cross, and worry and a kind of fear.

He says he doesn't have issues being late because with his motorcycle, he can move between cars and lanes.

Regarding school support, Alexander reports he hasn't had problems, and that most professors have been nice to him, but he says there are some issues with privacy in the International Office space at Border Community College. He does say he would like to talk to the President of Border Community College because he feels like the school just "sees us like money." He participates in service learning at school, but thinks he could do more if he didn't have to cross every day and had an apartment in El Paso. Alexander finds the Mexican consulate in El Paso "very nice" while the American consulate in Juárez is "very strict," but that makes sense to him. He wishes the attitude of CBP were better, but thinks "that can't be changed." He feels the worst thing about border commuting is "when I'm interested in something like research, and they tell me it's only for U.S. citizens or residents," but overall border commuting is very positive for him. He participated in the study because "I wanted to be listened to, and no one listened. We don't exist for both governments; we are just here."

Ana

Ana is an undergraduate at Border University, majoring in Multidisciplinary Studies. She is 25, lives with her parents in Juárez, and has been commuting to school for seven years on both a full-time and part-time basis with her car. She commutes because her dad requires her to live at home to save money. "If I have the express

lane, then it's fine, but if I don't have it then it pisses me off, it's hot, it's a pain in the ass." She has failed an exam because she didn't have the express lane on a holiday weekend in Juárez and didn't make it on time. She says she could participate in campus life, but she hasn't tried.

Ana reports secondary inspections and multiple cases of confusion with CBP.

The people at the bridge, at least with students, because I have my student visa expired, they are like, this is expired, and then they call someone else and they'll be like oh no she's good...they should get their information from the same source, because sometimes they're not on the same page.

Ana appreciates that the International Office allows other people to pick up documents and that you can call for advice, which helps commuters. She says the best thing about commuting is "the U.S. education with the Mexican lifestyle," but would advise others to live in El Paso if money permits and the worst thing is "the line." Still, border commuting is overall positive to her, "because I love being in school here, I love my friends. I can't find a job here [in El Paso] – but overall positive." She says she participated in the interview because she was interested in talking about her experience.

Andreas

Andreas is 34 and married with two children. He was born in Juárez, raised in Chihuahua, living now in Juárez. He's been commuting to attend school both full and part-time, for about seven years, driving, and he holds SENTRI. Andreas has attended Border Community College and Border University and he just finished his degree in

Multidisciplinary studies at Border University. He commutes because of financial resources and also, he feels more comfortable living in the “Mexican culture environment.” He says he’s had an average experience with CBP, including “more than a few” stressful situations involving questioning about his I-20 signatures, and he has been handcuffed. He has been late to classes, group work, and tests, but he thinks professors in general “understand special situations with the students that have to make this kind of daily commute.”

Comparing Border College and Border University, he finds more “understandable” strictness about border commuters’ special cases at the Border University. Andreas comments on the different International Office service models, “I feel that the advisors at [Border University] have more experience than the assistants at the [front] desk. [Border Community College] was the opposite, the professionals always answer the questions normally, but there’s a long wait.” He advised other border commuter students: “Don’t trust the academic advisors in your freshman year. Try to get as much course equivalence for [Border Community College] that transfer to [Border University].” He participated in the interview because he saw it as a special new topic to study.

Brian

Brian, 29, was born in Acapulco but grew up in Juárez, where he lives now with his wife and two children. He is a doctoral student at Border University in Computer Science, and has been commuting to study for one year by driving with SENTRI. Of SENTRI, he says, “I didn’t have one for the first six months and I was going completely

crazy.” He sees his academic experience as “different in the sense that coming here makes me lose time. So, I prefer working from home when I can.” He says he’s been late for class but professors haven’t minded, and doesn’t have any problems with the school support of him border commuting. About participation in campus life, he reports “there’s a lot of events and stuff that I would like to come [to], but it’s too late; in general, it has been a limitation.” He commutes for cost-saving, and to him border commuting means “annoying lines on the bridge, but it’s a nice experience to be in two countries in the same day. It’s kind of weird.”

Brian advises other students to get their Mexican passports renewed in El Paso, where he says it’s easier than in Mexico. He also suggests other students to set up their academic schedule to allow them to come either early or late to avoid lines. He says the overall border commuter experience is a little bit negative, because “it’s really annoying and takes a toll on what you’re doing or trying to do…it has a bit of control over your life.” Brian participated in the interview because he thinks it’s an interesting topic “when you live between two worlds that are really similar but are completely different.”

Carlos

Carlos has been commuting for six years, first to attend a private high school, and now at 21, to earn his Bachelor’s in Mechanical Engineering at Border University. He has walked, taken the bus, and driven, and now holds SENTRI. He lives with his parents in Juárez and he started border commuting because of his parents’ requirement. He reports CBP has handcuffed him and taken to secondary inspection

multiple times, and that he gets a lot of weird questions from them; “they have asked me about my earring or tattoos.” He says for him as a commuter, campus life is:

Pretty bad in the extracurriculars. I joined a fraternity, but they were doing too many things in El Paso; I wasn’t able to come here all day. Sometimes you cannot get along with people, even if you want to, because you cannot be there.

Carlos feels he’s had quite a bit of academic trouble due to border commuting, giving one example of asking for help from CBP on the bridge due to being delayed for an exam but “they didn’t care. I got a D, no excuse.”

He feels like the school doesn’t support him as a border commuter very well. But he doesn’t think he should complain about any policies or restrictions relating to his citizenship:

All the paperwork that they ask for I understand. I know they do it because they of course want to have a controlled situation...there are some places that you cannot work if you are Mexican, for they cannot give you the visa, of course because of regulations.

He hopes sharing his story through the interview will do something helpful.

Daniel

Daniel is 45 and lives with his wife and four children in Juárez. He has commuted for two years recently pursuing a Bachelor’s in Computer Science at Border University. However, he has commuted on and off since 1994, walking, taking the bus, and driving. He commuted because he was working full-time in Juárez. He says

because he's older and more responsible now with his family, he tends not to respond back to the CBP officers, but before that, "there were a few times that the officer threatened to take my visa because I responded back to them." He says he hasn't had any academic trouble as a border commuter and thinks the International Office services are wonderful. "I don't see what else can be done, other than they come and pick me up."

Daniel uniquely mentions a positive experience with CBP, when a CBP officer let him go to the front because he was going to be late to a final. He says he was prevented from engaging in on-campus activities or other opportunities accessible as a student because of his time commuting as a student. He advises everyone to "be that extra half hour earlier all the time. Sometimes even with the extra half hour, you're going to miss it, but it will be fewer times." He shared that he avoids the "free bridge" because of "the vendors' harassment and all the cars trying to get in your lane...I've seen people trafficking cigarettes and throwing them over the bridge to smuggle into Mexico and sell on the streets. I do worry about leaving my car unattended [due to narco trafficking concerns]." He participated in the study because he wants to help someone and share his experience with border commuting.

David

David is in his early 20s and lives with his parents, born and raised in Juárez. He has pursued study at both Border Community College and University, and has been commuting to earn his Bachelor's in Construction Engineering for about eight years, both full and part-time. He drives but does not hold SENTRI. He decided to commute

due to expenses, “and the [narco] war was over, so it was more safe, so I decided to go back to my parents.” He says he feels lucky with his experience interacting with

CBP:

Most of the time it’s been good. I remember some bad experiences, like an officer asking lots of questions about how it is taking a lot of time for me to study, with an attitude. Sometimes they have 19 windows open for I-94 cards but only two or three officers who leave, come back, talk, but most of the time, they’ve been nice.

While he has not been active in campus life outside class, he says “It’s up to the person.” He reflects on the International Offices at both border colleges:

College support was good, since there’s only two ladies working there, you get to know each other. University support is also good and I usually ask a lot of questions because I know I have to stick to the laws for my student visa.

He says friends ask him how he can wait an hour to cross, but he says you just get used to it, and advises others to get the express line or better, not commute. He participated in the interview because he wants to give ideas, help improve things, and make commuting easier for others.

Fernanda

Fernanda is 21 and lives with her parents and two siblings in Juárez, where she was born and raised. She is attending Border University as an undergraduate majoring in Education, and has been doing so as border commuter for three years. She commutes because her mom wanted her to have a better education and improve her

English. Fernanda appreciates border commuting for the educational opportunity while being close to her family, and thinks it's helped her mature faster. She says when she's crossed using SENTRI, it's been better, but she's had some bad times:

When I walk or when I had to renew my permit [I-94]. This lady was telling me my I-20 was expired which it was not. They didn't let me cross. The University just printed a new I-20 of the same one and it was unnecessary and not expired...

Fernanda says it's hard for her to participate on campus and has trouble meeting with classmates in the evening because she's too tired and knows she needs to go back to Juárez. She says some friends who use the bus find it even harder than for her with her car. Fernanda mentions she is grateful for the in-state tuition program for Mexican nationals with financial need, but would like to see the school work on helping professors understand that things are harder for border commuters. She recommends getting SENTRI if possible, "that's a blessing because I used to do the line...People who use the regular lane get a different treatment, like officers screaming at them. SENTRI is expensive and I think that's unfair." She participated because, "She hopes there might be changes, not for me, but for other generations."

Gabby

Gabby is 20 and has lived in Juárez her whole life. She lives with her mother at home and commutes to study biology and chemistry at Border Community College. She has been studying for three years and will soon transfer to Border University to attain a Bachelor's degree. She commutes by walking, taking the bus, and riding on

her boyfriend's motorcycle. She commutes mainly because of money and she works in Juárez, finding it hard to find a job in El Paso. She enjoys "living between two cultures. Since I cross every day, I see the difference."

Gabby says that she is participating in campus life in biology research projects and makes the effort to stay late. She only has had trouble with a professor once, when "I lost the attendance for a class because the bus broke, but the professor had his policy." She finds that "the college doesn't help a lot. They do a lot of programs, but they don't involve international students." The best thing about commuting is relating to two cultures and meeting many different types of people in the "border community." The worst thing is "[the] time spent. You don't rest. When you don't have the time to do everything, the thing you sacrifice is sleep and rest." She hopes and plans to find a job on campus and move to an apartment in El Paso soon. She participated in the study because, "Finally, someone is interested in what happens to us every single day and that we have to make a lot of sacrifices."

Hiram

Hiram is 27, pursuing an undergraduate degree in Nursing. He lives with his girlfriend in Juárez, where he was born and raised. Hiram has been commuting to Border University for four years on a full-time basis with his motorcycle. He doesn't hold a SENTRI pass, because he can move in the lanes more quickly with his motorcycle. He commutes to save money on rent, but feels that it's more convenient to live in the U.S. if possible. About border commuting, he thinks, "once you cross every day, that should be regular, like something that should be the same, every day, but it's

not.” He has experienced secondary inspection and handcuffing, and reports mistreatment and confusion from CBP officers. He has observed someone smuggling drugs in a bicycle frame, and he has a close friend who gets pulled over four times a month. Related to school support of his commuter experience, he suggests the institution provides additional scholarships. He assumes responsibility to maintain his own status: “If you follow the dates and instructions, you will not have trouble in that.”

While Hiram has not had any academic problems related to border commuting, comparing his experience to those who live in El Paso, he says, “you will not have the same level of stress, because you need to spend four hours every day, six hours sometimes in order to be at school.” He sees campus life participation as an issue with time management. Hiram sees the best thing about commuting being the benefit of both countries, and the worst being the waste of time. He sees border commuting overall as a positive experience: “I can see the difference in cultures; see how the people think. It will be bad, it will be good, but you will learn from it.” Hiram participated in the interview because “no one has even cared about that, and that’s awful because I have friends in very bad situations with the border officers.”

Jaime

Jaime was born in Juárez and spent summers in Houston, Texas in tourist status growing up. He is 36, lives alone, and participated in the interview via Skype from his current home in Mexico City. He recently spent three years as a border commuter student at Border University pursuing a Master’s in Creative Writing. However, he has not yet finished the degree. He was working as a professor at a

university in Juárez while studying, and commuted with his car (SENTRI) for financial reasons. He says border commuting has both negative and positive impacts for him. “It’s a very enriching experience, you learn a lot. Before 9/11, crossing was really easy like in five minutes. Then it became excruciating dealing with the officers. I had many bad experiences.” He sees his academic experience as different because he didn’t have time to participate in department activities due to commuting and working full-time in Juárez. He says he was at one time part of a student organization and also an editor of the department magazine. Unfortunately, since he couldn’t attend regular meetings, it was a problem for him.

Jaime reports he did have additional trouble with the university:

I lost my visa status when I was trying to renew my I-20 because I just needed to finish my thesis. [The International Office] gave me the wrong form and it was too late. It stopped me from enrolling and fixing it was expensive. I tried for a whole year and then I moved to Mexico City...I’m bitter about the experience with misinformation when I lost the immigration status, just from a student working the front desk. So, they need more detailed information or training.

He says the best thing about commuting was living in both countries at the same time. “I noticed my fellow students coming from Colombia or Peru, a different process for them discovering everything.” He advises others considering border commuting that it will be tiring mentally and physically, but it is worth it. He wants to go back and defend his thesis to get his degree, but he says it’s taking time because the experience was very painful. He chose to participate in the interview to document his experience.

John

John lives in El Paso now with his wife, having just recently moved from Juárez. Before that he commuted for ten years to Border University, and has pursued a Bachelor's, Master's, and a Doctorate in Computer Science. He is 27 and has commuted as a full-time international student but also while holding TN status, a non-immigrant temporary work visa (Trade-NAFTA). He has employed multiple methods over his decade of commuting, including walking, bicycle, carpooling, and driving (with SENTRI). He started commuting because he lived close to the border, and "although the lines were terrible, using the bicycle was at first quick until they changed us to the regular pedestrian lane." He says he doesn't have any emotions about commuting because he's done it for so long.

John says his academic experience was generally negative especially when Juárez was very insecure. He says he only missed one test but a lot of friends missed many more than that. His professors were mostly understanding, but group meetings were hard. John participated in campus life as a commuter. "I attended sports events, I was an orientation leader, and I belonged to and led about five student organizations." John says the best thing about border commuting is "You get the best of both worlds," and the worst is the time spent. He advises others to invest in SENTRI, to consider the Santa Teresa port of entry which is less crowded and more consistent, and to keep quiet with CBP. He participated in the interview because of his ten years of experience and that friends and professors wouldn't believe him when he would tell them stories about border commuting.

Lorenzo

Lorenzo is 34 and lives with his wife and two children in Juárez, where he was born and raised. He commuted to Border University for his Master's and his doctorate in Education, for two years. He has recently stopped working on his doctorate, but when studying he held border commuter status because of his family and related financial constraints. He drove with SENTRI, but would have taken the bus if the schedule worked for student border commuting. He says border commuting "means losing two to three hours of my life sitting in the car." He feels that he's been treated pretty well by CBP and thinks they respect you more if "you show an I-20," but says his friends have had very different experiences. Lorenzo's professors were "considerate" to him if he was late. He thinks the international office handles a lot of students without much staffing. "They're pretty efficient. I consider them good for the amount of students they handle."

He does suggest that the university should consider providing more grants or make info about financial aid opportunities more public. "If you do not check your email constantly you will miss it. If you're studying in El Paso your socio-economic status is good, but the exchange rate is very different." Lorenzo could not participate in campus life much outside of a few activities, because he can't stay the whole day. He thinks he would have done more on-campus activities if he lived in El Paso. He feels the government should reduce the border wait time "I know security is an issue, but it just takes too long." His advice to others is to get a new car, if driving, because the

bridge wait is very hard on the car, and not to turn on the air-conditioning if the car is old. He participated in the interview to share his experience for the first time.

Luis

Luis recently earned his Master's in Economics from Border University, where he commuted for 2.5 years. He was a Teaching Assistant during his studies. Luis is 27 and born and raised in Juárez, where he currently lives with his father. He commuted for financial reasons and when he thinks about border commuting, he thinks about "lines, wondering what time you will get some place, especially stress when you think you're going to be late to an exam or a class." He otherwise hasn't had "any big incidents" with his experience commuting. He says he didn't have a problem commuting, because "if I had class or an exam I would go two hours early, just to make sure. If there was no line, I would just have two hours to kill in El Paso." As well as being a TA, he also participated in soccer and the gym on-campus, where he got to meet more diverse people. He says he would have participated more if he didn't commute.

Luis sees the school support for border commuters as:

Mostly good. Sometimes they [International Office] had an issue where they tell me a week later, I need to send more paperwork. And another week later, oh you forgot this other document. It was a little frustrating. I almost missed my deadline to transfer to school for that. Other than that, the customer service has been great.

He doesn't have any particular suggestions for the school, but suggests the government could make a different line for student commuters. Although he says, "that would be great, but I don't think it's going to happen any time soon." He recommends commuters get the express line [SENTRI] and wishes he could live on campus because "you get to know a lot of different people. I didn't have that experience. The only people I interacted with were guys in my class." Luis participated in the interview because he had time while he is currently looking for a job, and wanted to do something to help.

Marcos

Marcos just moved to El Paso at 20, where he lives with friends. He was born and raised in Juárez and commuted the past two years while he's been pursuing his bachelor's degree in Biology at Border University. He drove and got SENTRI after one year. Marcos says:

My first year crossing the Free Bridge was bad. I felt threatened every time. I felt like they would get me, even though I'm just a student. I don't know why but I got caught so many times. Like one time they thought I smelled like weed. When they take you to revision [secondary inspection], the treatment there was the worst.

He commuted and lived at home with his parents for financial reasons, because tuition was too expensive for him to afford living expenses. He is now living in El Paso because he got a job at Border University. He says he got sick from stress as a border commuter and since he moved, he has less health issues and anxiety.

Marcos' professors have been understanding of issues with being late due to commuting, but he knows friends who have had more trouble with professors. He didn't have time to participate in campus life as a border commuter; he tried to play intramural volleyball once but quit because he was getting home too late. He says now he's living here, it's more common that he participates, and he can do research experiments "where time matters" now. The best thing about border commuting was the financial savings. He advises other commuters to know their rights to avoid mistreatment at the bridge, and to avoid confusion since the International Office, CBP, and the consulate have each told him different things at different times. He participated in the interview because he loves research and he wants to inform and share with others.

Mila

Mila was born in Delicias, Chihuahua but grew up in Juárez. She spent three years being a student border commuter but now has lived in El Paso for two years at age 24 with a roommate. She has been pursuing her Bachelor's in Finance at Border University and also has attended Border Community College. She was a commuter because of the impact of the recession on her father's finances. Mila says she has had CBP experience with "the occasional asshole" but most of the time was ok, which she attributes to being very organized and being careful. She says she wanted to get involved in more activities on campus as a border commuter but couldn't due to exhaustion. She says:

Now that I live here [in El Paso], I'm doing way better in school. I like to get together with people and study, that has helped a lot. Also, I'm working on-campus so I started meeting people and being active in a student organization. I have time for school now actually. I couldn't use the resources that I now can use.

Mila says that if you are shy or introverted, you will never learn information, because the school doesn't help very much. Mila would tell other border commuters to call her if they had any questions, rather than contact any administration. She also would advise border commuters to try to get involved in student organizations if possible and about making connections to get jobs. She participated in the study because she thinks that people, including Mexican students living in El Paso, as well as Mexican-Americans who commute from Juárez, don't understand the experience.

Neza

Neza was born and raised in Juárez, where he lives now at 23 with his parents. He's been a student border commuter for seven years studying Linguistics at Border University, having completed a Bachelor's degree and now pursuing a Master's degree. His main reason for commuting is economic, and he has commuted by foot, bus, and driving, and he now holds SENTRI. He says he had some academic difficulty at the beginning of his studies but now he is better aware of his situation, knows to wake up earlier, and how to explain to his professors about commuting.

However, he says he probably would have a better academic experience if he lived in El Paso close to campus. Neza says he wishes there was additional school and

government support for scholarships. He says, “if I don’t get a TA position here, I think I will quit, since my parents have been helping me for a long time.” The best thing about border commuting is “That you're in both places and can take advantage of both places. I can buy something at both places, attending different events, social activities, both of everything.” The worst thing is that taking advantage of both places is time-consuming. He participated in the interview because he thinks his seven years of commuting have given him an interesting experience and story to share.

Pamela

Pamela is 22 and pursuing a Bachelor’s degree in Accounting and Human Resources at Border University. She has been commuting for three years to study, via walking, bus, and carpool drop-off, from Juárez, where she was born and raised. She did live in El Paso for her first year while studying, but changed to border commuting because of cost and comfort being with her family and seeing them more often.

Pamela doesn’t think her academic experience is any different as a border commuter than a non-border commuter and says she’s always successfully taken five classes a semester. She is part of a student organization and also has a job on-campus. Regarding school support for border commuters, says she gets emails from the school about “Stuff that’s changing. But I feel like everything is just not clear enough. [After reading an email], I heard from a friend that she had different information, so that’s confusing.”

Pamela says getting her visa was actually fast, but the long line at the bridge needs to change. She says that most people will never consider walking to commute

like she has done, so she recommends people to get the express lane and commute rather than live in the U.S. “The express lane is like \$300 per year I think, which is what an apartment with roommates costs you for a month.” She is the only commuter who does not specifically recommend living in El Paso if they have the financial means. Pamela says she participated in the interview because a lot of people have never even been to a border and have no idea.

Ricardo

Ricardo is 28 and lives by himself in Juárez, his birthplace. He studies Systems Engineering at the Master’s level at Border University, and has been border commuting for 1.5 years to that end. He commutes for financial reasons and he also works full-time in Juárez at a manufacturing company. He says he’s used to crossing to El Paso since he lived in Juárez his whole life, but now that he’s crossing multiple times a week, the time-consuming part is of most concern. SENTRI has made it easier for him. Ricardo says his academic experience is “a completely different experience for studying than Juárez. I like driving and I like the university. Even when I have to wait and I have to do a lot of paperwork, I really enjoy studying here.”

He has only had one professor not be understanding, about him being late to a six o’clock class, when his work in Juárez ended at five. He says the rest have been flexible and understanding. Due to his schedule, he doesn’t participate in anything on-campus except classes. About the school support he says:

They have some welcome events and they were friendly and shared a lot of information and encouraged people to come to them if you needed anything.

They seemed pretty supportive. One time I was late trying to get to the international office when they were closing. I told them I'm coming from Juárez and I can't make it earlier because of work. So, they were pretty cool about it, waited for me, and signed my papers right away.

Ricardo was surprised by the visa process being quick in comparison to getting a passport in Juárez but finds the CBP process very slow. He says sometimes he has to miss events in Juárez to go to school, but the benefits of commuting are far greater. He participated in the interview because he likes helping others, both border commuters and researchers.

Roberto

Roberto was born in Southern Mexico (city unknown) but lived in Juárez since age 13, where he still lives now at 26 with his parents and brother. He got his Bachelor's in Juárez and has been border commuting for a year to pursue a Master's degree in Mechanical Engineering at Border University. He commutes because "of the options in the area this university is the best. Living in Juárez is cheaper, especially with my parents. Also, I have my friends and family over there and it's easier to go out there." He says he struggled much more with being in a bad mood commuting before he got SENTRI, and doesn't have extreme complaints about CBP. When he started studying, he worked in Juárez, but after the first semester he received a Teaching Assistant position at Border University. He feels this has made a huge difference in spending more time on campus and getting to know more people, but also thinks he would go to activities and socialize more if he lived in El Paso.

Roberto thinks the school doesn't have specific support for border commuters besides the in-state tuition discount for Mexican nationals with financial need. "I'm not sure there's any other specific support for border commuters. I have a friend who is with me all the time who is not a border commuter and when we go to [International Office] or [administrative building] they treat us the same."

Roberto says the worst thing about commuting is:

The time and money it implies. Also, the strain on the car. I have a standard car and every time I move half a meter...when my car broke it was the clutch, from having to press it every meter in the line.

He recommends others who might commute to consider getting an apartment close to the bridge in Juárez if they can, and to "absolutely get the express lane. Once you get it you will never go back." Roberto participated in the interview to see if other experiences are as "good as mine, or if they're in some troubles."

Sofi

Sofi is 23 and pursuing her Bachelor's degree in Biochemistry at Border University. She has been commuting as a student for four years and has lived with her family in Juárez her whole life. She doesn't have SENTRI but drives and has commuted both full and part-time. She commutes to be able to study at a good school but live less expensively. She enjoys living at the border and "participating with the change from country to country." However, she says,

Sometimes I really hate to cross the border. If the class is at 7, I need to wake up at 4, and it is a little bit hard. And then I need to wait here from class to class and eat. I come home at 8 or something; so, it is sometimes pretty hard.

Sofi wishes she could live in El Paso because she could study more and sleep better. She notices the difference in this a lot compared with a friend, who lives near the university in El Paso and just walks to campus. About trouble with school she says, “I have had some bad experiences” and recounts a professor refusing to see her because she was 15 minutes late. She thinks border officers should not treat people who cross so poorly. She says she has more problems at the border because while “a lot of people don’t say anything to the officers...I don’t care who the person is, don’t treat me like that.” While she doesn’t have SENTRI, she is currently looking into it because she heard from a friend it is much better to have it. She participated in the study because she wants to provide information to help improve services and information for border commuter students.

Xochitl

Xochitl (he) was born in Mexico City but was raised and lives in Juárez. He is 24, single, and lives with his family. He has been studying at both Border Community College and Border University for five years and just finished his Bachelor’s degree in Electrical Engineering at Border University. He has walked and driven in the commute and got SENTRI partway through his studies. He says,

Before I had express lanes, I didn't want to come to school, because by the time I got to school I was tired or frustrated. It was a miracle when I arrived on time. I think I was working less academically.

He says he thinks the school is helpful by providing parking permit information and plenty of places to park. However, he says he's had trouble with school support:

They only have one [office] to help international students at one campus [of Border Community College]. In the beginning you're all nervous because you don't know what the next step is. I arrived at the university and went for help but they were not as effective [as Border Community College]...At [Border Community College] you go and say what you want and they give it to you. At [University] they make you wait...I remember they once left me here without an I-20, I couldn't cross [back home].

Regarding governmental support for the visa and passport, Xochitl says it is easy "as long as you have decent English. If you don't speak English, good luck with that." The best thing about border commuting is saving on rent. He advises others who border commute to get SENTRI and a parking permit. About his experiences as a border commuter, he says, "I've seen cars just not let each other into the line and hit each other. This lady hit me one time. They're so desperate and don't know how to follow lines." He participated in the interview because he is unemployed and has time.

Themes Presentation

The preceding section contained 23 summarized profiles of the study participants. While those profiles provided snapshots into the experience, Giorgi's

Descriptive Phenomenological Method provides a more rigorous, structured approach to determining the essence of an experience. As described in Chapter 3, seven themes emerged from my phenomenological process.

1. Waiting on the Bridge: Stress
2. Power and Helplessness: *Impotencia*
3. Getting Used to it: Adaptation
4. Self-reliance and Resilience: Strength
5. Sacrifice is Worth it: Opportunity
6. Benefit from Both Sides: *Fronterizos*
7. Needing a Louder Voice: Help

These seven themes serve as an initial representation of the essence of the international student border commuter experience. They are not intended to be all-encompassing, but begin to establish a description of the phenomenon. The themes will be described in detail in the following sections.

Waiting on the Bridge: Stress

Be aware that it's gonna be tiresome. Not only waiting in line, which can physically exhaust you; under the border sun, it's very exhausting. But also, mentally tiresome. (Jaime)

The first theme on the daily life experience of border commuters involved physical and emotional descriptions of how the daily crossing affects them. Stress, anxiety, frustration, waiting, wasting time, and being tired were all ideas many of the

participants brought up. All of the 23 participants brought up at least one of these topics during their interview, some of them multiple ideas or more than once.

Many participants mentioned feelings of stress and anxiety, or described situations that indicated stress or anxiety without specifically using those words. When asked what border commuting means to him, Marcos answered:

Stressed...I just think about having to cross every day. And back and forth, because going back is a pain also...Something that I don't want to do...Something that I have noticed since I started doing this border commuting thing, is that actually I got sick of too much stress.

To Xochitl, answering what border commuting means to him is a single word, "Stress." He expands on that idea later: "The stress of crossing the bridge. Dealing with all those cars, and the people. If it's hot, dealing with their angry-ness. If it's cold, dealing with the cold. Just the crossing itself. It's annoying."

Alexander responds to the same question with a specific reason for concern: "When I hear that word cross, crossing the bridge, I feel worried when I cross the bridge because I have my bag and I feel fear that someone put something in my bag and they tried to cross it or something like that." David also talks about specific anxiety related to narco trafficking strategy. "You get nervous when they have the dog walking around your car but that's because you think, what if someone put something on my car?"

Similarly, Neza recounts a time his car was flagged for additional inspection. His U.S. citizen cousin told him not to worry, but he was scared about CBP finding

something that was not his. Gabby brings up the same concern about people being aware she crosses every day and the impact of them potentially putting something in her car. “There is always a worry...you will lose everything...your school, your plan...the border means a lot.”

More than one participant talked about how they feel anxiety about crossing and getting in trouble despite following the rules. Ale: “It makes me feel anxious to cross, even if I know that I don’t have anything to worry about, because I’m not doing something illegal or I don’t have anything on me that’s going to be dangerous.” Pamela: “It’s that kind of feeling where you feel like you’ve done something even though you’re 100% sure you didn’t.”

Mila describes herself as “paranoid” to make sure she has everything in order to try to avoid potential problems. Carlos discusses a strong generalized stress he feels overall about knowing he has to come to El Paso. He says he only comes for school-required events as a result.

Andreas shares how on multiple occasions, he has felt so stressed out by waiting in the line to cross and feeling like he isn’t going to make it to class on time, that his stomach begins to churn from the anxiety. Then he panics further about going to the bathroom and that he won’t make it to the bathroom on time, since he’s alone in his car. He says although it’s unlikely people would usually mention this type of experience, he confided to close friends about this happening to him. His friends also have had shared similar situations and accidents getting sick while waiting in line because of the anxiety.

Feelings related to the amount of time it takes to commute across the border was a big aspect of the participants' experience, mainly in answering the question "What is the worst thing about border commuting?" Fifteen out of the 23 participants mentioned specific feelings or brought up topics related to waiting in line, frustration, being tired, and the time they waste by border commuting.

Gabby says, "The worst thing would be the time. You don't rest. When you don't have the time to do everything, the thing that you always sacrifice is sleeping."

John says: "In ten years I don't know how many days I must have lost just waiting to cross." To Fernanda, her answer about what border commuting means is:

Tiring. What else? Tedious. I see I'm looking at the officers but they're not doing anything. They're just like talking and laughing and we're all right here waiting. And sometimes, well we can't do anything. I always get angry. When I go over there I'm always in a bad mood when I get back. That's why I hate to go.

Ale says something similar:

It makes me feel tired, like I don't want to do that. I hear [border commuting], and I'm just like "Ohhh." I have to go all the way there and I have to go through all of that to just come to school, or come to work or do anything related to the school. Or I go back home, like sometimes I'm really tired from school and I have to drive all the way there and do the line for like an hour waiting there."

Xochitl says that when he was driving in the regular lane, he was waking up at 4 am to be at class at 8 am. By the time he got to school he felt so tired and frustrated

he couldn't focus on academics. Mila also talks about a tiring schedule that caused her to quit her on-campus job:

I was exhausted all the time. I used to work at the library and get out at 1 am, because I was closing. Next day, I have to be here in the morning to go to classes and then work again in the library and ah, crazy. So, I just couldn't do it. I didn't have time for anything. I just got home and I couldn't do homework or study. If I was gonna do something, I had to be in school cause at home it just meant like, oh, die. Because I was just coming home to sleep, wake up, and then come back here.

These negative feelings about crossing came up in response to the question, "What is the worst thing about border commuting?" but not only that single response. The emotional and physical pains were pervasive across the student interviews, and came up in many responses throughout the interviews. Another type of pain that international student border commuters experience is a result of their interactions with CBP officers.

Power and Helplessness: Impotencia

Sometimes [CBP] were expecting something in the cars, they searched more, asking questions and blowing, doubling, our whole schedule. You get angry, you get frustrated. You just have to accept it, being nervous that I will lose my student visa. (Daniel)

Participants regularly brought up frustration with their interactions with Customs and Border Protection while crossing. They also brought up being deeply scared of

repercussions. As John says: “Anything can happen and I really don’t want to lose my status as a border commuter.” Ricardo comments about his experience with CBP:

They have a lot of bad officers there. They always give you a hard time with things that you know they’re wrong [about]. There’s no way you can tell them. If you tell them you’re just going to get in trouble...They make some very rude comments. You can’t do anything. You’re in a situation where you can lose your papers very easily. So, you don’t want to be arguing, or start something that looks like a fight, because then you might lose your rights to cross to the U.S. I’m really not willing to take that risk.

Several study participants mentioned the Spanish word *impotencia* while considering how to describe the feeling they get while crossing and interacting with CBP. Mila says: “[Border commuting] reminds me of a time when I wanted to do more stuff and I just couldn’t. I don’t know how to say it in English. *Impotencia*. Like you want to do something but you can’t.” The fear of losing their ability to cross based on a reaction to CBP makes student border commuters feel helpless. Ale says:

I can understand that sometimes they have to look through your papers, through your car, through everything. But I also feel that they think they have the power and they’re better than you and they can just do whatever they want. They can be like, I’m taking your visa and you’re out of the United States forever. And I’m not going to be able to do anything because they’re the authorities.

Neza mentions the word *impotencia* in Spanish too, and says, “You know that officers at the bridge can be a little bit abusive and you really cannot do anything. You

just need to suck it up.” Jaime says, “I had to face some very rude officers over the years. I was very helpless.” Twenty-two of the 23 interviewees described similar feelings.

Both Fernanda and Brian also use the same words “impotent” and “helpless” to describe their feelings. Brian also says, “border officials have the power...maybe they feel entitled to treat you like shit...you can’t say anything because they will take your visa away.” Similarly, Fernanda says, “because we have a student visa, we have to keep our mouths shut” and that she is afraid of repercussions. “It depends on the mood of the officer. If he’s in a bad mood he can take your SENTRI away. If he’s in a really bad mood, he can do anything.” Fernanda’s fear comes from experience, since she did get her SENTRI card taken away from her by a CBP officer. The officer was angry that she had something in her car that did not technically belong to her. She had to wait three days to retrieve it.

Most of the students I interviewed said they did not talk back to the officers, or had learned not to, while Sofi said she still struggled with wanting to speak up:

When you cross the border, they give you different information at different times and I'm like, I know you are giving me wrong information. No matter what they or you say, it is always your fault. And you can't ask why...I'm not a person that likes to stay quiet and don't say anything. So, I have a lot of problems with that.

Hiram, on the other hand, has learned a functional method of dealing with the trouble he gets from CBP officers:

It's something that you really are expecting. Like once you cross, you're like, some of them will not know what's he doing or what he's going to say to me. So, if I have a problem, I will ask for the supervisor. Every time I do that, because they're the one that know. So, I don't complain. I don't judge. I'm just like okay do whatever you want. Because if I get upset, or if I say something, it's going to be worse on me.

Daniel says that he goes through cycles of emotion related to his regular or irregular interactions with CBP.

I felt [apprehensive] many times. Because I always thought that I may respond back to them. I may do something that they think that they need to search me more. And I became more and more nervous that I will lose my visa. So, I always had that but I already overcame that. Every time that I start doing the commute after having a period that I will come to the United States not that often, it will come also that adjustment until I say well, they already know me. I'm not doing anything wrong.

Hiram and Daniel's statements reflect the feelings of impotence and helplessness, but also a sense of growing accustomed to the feelings. The below section expands further on that latter piece of the experience.

Getting Used to It: Adaptation

[The worst thing is] just having to wait on the bridge. But you get used to it. Sometimes, friends ask me, how can you deal with waiting like an hour or so to cross? And I'm like, you get used to it. (David)

Every international student border commuter I interviewed for this study reported feelings of stress and nearly all reported feelings of helplessness about the crossing to study on a daily basis. However, many of the participants also indicated that they had adjusted to the process. Eighteen of the 23 interviewees mentioned adjusting or getting used to border commuting during their interview or that things were better for them now than when they started. As Alexander says: “I was so nervous. I didn’t know anything. But then I became accustomed to [commuting]. I know the protocol...I don’t have anything to fear.”

Like Alexander, other commuters often discussed a certain difficulty of border commuting, accompanied with the additional reflection that they were more used to that difficulty now than before. For example, Lorenzo feels comfortable with the complexity of border commuting now: “It was a little bit complex at the beginning. Once you get used to it, it is pretty easy.” Similarly, Fernanda answers what being a border commuter means to her about her adjustment to the process: “[Being a border commuter] requires patience and it’s a matter of getting used to the routine. It’s a hard transition but I’m used to it. I know the process and how it works.”

Daniel talks about normalizing the experience of crossing and the related emotions about crossing after some time:

This is normal for us. We were born and raised in Juárez, so we have to do whatever it takes to get to El Paso to study...But after a while, if you see how long the line is, if you see the officer that you already know is going to take longer, you just ride it and accept the frustration and discrimination at the

bridge...Once you learn your way around, there are going to be very few times that you will be surprised.

While 22 of 23 participants mention “getting used to” border crossing in some way, some actually pinpoint particular skills or practices they’ve developed as part of that adjustment. Xochitl recognizes development of time management skills through getting used to being a student border commuter: “[College] was hard for me at first... it’s hard to go and ask everyone. At the beginning you’re all nervous because you don’t know what’s the next step. I would arrive late to my classes so I had to do better. I learned time management... [and] I can find information for myself.”

Pamela also mentions learning to manage her time and reflects on positive aspects she sees of commuting and crossing by foot for her studies.

After three years, I am balanced. I know the people [at the bridge]; I know how to walk; I know how to feel. There are bad parts. I can’t stay at school too late because I need to go back. Whenever my friends are going out I can’t because I have to get up. I lose a lot of time in my day, maybe two to three hours. But I also like it and got used to it. You save a lot of money. I get to see my family every day. I exercise while I walk [across the bridge] every day. I use the time to think about stuff that I have to do, or even read a book or study. I learned to manage my time quite well. I also have less distractions at home then when I used to live [in El Paso] with my roommates. And I think I’ve done better academically.

Since the sheer time spent waiting to cross and the variability of the wait time for students is a major component of the experience border commuting, the SENTRI (Express) pass is mentioned often. Most drivers got SENTRI passes sometime during their studies since they began commuting, and remark about the commuting experience being markedly improved with the speed of their crossing. Roberto mentions this, but also shows how his thought process about time spent crossing became more optimistic even before he got SENTRI:

In the beginning, it was like, “Oh, I’m going to be at the bridge maybe one hour, maybe more. It’s going to be hot. I’m going to spend money, there’s gas, there’s time and there’s other stuff.” But after some time, you get used to that, so it’s like, “Woo, I only took like forty-five minutes in the bridge. Like two months ago, I just got my express lane on the Santa Fe bridge. So right now, it’s just like five minutes to cross so it’s way better.”

Mila reflects on the changes she’s experienced since she began border commuting and says she has improved her character through the process of commuting as well.

At the beginning I had no confidence. It was something new; it was intimidating; I was eighteen with bad English. The first year I didn’t know what was happening; my dad sent me there so I was there. There were times that I was like, “Hell, no, It’s not worth it.” I was always tired and thought maybe I should stop. But my dad already put a lot of money in the first year and he started doing bad [health-wise.] So, I said, “He wants me to continue, I already started, I have to finish it...” [Being a border commuter] makes things harder, but it makes

me work harder and it helps me build my character and become better. I learned more from my fellow students about the advantages I could get. Now I help my friends, keep them close, advise them, and save them the difficult times I had.

Mila's account shows that she grew acclimated to the experience of international student border commuting. She also exhibits self-reliance and resilience, which is the next theme to be discussed. Finally, she exhibits interest and action in helping others, the final theme in this analysis.

Self-reliance and Resilience: Strength

I didn't really have a problem [with academics] because if I had a class or an exam that I really need to go, I'd probably go to the bridge two hours earlier, just to make sure. Sometimes it was a problem because if there was no line, I had like two hours to kill here in Border University. But that's that. Yeah. I tried. (Luis)

While border commuters clearly articulated that they could "get used to it," many also presented concepts related to self-reliance and resilience. Interview questions prompted the participants to provide ideas for additional governmental support and additional school support for their commuting experiences. Yet in their interviews, student border commuters regularly reflected substantially more thinking about their own responsibility to succeed in the experience. Twenty-two of 23 interviewees expressed at least one concept that demonstrated self-reliance or resilience. The excerpts in this section are all longer because the statements that reflect self-reliance and resilience are more complex.

An example is what Hiram says about being late to school due to crossing:

You can find a way to be on time. To me, it's all my responsibility. I will not blame the officers on the bridge, because I know how they are, and I need to deal with it. I should always expect to be earlier in case something happens, because I know this has happened before...It's up to the student. It's not a problem with the border.

Hiram rejects the idea that professors should be more lenient towards border crossers.

Ricardo would agree:

I haven't had much support from [the university] because I haven't needed it. I had a problem with one professor out of many professors for being late. I'm not complaining about that; it wouldn't be fair to other [students.] It was my fault actually. Not his or others. I know if I enroll, I've got to be there early and that's something that's logical.

Roberto also makes a statement that shows self-reliance and a no excuses approach:

You just have to be organized and set priorities. You will always have time, you can just waste it on other stuff that isn't necessary...I don't think that there's a point to say, "I didn't get an A because I was a border commuter." I don't think that's real.

A consistent theme emerged that it is up to the border commuters themselves to solve problems, and that it is not up to the school or government to solve all the problems. The international student border commuters feel their responsibility is key to be able to take advantage of the opportunity that border commuting presents. Says

Daniel:

We have to invest time. If we're five or ten minutes late, that represents a half hour more in line on the bridge [due to schedule]. I sometimes missed classes but then I made it a point not to do that, I just have to be earlier...I think we are lazy in general. We have to overcome that obstacle. We have to be more prepared. It's just the way it is. It's the cost or the price that we have to pay to continue working and still live in Juárez.

Carlos speaks expressly about the opportunity he receives through border commuting and self-reliance:

I didn't get the good things about being a border commuter at first, because I wasn't thinking about it as a teenager; I had no clue. But the location and opportunities here are great. The opportunities that you have are infinite. If you don't make something out of it, it's because of your fault, I believe. Of course, there are some places you cannot work if you are Mexican, but that's not the company's fault. You have to go to career fairs and ask employers if you can work there. Not one employer was rude to me. I'll be working when I graduate.

This statement shows tenacity because there is a general sense that employers are dismissive of international students, who require additional costs and resources to employ. Carlos refuses to let the challenge stop him from making employment connections.

Alexander commutes because "it's a tradition." He recalls how he started on his own journey to college and demonstrates a strong sense of self-reliance:

My father used to work and study here. My brother used to work and study at the university, and for two years he crossed every day. He finished his Bachelor's. The first time I came here, my father just opened the door from the truck, he kicked me, he said go and get information. Everything that I have here, my GPA, my scholarship, everything, I got it from searching and getting information and from my work.

Alexander also demonstrates his resilience through the advice he would give to potential international student border commuters.

If I have a friend trying to come to study here, I would like to tell him that he just keeps forward and doesn't listen to anybody. Just keep forward because everyone's gonna tell you that it's hard. Everyone is gonna tell you that you're gonna fail. They're gonna say, This class is very hard. Don't take it. Or they are gonna give you very bad advice. Don't listen to anyone and just keep forward. Things can be done but you have to investigate. Everything that you do here you have to investigate and then just keep forward. And never give up because there are times that I really want to say, "Oh, you know what, I'm done. I'm done with all this. And then I see the road that I have followed. And I say I want to be a combat medic. I want to join [Border University] and I really want to finish my major. And I say, I just keep forward. Don't give up. There are gonna be a lot of people saying that you're gonna fail. Tons and tons of people. Ignore it. Just keep forward.

Gabby advises a future border commuter to “be patient” as well as overcome adversity through appreciation and motivation:

Be really in love with the things that you’re gonna do cause you’re gonna suffer. You’re gonna pass things that you don’t wanna pass. You’re gonna be angry, you’re gonna be hungry, you’re gonna be hot, you’re gonna be everything. Upset. But, in the end, it will give you what you want. So, in order for you to be a successful border commuter, you have to be in love with being a student. You gotta be motivated. Cause if not, you’re not gonna make it.

The international student border commuters exhibit a strong sense of personal responsibility. They overcome the stress, time-burden, and loss of power they experience while commuting. The next theme discussed presents a possibility of why they are able to overcome the challenges; opportunity may be what drives them to succeed.

Sacrifice is Worth It: Opportunity

The outcome is better than the process. The benefits are way more than what you’re sacrificing. I know someday I will be thankful for doing this. That’s what drives me. I have a lot of opportunities right here. (Carlos)

Border commuters in this study were asked what the best thing about border commuting was. Many of them responded that the challenges they faced through commuting were worth the struggle, because they were benefiting from their educational opportunities in El Paso. Seventeen of 23 interviewees said something to this effect.

Gabby's below quote is lengthy, but speaks well to this theme, even explicitly. [Border commuting] allows better things through the sacrifice we do every day. I get to be more responsible and motivated. I understand what I want to do and why I am doing what I do now. I look back and see all the time that has passed, three years, and I see I have crossed the bridge every day just to get to school and I don't complain about that. It's amazing because I see that I really want to study here. I really want to be here....We appreciate it more when we get to class. You are thinking all the way to the campus about school, about those two hours in class that you want to pay attention to, to get the information. I used to take the bus three hours to cross and go to school and three hours to wait for the bus and come back because we had to wait for the bus. We did homework on the bus to use the time, because when you got home, it was too late to do anything except sleep and eat something. You appreciate everything you have. Even the food. You appreciate an orange. You don't do it when you have everything.

All the international student border commuters expressed appreciation for the education they are receiving or did receive at Border Colleges. David says:

I love being part of school here. I get to be grateful for what I have, because not that many people have the opportunity to come inside here. I mean, sometimes I complain since I don't work that I have to spend money on gas or the expensive books here, but it's really all positive. I have some friends that study at Juárez,

at good schools. When you see what they don't have, you realize how they invest better in schools here.

Luis appreciates that he gets to practice his English. While he studied English in Mexico, it's "different how the teachers try to teach" and to have everything in English and the professors always speak in English. Andreas also appreciates the English language learning, as well as cultural learning. He sees the benefit for his future employment prospects too.

If I get a job position here in El Paso, I will speak Spanish and English, which is good. If I go to the north for a job position, I speak Spanish, so I get a bit more salary. On the Mexican side, I speak English so I can be a manager...The cultural exchange that we have here also gives me a good background for my job. I have more cultural experience to contribute in meetings at work with people from China and Hong Kong. This kind of learning is not offered at the universities in Juárez. (Andreas)

Ale expresses the convenience of going to a different country and being able to study something not offered in Juárez, and says, "Even if I have to deal with all the line and the stress and the immigration things and all that stuff, I'm able to work, I'm able to study." Brian is a TA and values the health insurance he receives for his family, as his son just had surgery. He says being a border commuter is "a lot of pressure" but he reminds himself daily how it's worth it. "It's actually an investment...It's a sacrifice we have to make now for getting a job later."

Mila mentions in-state tuition program for Mexican nationals with financial need being paramount to her ability to study in the U.S.:

I'm happy with the State of Texas having the [in-state tuition program]. Without it, I would not have this huge opportunity for me to study here. This has changed me a lot and made me smarter. In Mexico in school, you learn a lot of calculus, math, but they don't make you read; they don't teach you how to write essays. Here I learn a lot more and it's easier to get a job. It helped me a lot in my personal life; it opened my eyes a lot. It's always been inside me to travel. I'm engaged to a Russian man and that wouldn't have happened studying in Mexico. A degree from here is going to help me a lot when I move abroad. I have put in a lot of effort, my dad's spent everything on school, and this is good for me. I'm going to finish this thing and I'm going to enjoy it as much as I can.

Lorenzo also compares the Mexican and U.S. educational systems and says in Mexico the teachers are "very serious and strict" while in the U.S., the teachers are more approachable and relaxed. "I knew studying here would be tough, but I like the challenge...the learning experience is excellent," he says. Roberto, a graduate student, says the best thing about commuting is taking advantage of the Border University labs and facilities, and also says in his experience studying in Juárez, there was a lot of turnover in the professors he had.

Ricardo also says the challenges are worthwhile:

It's very interesting to have a completely different experience studying than in Juarez. I'm very happy to be studying here. Even when I have to drive an hour

every day to school and I have to wait and I have to do a lot of paperwork, I really enjoy it. The school is cool. If I have an education from a U.S. school, it is better in my future for work. [Employers] recognize that you've been in an institution with a quality level of academic programs. Even if I don't end up coming to the U.S. to work, in Mexico having international experience on your resume is a good thing.

The theme that the "sacrifice is worth it" shows that while international student border commuters experience extreme hardship along their physical and academic journey back and forth between countries, they regularly reflect on the opportunity they have as a result of continuously overcoming the challenges in their path. In the next section, the international student border commuters recognize the benefit of being present in their back-and-forth activity.

Benefiting from Both Sides: Fronterizos

I explained this to my daughter when she was younger. She was like, "Okay, are we in Juárez or this is El Paso?" No, no. You see, the whole thing is a big city and it is just divided by this bridge. It's just a bridge and an imaginary line above the real world, which is all connected. (Andreas)

International student border commuters are one type of transborder student.

Being Anglo with weak Spanish proficiency, I was unaware of the terms *transfronterizos*, *transfronteriz@s*, *transfronterizx*, and even *transborder* when I collected the data for this study in June 2016. Andreas also chose to say the following meant border commuting to him:

Well, it means, I want to say one word in Spanish, which is *fronterizos*.

Fronterizos, for me, is a person that probably was born in the American side but was grown up in the Mexican side. So, for me this is a unique place where we can be both. We can be from one side to the other. And it's just a unique place. I don't know any other place in the world that happens and you feel the same feeling of, um, to be mixed. To choose what you want to be. That's what it means to me, *fronterizos*.

Andreas' definition of *fronterizos* matches many of the scholarly definitions of transborder students, even down to him specifying the person is born on the American side. Transborder students are mainly U.S. citizens in prior literature focused on the U.S. transborder context. It is remarkable he described his own meaning almost exactly like an academic definition.

Brian brings up linguistic fluidity, also mentioned in other transborder studies. It's interesting to be in two countries on the same day: going to Mexico and speaking Spanish, and then coming here and speaking English. Then you start speaking in Spanish and English combined. It adds to your whole self. You get to experience a really mixed culture. I find it really rewarding to experience both sides. You can see the duality of having a much higher income here in the U.S., and that there are actually good investments in public stuff like buildings and infrastructure. In Mexico, there's corruption and for example, they spent millions of dollars on this big huge X structure – we don't have money for that. But [Juárez] has come a long way from where it was, and to me, looks much better.

Comparisons between the two cities/countries are fairly regularly mentioned by the international student border commuters in this study, and often framed in light of the benefits studying in El Paso brings.

Sofi studied one semester in Juárez but came to study Biochemistry at Border University, because schools in Mexico do not offer that major at the undergraduate level. “You learn English there [in Mexico] but you really practice here. Talking, reading, new words, new topics. I really like both places...Each place has its certain things I really like.” Ale mentions that being able to study in a different country and go home to live with her family is a positive experience, and says, “These cities are like one city but they’re still different. It's a different culture; there’s different things to do here and there.”

Alexander appreciates diversity in El Paso:

I try to see the two cities, El Paso and Juárez, and see the difference. I see that El Paso offers a lot of opportunities. It changed my attitude. I can experience college here and also when I come back to Juárez and I can still live my life. There are so many people here; like El Paso has Muslims and people from all over the United States...I love to talk with veterans and Army people. “Oh, I went to Afghanistan, I went to Japan” - so much experience. I learn about other cultures and the culture here. But when I come back, I’m still living my life in Juárez with my friends and my family.

Marcos also appreciates being close to Mexican culture and food.

I have the opportunity to come here and to take all the advantages compared to Mexican universities...But I'm very used to my culture and I have the opportunity not to lose that part. If I want some tacos, I just can cross the border and get my tacos. If I live in Minnesota, I cannot get my tacos that fast. Here I can live bicultural.

Neza brings up learning to love the biculturality he experiences commuting.

I had this sort of negative stereotype - anti-gringo. Having the opportunity to study here and experience it a little more first-hand has changed [me]. I can understand both culture and the importance of this area better. I see the mixture of both [cultures] and all the connections that happen. I've learned to love that mixture.

International student border commuters "learn to love" both sides of the border in their commuting experience, despite the challenges they encounter. They also see the cultures more clearly. However, they still struggle to have their voices heard, which is the final theme discussed next.

Needing a Louder Voice: Help

I am one person talking and asking for the attention that I deserve. But I am talking for all the people who don't talk. Because there are a lot of people suffering from the same things. (Gaby)

Participants expressed their reason for participating in the interview was to be heard. They wanted to be heard not only for them, but for other people in their same

circumstance, and to help inform people. However, there also was a current of isolation and neglect running through some of the interviews.

Gabby also says she feels Border Community College does not care about international students and just sees their tuition dollars.

No one cares about us. We're like we don't exist here. We're not important. Even when we are a very important part here, we are like not existing. And it is worse because we don't exist here and we don't exist over there. Since we're not studying over there, the [Mexican] government doesn't care about us. Since we are not citizens, the [U.S.] government doesn't care about us. So, we are like non-existing people.

Marcos says something similar about inclusion at Border University. "Sometimes it's hard here. [Border University] says they like international students but they don't even hear what they want. They're like 'We have international students. Now share with us your culture.' But that's it."

Fernanda says that people don't understand the border culture, like her close friend in South Carolina who has never been to a border before. "I feel like people don't really know how this goes." Mila agrees:

There's a lot of things that nobody knows and that even Mexican students, but they were born in [El Paso], so they're American but they're actually Mexican. They don't know and they're like, "Why are you doing this? Or why are you not doing this?" And nobody knows. My boss at work sometimes doesn't

understand all of our situations. Being an international student is very taboo, I think.

Neza says, “We are a group of students that have [our] own needs and we’re different from a typical student.”

International student border commuters want to speak out about their experiences and educate others. They want to educate both fellow commuters and others external to the experience. In the following chapter, the themes associated with the international student border commuter student experience are revisited along with existing theories and emerging literature related to transborder students.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the study. Twenty-three participants’ demographic information was summarized, and each participant was profiled in an individual description. The seven themes describing the essence of the international student border commuter experience emerged as:

1. Waiting on the Bridge: Stress
2. Power and Helplessness: *Impotencia*
3. Getting Used to it: Adaptation
4. Self-reliance and Resilience: Strength
5. Sacrifice is Worth it: Opportunity
6. Benefit from Both Sides: *Fronterizos*
7. Needing a Louder Voice: Help

The themes were then presented in detail, and in conjunction with corresponding quotations from the international student border commuter participants. The following chapter will provide further discussion and analysis in light of emerging transborder research, recommendations, and conclusions.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Introduction

I collected the international student border commuter experience data in June 2016. Since then, developments in politics, social justice, and public health occurred. Further research into the transborder student experience has also taken place, but still not specifically focused on international student border commuters. This chapter provides updates on the local context, and additional analysis of data I collected, using emerging literature in the field, as well as existing border-related theories. I present a summary of the study, general conclusions, and limitations of the conclusions. Future research recommendations are provided, as well as recommendations for Border Colleges and governmental agencies. These recommendations are generated by both the student participants in this study, and myself as the author.

Study Positionality

This study's interviews took place in El Paso during June 2016, before Donald Trump was elected the 45th president of the U.S. in November 2016. The study also took place before the August 2019 El Paso shootings, and before the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020. It is important to understand findings in the correct context given the later happenings. In the below sections I provide some thoughts about how international student border commuters' experience may have changed.

The Trump Presidency

A year earlier than this study's data collection, in June 2015, Trump had announced his candidacy for presidency, referring to Mexico as "sending people that

have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists" (Reilly, 2016). His campaign promise included building a "great wall" between Mexico and the U.S. (Reilly, 2016).

During the time of the interviews, Donald Trump was already on the mind of participants, and some mentioned him by name. When asked why she wanted to participate in the interview, Pamela says: "Donald Trump speaks a lot about how the border goes and how border patrol are really chill about everything, the situation. And it's not really like that. I just want people to know what the real thing is." Marcos: "I don't know what's gonna happen if Trump's win. I'm not gonna cross a wall."

In January 2017, after Trump's election and inauguration, he announced the Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Enhancements Executive Order, which authorized construction of a larger wall along the Mexico-U.S. border. Detention camps separating parents and children were created to detain undocumented immigrants both very close to El Paso, and in El Paso itself. While international student border commuters were not directly impacted by Trump's anti-immigrant policies, the hostile socio-political environment of the presidency is very likely to have caused additional stress for international student border commuters.

Researchers conducting study on transborder students post-Trump's election may help shape a hypothesis about the impact on this study's population. Gaxiola Serrano, a transborder researcher who was collecting data directly following Trump's election, refers to transborder students feeling the need to:

...account for their existence as individuals living, navigating, and surviving a highly politicized U.S.-Mexico border....continuously find[ing] themselves making sense of their identities and traversing their education during a sociopolitical time filled with anti-immigrant policies, a racist nativist Latina/o/x rhetoric, and a heightened border enforcement (Gaxiola Serrano, 2019, p. 128).

Falcón Orta, publishing in 2018, said, “student collaborators discussed how President Trump’s political attacks on Latinas/os/x have produced fear and anxiety but have also brought some of the community closer together” (p. 162). In addition, Mendoza observed that following Trump’s election, several participants dropped out of the transborder student interviews used in his research study (2019). Mendoza noted:

Some participants displayed concerns about the study due to the current political climate in the nation. At times participants appeared to hesitate in their responses, mainly when dealing with questions about residency, citizenship, and family status. (2019, p. 32)

These transborder studies of Mendoza, Falcón Orta, and Gaxiola Serrano were focusing on U.S. citizens and permanent residents. We can only hypothesize that the international student border commuter experience during the Trump presidency included the same concerns, or worse, until future research occurs. According to a Border Community College official, “nobody felt welcome” during the Trump era, and enrollment numbers dropped in general. At Border University, overall Mexican international student numbers dropped by 16.5% between Fall 2017 and Fall 2021

(CIERP, n.d.), and Border Community College lost a substantial number of students too, both during the Trump presidency and pandemic (personal communication, 2022).

The El Paso Shootings

In August 2019, a gunman shot and killed 23 people and injured 23 others at the Walmart in El Paso. The shooter had an anti-immigrant and nationalist manifesto. The shooting was the deadliest attack on Latinos in modern American history (Vargas & Juárez, 2020). This tragedy and aftermath did not directly impact most international student border commuters. However, this incident very likely had negative psychological effects on the community members, including this study's population, and a potential chilling effect on cross-border enrollment.

George Floyd's Murder

In May 2020, a police officer murdered George Floyd, which resulted in national and international protests for racial equality. This could have led to additional reflection by border commuters about racial profiling and their own experiences, and either thinking of similarity or difference between the experiences of Black and Hispanic people. Finally, it could have caused transborder students to question notions of authority, speak up for themselves more, be more vigilant about not accepting racial discrimination, and be more likely to protest. However, these are all unstudied hypotheses. International student border commuters, in particular, while possibly more aware of the inequity and incorrectness of their treatment at the hands of CBP officials, may have been further frustrated by their powerlessness because of continued fears about their visas being revoked by CBP.

COVID-19

COVID-19 had direct impacts on student border commuter experience. In March 2020, the public health situation became so deteriorated that lockdowns were implemented in the U.S. The border closed to everyone except essential travelers, which included international student border commuters. However, when the schools went fully online for pandemic reasons, some international border commuter students were turned away from entering the U.S., because CBP felt they did not have a reason to enter (Border Colleges staff personal communication, 2022). Many students still needed to access campus for various reasons, like going to the library.

The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) arm of the Department of Homeland Security issued numerous iterations of policy guidance for international students during COVID-19. This caused confusion about what rules to follow for all international students, including border commuters. The guidance also caused panic in July 2020, when updated policy required international students to depart the U.S. if enrolled in online coursework. This guidance version was later overturned in a lawsuit filed by M.I.T. and Harvard. Still, concerns and heightened fears, as well as confusion, remained for international students well beyond that guidance being rescinded.

In 2021, the El Paso Times reported on long waits for pedestrian student commuters, focusing most on high schoolers, and that the Paso del Norte region ports-of-entry were to reopen student lanes, which had closed in 2019. Also in November 2021, COVID-19 vaccines became mandatory to enter the U.S. This caused confusion for CBP, and delays (Border Colleges, personal communication, 2022). At

airports, the airlines are responsible to screen passengers for vaccines prior to boarding, but at land ports-of-entry, only the CBP is present to handle the burden.

Policy Developments

In 2015, the Department of State stopped issuing F-3 visas. The SEVP (Student Exchange Visitor Program) contacted all schools located along the Northern and Southern borders that lie within the regulatory requirement for hosting border commuter international students - 75 miles from the border. SEVP advised schools that border commuters should be issued F-1 visas and I-20s rather than F-3. However, the part-time enrollment status for border commuters remained possible, and schools still distinguish between international student border commuters and non-commuters by inputting living expenses or not in SEVIS. Part-time border commuter I-20s are still issued semester by semester, so the amount of continued paperwork for both the institution and the student remains high, and possibility for confusion or missing deadlines remains consistent with the past. Border Colleges School Officials note that CBP officers still grant F-3 classification from time to time, despite SEVP's announcement F-3 students should no longer exist and no more F-3 visas being issued by the DoS.

Data Developments

In 2017, Orraca, Rocha, and Vargas used Mexico's 2015 Intercensal Survey to describe students who live in Mexico while studying in the U.S, and search for related factors associated with their transborder activity. According to the researchers, this quantitative study is the first to use statistics and a national dataset to explore

transborder study. Their findings indicated, “Cross-border students are mainly U.S.-born and concentrated in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez” (Orraca, Rocha, & Vargas, 2017, p. 389). Additionally, transborder students have stronger ties to the U.S. than local students. Specifically, 81.0% of cross-border students were born in the U.S. compared to just 5.4% of local students in Mexico.

Orraca et al. also found that 1.9% of all students living along the Mexico-U.S. border were transborder students, or nearly 40,000 students (2017). In Ciudad Juárez, there are 7,648 transborder students total (1.8% of the population), with 1,708 University-level transborder students, and 71 grad students. Most students are at the K-12 level. They found correlations with transborder study and the following variables: age; household income; and having someone else in the household born in the U.S. and/or cross-border working. The researchers hypothesize that students commute to the U.S. due to the perceived higher quality of the education system with the goal of eventually transitioning to working in the U.S (Orraca et al., 2017).

In 2018, Rocha Romero and Orraca Romano published similar quantitative research about transborder students in Spanish, also based on the 2015 Intercensal Survey. According to the researchers, what made collecting this data about transborder students possible is that for the first time in history, the 2015 census asked questions about where the student resides and what country they are studying in. This made the research possible, where they asked the following questions: 1) How many transborder students are of Mexican origin; 2) What circumstances allow transborder study; and 3) How do those born in Mexico and those born in the U.S. compare?

Only 1.1% of people born in border regions of Mexico become transborder students at any level. They find there are 31,749 U.S. citizen transborder students and 7,850 born in Mexico total. It is unspecified how many born in Mexico are non-immigrant international students. The researchers hypothesize that the reason why Ciudad Juárez has the highest number of students is because of the lower cost and better access to education in the El Paso, Texas region in comparison to other regions (Rocha Romero & Orraca Romano, 2018).

Rocha Romero and Orraca Romano also find that being born in the U.S, speaking English, having high family income, having commuters in the family, and having good grades are all factors to be able to access transborder higher education. Transborder students born in Mexico come from higher income households than transborder students born in the U.S. Rocha Romero and Orraca Romano state:

Haber nacido en México y estudiar en Estados Unidos está condicionado principalmente por los altos ingresos, estos estudiantes transfronterizos tienen los ingresos más altos, incluso por encima de los nacidos en aquel país. Este grupo es parte de una élite económica, a la que las limitaciones de la frontera política afectan poco o nada. Sorteán el cruce fronterizo, y rentan en periodos escolares. Tres estudiantes comentaron que pueden estudiar en Estados Unidos porque su familia tiene muy altos ingresos. (2018, p. 123)

Being born in Mexico and studying in the U.S. is mainly conditioned by high income, these transborder students have the higher income, even above those of the ones born in that country [U.S.]. This group is part of an economic elite,

an elite to which border policy limitations impact little or nothing. They sort out the border crossing and they rent in school periods. Three students said that they are able to study in the U.S. because their families have high income.

(personal translation, 2018, p. 123)

Assuming this applies to international student border commuters is problematic. Those three students interviewed for this study were not international student border commuters. Rather, they were full-time international students residing somewhere inside the U.S. The renting in school periods statement shows that the students are not true transborder commuters. I would argue that border policy limitations absolutely impact international student border commuters. I would question if the international student border commuters are truly part of an economic elite. "Sorting out the border crossing" is challenging and requires skills, as this study's findings demonstrate.

Themes Discussion and Analysis

The findings of this study will be analyzed in the below sections, using the most recent emerging literature on transborder students, conducted post-study data collection. I revisit the seven themes I isolated from the participant transcript coding. The emerging transborder literature published after the data collection period serves to provide a lens to analyze my findings with.

Waiting on the Bridge: Stress

Previous literature on transborder students establishes that the long wait time at the border is a regular challenge faced (Bejarano, 2010, Relaño Pastor, 2007, Falcón Orta, 2018). This study's findings are in line with the previous findings. International

border commuter students report inability to engage fully in academic life due to the time spent commuting. They also report an intense amount of stress associated with the crossing. Says Carlos:

All the time that you have to spend...It involves a lot of sacrifice, in monetary aspects, in social aspects, time. It's stressful sometimes when you're on the bridge. The line doesn't advance. You have to steer all the way there. The sun is staring at you. You cannot do anything. Just have to wait. Because that's what you have to do.

In 2022, Avalos published an article in which, through autoethnography and the researcher's own experience as a transborder commuter, exposes "the concept of temporal sequestration to better understand a pernicious form of border violence that is often omitted in presentist accounts of waiting" (p. 124). Avalos says that most accounts of immigration related issues focus on the very active occurrences rather than the less-eventful waiting period. The researcher argues that waiting is a multidimensional practice: relational, learned, and "suffused with affect," and waiting prevents transborder commuters from reaching their "desired futures" (Avalos, 2022, p. 124, p. 125). International border commuters strive to reach their desired futures despite the daily wait.

Brian comments on waiting for CBP officers to issue his arrival permit (I-94):

The most annoying thing is when you want to get your I-94, this has happened to me four times. You go there and then you're like the only one in line. And you're like woo-hoo, I'm going to get out of here fast. And then there's like four

guys there and then they start drinking coffee and they start joking around. And there like one is eating a donut in the back. And soon you have spent an hour and a half.

The boredom, stress, and feeling of wasting time in this study are in line with the results of the small survey Rodríguez and Curlango Rosas conducted in 2013 of border commuter shoppers. However, the anxiety expressed by international border commuter students emerges much more strongly in this study's data. It makes sense that international student border commuters would feel more worry and a greater amount of stress, because non-immigrant students are not guaranteed to be able to enter the U.S., unlike U.S. citizens.

Several participants recounted stories that involved them being denied entry to the U.S. by CBP, so the fear reflects a possible reality. CBP does have the ability to deny entry, and not only that, they also can invalidate entry visas issued by the DoS. While none of the participants had their visa actually canceled by CBP, nearly everyone expressed fear of this. The section below further discusses the unique concerns of international student border commuters, who are reliant on the border officers' sole discretion.

Power and Helplessness: Impotencia

CBP officers have a high amount of personal discretion in making their decisions to admit or deny entry to foreign nationals. They have discretion to deny entry based on the immigration document validity of the border crosser. However, they

also can deny entry based on individual personal characteristics of the non-immigrant person attempting entry (Heyman, 2009).

According to Wonders (2006), border performativity is a dance between the individual crossing the border and the individual enforcing the border, the latter of whom is a Customs and Border Protection officer. “The border is enforced every time an agent makes the decision to allow or refuse border crossing” (Cordova, 2010, p. 51). This enforcement dance occurs on a daily basis for international student border commuters, who rely upon CBP’s favorable decision each time.

As I have previously established, international student border commuters consistently feel scared about their precarious immigration status, which they refer to generally as “visa.” They worry that the Customs and Border Protection officers can take it away. This is not an unfounded fear, because as previously stated, CBP can revoke their visa. Each time crossing, anything can happen in the border-performative dance between the international student border commuter and the CBP officer. In the worst case, this dance can result in being denied entry or having their entry visa in their passport canceled altogether.

John says:

It’s been really frustrating that there is never anyone you could talk to [about problems with CBP]. Because you would always lose the argument with an officer. No matter how much paperwork you have, how polite you are, how truthful you are in your statements. When officers are being rude or mean or outright insulting, or yelling, aggressive, where are you going to complain? You

have to accept it. I have to just nod, say yes and take it all, because there's nothing really I can do...If they're giving you hell, just take it. If you don't do that, then you definitely get in trouble, way more trouble.

Confusion or inaccurate statements made by Customs and Border Protection were reported regularly by this study's participants. CBP confusion, coupled with the "intense policing, racism, and a culture of impunity at the border" makes the experience of international student border commuting additionally stressful, beyond the time spent and physical experience of crossing (Falcón Orta & Monk, 2018, p. 284). The physical set up of primary and secondary inspection does not lend itself to checks for accuracy by supervisors:

Primary inspectors are operating in a relatively low-visibility decision making process (by themselves in glass booths), in one-to-one private interaction with passengers, in which superiors have little means to know if they are making mistakes or doing the job properly. (Gilboy, 1991, p. 575-576)

CBP is known to have high turnover rates in general, and in addition, the Paso del Norte region is also reported to be a training location for CBP officers (Personal communication with R. Garcia, February 2022). Every student in this study reported at least one issue related to CBP. These phenomena are likely to be correlated.

In 2020, Castañeda Pérez found being a current transborder student was positively related to experiencing negative emotions with CBP. The researcher defined transborder commuters as "a heterogeneous population that includes U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, and Mexican nationals who have the legal documentation

to cross the Mexico–U.S. border regularly for a variety of reasons.” In the Paso del Norte part of her study, being a student was also “positively associated with identifying groups that received worst treatment from CBP” (p. 9).

Castañeda Pérez explored factors in transborder commuters' perceptions of border policing as well as their level of political engagement by administering surveys at the Tijuana-San Diego and Juárez-El Paso ports of entry to pedestrian border commuters. Note that this study's international student population was included in her sample of pedestrian crossings, but also many other U.S. citizens and green card commuters were included too. The results showed that the commuters with higher social status were more prone to hold negative attitudes towards border policing and those who held the most negative attitudes were more likely to feel excluded yet also most politically engaged.

I would hypothesize that the international student border commuters are not very politically active, due to the concerns about their visa status. However, I do think this study's participants are prone to hold negative attitudes towards CBP based on the negative experiences relayed in all 23 interviews. Castañeda Pérez mentions social status correlates to more negative views of CBP - it is not clear what social status the international student border commuters hold, although I will discuss later in this study about economic status.

Returning to Wonder's border performativity concept (2006), how the border is performed can be interpreted in multiple ways. If performativity is interpreted in the dance process between the enforcer and the crosser, the process is more performative

for U.S. citizens than for non-immigrants. U.S. citizen transborder students absolutely may encounter some challenges related to crossing the border, or mistreatment from CBP. However, U.S. citizens will be afforded entry, regardless of their personal characteristics, based on their citizenship rights.

If performativity is interpreted as the actions between the enforcer and crosser, the crosser indeed performs. Nearly all the participants in the study discussed that they acted a certain way to ameliorate the chance of a positive outcome in their interaction with CBP. I argue that there is performativity in the actions of international student border commuters in order to successfully cross, but there is no performativity in the process of admission or denial of entry, since the outcome could go either way (entry or no entry).

Relaño Pastor says “transfronterizos find ways to destabilize the power of the border when, for example, they resist the questioning of their linguistic and national identity by border authorities” (2007, p. 266). However, Relaño Pastor’s group is all U.S. citizens who have the power to resist questioning by CBP. The power is only established through their citizen status which affords them entry regardless of their behavior.

In discussion of border performativity in a study of U.S. citizen border crossers, Cordova states, “this performance becomes naturalized and expected even though transborder commuters are aware of the sacrifices and difficulties they experience” (2010, p.35). Indeed, the non-U.S. citizen border crossers in this study also expressed a concept related to the commuting process becoming naturalized and expected, or that they get used to it.

Getting Used to It: Adaptation

Adaptation may be a more appropriate academic term for “getting used to it.” In a 2013 Master’s thesis study on U.S. citizen San Diego-Tijuana transborder students, Falcón Orta writes:

Students adapted to the obstacles of their environment by eliminating the border wait, managing their time, planning for unexpected circumstances, and intentionally blending into the American and Mexican societies. Through this process students intentionally changed the way they acted and thought in order to overcome the obstacles of their environment. (p. 76)

A transition exists in the experience of being an international student border commuter as well, according to this study’s results. Fernanda, an international student border commuter in this study says, “I guess [commuting] helped me mature faster...I guess that’s a positive thing.”

Falcón Orta published another article in 2018, with Harris, Leal, and Vasquez, which was a study on four transborder Mexican-American men students’ identities in a San Diego community college; the researchers propose “multicultural gender-aware practices to advising” them (p. 73). More importantly to this study’s analysis, they found one of two strengths of these transborder students to be “adaptability to cultures and societies in both nations” (Falcón Orta, Harris, Leal & Vasquez, 2018, p. 76). Again, this adaptability finding relates to the findings of my present study.

Finally in 2021, Falcón Orta’s dissertation again found a theme related to adaptability. The researcher used photovoice constructivist grounded theory to come

up with five themes about the U.S. citizen transborder identity in San Diego-Tijuana.

“We have to adapt to live in these situations’...illustrates how Transfronterizx students developed skills, knowledge, thinking patterns and performances, during their transborder interactions and academic trajectories as necessary in adapting to challenges” (Falcón Orta, 2021, p. 124). The adaptable trait is also found in international student border commuters in this study. Marcos says:

It depends on the way you want to see it. Because in some way, [border commuting] can make you more organized. Like, I have to wake up at this time. I have to go back at this time, because if not the line’s gonna be crazy. So, I have to finish all my stuff. I have to do this, this, and this before I leave. I have to bring this back. Like it makes you think what you’re gonna do more precisely and everything.

According to Falcón Orta, the transborder commuters first understand their environment, and then develop skills for adapting (2021). Falcón Orta introduces the term “BorderHacks” to describe some of the “strategies and performances” to improve the border commuting experience (p. 128). The international student border commuter study participants displayed a few examples of BorderHacks of their own. John has developed an academic solution:

I started doing clever things like turning text to speech to listen to my class books while in line. Listening to a computer science book is not an easy thing to do. Especially because of the code and all the special characters and things like

that but, you know, you start optimizing your time to cope with all of the time that you lose doing that.

Neza also demonstrates optimizing his time:

I think there's more benefits [to commuting] because I live in the cheapest place I can. You can take advantage of situations, like if I know I need to be on the bus, I do my readings. I try to look at the positive.

The BorderHack is doing readings on the bus, but the optimism about it shows further personal development. Neza shows resilience as well, which is a part of the next theme discussed.

Self-Reliance and Resilience: Strength

In this study, international student border commuters referenced their own responsibility and skills being important to navigate the challenges of daily crossing. In 2017, Cueva Esquivel looked at “knowledge, skills, and talents” used by eight transborder commuters who hold U.S. citizenship and high school diplomas in the San Diego-Tijuana area. The study resulted in nine themes, two of which were “Resilience and Adversity” and another which was “Transfronteriz@ Agency.” These themes are in line with this study’s findings.

Cueva-Esquivel finds that obtaining a transborder high school diploma was: ...at the expense of many family economic and socio-emotional sacrifices, as well as depending on a network of connections with family members on both sides of the border, while dealing with adverse conditions that they cannot control on either side of the international border. (2017, p. 207-8).

International students' conditions are different from transborder U.S. citizens. They do not necessarily have family on both sides of the border that they can depend on. In addition, the "adverse conditions they can't control" are heightened as compared to U.S. citizens. International students' precarious non-immigrant international student status allows no guarantee of being let into the U.S.

Cueva Esquivel also finds "[t]he major themes of this research involved feelings of isolation, ennui (boredom), stigma, raw resilience, struggles and border hardships, physical endurance, and a clear explicit vision of what is needed and what is wanted" (2017, p. 233-234). This study had a lot of intersecting themes. International student border commuters, as well as U.S. citizen border commuters, suffer from the commute but are determined to succeed. They have to employ their knowledge and skills in order to succeed. "Transfronteriz@s have a unique worldview and a tool box to "fix" the situations that arise in their unique Transfronteriz@ style" (Cueva Esquivel, 2017, p. 233-234). Cueva Esquivel continues,

In regards to the theme of "Resiliency and Adversity", Transfronteriz@ participants expressed their commitment [resilience] to adapting to the binational sociopolitical turbulence that exists in the Tijuana-San Diego regional context, while learning to always be flexible to any unexpected event, situation, or condition. Of importance here is that Transfronteriz@s have learned to construct different ways of dealing with people on both sides of the international border, as well as interpreting the socio-political tensions of the two worlds adjacent to the borderland. (2017, p. 236)

Cueva Esquivel argues the Transfronteriz@s accumulate cultural capital, as do other past researchers on transborder students. “Our data shows how transfronterizos accumulate cultural capital as border-crossers, which empower themselves across national, racial and class lines” (Chávez Montaña, 2006, p. 10, cited in Relaño Pastor, 2007, p. 267). From this study’s findings, international student border commuters also accumulate capital in their crossing experience as they adapt and exhibit personal responsibility and resilience. But they cannot be fully empowered without U.S. citizenship.

Some of this study’s participants mentioned specific learning from “the bridge.” Says Lorenzo,

And you learn from the bridge actually. Just from the people that are there. You even know which lanes not to use. Or what’s happening. Sometimes you see a collision on the bridge. I once saw these two guys fighting. They got out of the car and started fighting. And then they jumped back in and continued the line. They started fighting so all the lines stopped and didn’t move. Just seeing the fight...The learning that goes in on the bridge. Yeah. Like I said it’s like a small, very small community but you actually learn from others. Just by standing there because you see, for example, the people that sell candy, water, they have like their own language between them. And they know that if they go beyond the U.S. border point they cannot, they can be arrested. So, they go anyway because sometimes the line goes all the way back there. But they have their own language and sometimes they whistle or they do stuff and they run right

back. So, you like always getting entertained just by seeing the people. How they interact. Well, that's how I do it. When you're coming across every day, you see the kids are coming to preschool, elementary and they walk. Then I know that they're going to grow up and eventually cross using their own cars. It's just a way of life; I know that this will only continue and be bigger and bigger.

Lorenzo's story is a literal description of learning from the bridge while observing the transborder community in action. His statement, "It's just a way of life" is a simple yet profound description of the transborder lifestyle. More abstract concepts related to learning and knowledge and the border also exist.

Bejarano studied Mexican American students who lived on the U.S side of the border and visited family in Mexico (2010). Bejarano brings up the concept of "border rootedness" which is not very clearly defined beyond the following (italics are mine):

As border citizens they see few options but to live day-to-day with the difficulties of balancing home, family, work, culture/cultural production, self-identity, life experiences, memories, and their overall, '*border rootedness*' and struggle for justice (p. 393)...They use 'transformative resistance' by moving across policed locations refusing to be limited across space and local place. They also transcend their rights' infringements by leaving the local and revolutionizing their experiences by going to college away from home, and using their resilience and '*border rootedness*' to surpass the manifestations of violence they confront...These young immigrant students engage their 'border rootedness' for their survival and resist by traversing social, cultural, legal,

academic and linguistic borders. They learn what their rights are and begin to assert the few rights they can practice...By confronting these forms of violence with organic and local knowledge bases through *border rootedness* and transformative resistance, youth learn to transcend concrete boundaries and meet head-on boundary reinforcers forming empowering strategies that are subtle but imperative (p. 397).

I would argue that border rootedness is something that international student border commuters experience or manifest. However, transformative resistance is not so assured. Non-immigrant international student border commuters are not empowered to resist against the manifestations of violence they confront, if violence in the day-to-day border crossing with CBP is under discussion. However, in the longer term, over time they do overcome immense challenges to further their education.

Sacrifice is Worth It: Opportunity

International student border commuters recognize that their efforts pay off, or at least they hope that they will. According to other transborder researchers, U.S. education increases language skills, bicultural knowledge, networks, and competition in the labor market, in both Mexico and the U.S. (Chávez Montaña, 2006; Cordova, 2010). According to another researcher, the rate of pay and likelihood of future employment in the U.S. should increase with transborder study (Orraca et al., 2017). Future longitudinal study on both international student border commuter and U.S. citizen employment outcomes should occur.

Cordova also brings up the idea of “*superación*” or bettering oneself. “Superación encompasses economic motivations but is much more than the ability to

subsist, it includes the desire to have more life chances and dignity in your own life (Cordova, 2010, p. 110). Superación is relevant to the international student border commuters, who struggle through the commuting experience in order to achieve their educational and career goals. In this aspect there is little difference between U.S. citizen and Mexican national transborder student experience.

One of Falcón Orta's 2021 dissertation themes was "*Las Ganas de Salir Adelante*." To my understanding, this is hard to translate to English. It could be considered as moving forward, or getting out of a tough situation. It would not be used for someone who was already successful accomplishing something more, so it implies that students are in a tough or low place beginning with the transborder activity. This description aligns fairly well with this study's findings for international student border commuter students, given that international student border commuters overcome much in their educational journey.

According to Cueva Esquivel, "[p]erhaps there is a halo effect from the powerful idea of the American Dream on Transfronteriz@s, where all hardships are interpreted as 'hard work', and as a necessary condition for the achievement of the Transfronteriz@ Dream. (2017, p. 241). The theory of immigrant optimism applies here (Kao and Tienda, 1995). International student border commuters, as well as other transborder commuters as seen in other research, believe that their hard work will pay off. But it is not clear what impact their experience actually has on their future career and life trajectory. Future study must explore this topic to determine whether their sacrifice truly does pay off.

Benefit from Both Sides: Fronterizos

Some researchers find that being a transborder student makes people feel like they don't belong to any place (González et al., 2012, Kleyn, 2017). This finding matches Mila's account in this study:

The worst thing was that I was, I felt like I didn't belong anywhere. I was not in Juárez ever because I just got to sleep there. But I was not here [in El Paso] either. Because I was not doing anything...I was always exhausted. I couldn't commit to anything. Neither to my life there or my life here, because you're never here or there, just going back and forth.

However, researchers also find that transborder students may have a bicultural identity that is enhanced by the border crossing experience (Zentella, 2009, Relaño Pastor, 2007). According to Relaño Pastor, "transfronterizos are not trapped between 'acá or allá' [here or there]. They are from *acá y allá* [here and there], actively transcending borders and fronteras (2007, p. 275). In this study, Jaime also sees the reward of being in both places and identifies his ties on both sides of the border:

When you attend different schools in different countries, your vision and everything expands and you become more tolerant, and more understanding. It makes me more conscious of problems like racism...it has been very enriching...When people ask me, "Where are you from?" I say "Juárez-El Paso." It's the same community, even though we have to cross and there's this process to it. I have ties to both sides. I know these two cultures and they're part of me. I have all the American references and I also have all the Mexican references.

When I became a student, I felt a full part of both sides of the border. [I'm] not just an alien crossing; I am part of both communities.

Hiram feels like both cultures are inside him:

If you have that possibility to cross, it's heaven. I can see the difference in the culture and see how people think; there are different ways to think and solve problems. It helped me when I worked in Mexico City; I escalated exponentially. I did great because my ideas were a mixture of the two cultures. You can compare and you can choose which way is better.

Sofi was one of the only students in this study who articulated they felt like they didn't belong either place, while more students like Jaime and Hiram explained the benefit and their connection to both countries. Still for international students, they cannot be fully engaged in the U.S. because they lack the citizenship that gives them security in the U.S. to work, live, and resist.

Sarabia created a concept called "transborder citizenship" which is achieved by "middle-class Mexicans – with tourist visas to travel to the U.S...While they remain strongly rooted locally in Mexico, the border is not a limiting factor." (2016, p. 343). I would argue that the border is still a limiting factor for non-immigrants. Both international students and tourist visa holders are non-immigrants, and they have to go through the border performance with real outcomes. Non-immigrants have some access to the U.S., but it is not full access. Therefore, the border can be, and is, a limiting factor for those international student border commuters without U.S. citizenship.

Needing a Louder voice: Help

Related to the previous theme of self-reliance and resilience, international student border commuters often brought up helping others who were in similar commuting situations. This study directly asked the question, “What advice would you give others who were considering or preparing to engage in student border commuting?” Some of them told anecdotes about actual advice they’d given others. When asked why they participated in the study, many also said they wanted to help others who may be border commuting, and to speak out to improve conditions for future commuters.

Hiram says: “I think the first step we need to do is complain. Because we’re not criminals and, at some point, they treat us like that. And we need to leave the evidence.” Marcos recognizes that more transborder students exist besides international student border commuters, and wants to support them as well.

Even though they’re not international students, there are a lot of people who commute every day, you know. I have a cousin that’s an American citizen but she commutes every day. She lives [in Juárez] with her parents. And now she’s studying [in El Paso] and she’s commuting every day. They’re not only international students. So, they have to listen to us and to what we need.

The international student border commuters possess unique skills and knowledge they can impart to others, which could be called border teachings or border pedagogy. In 2019, Gaxiola Serrano’s dissertation explored how ten community college students made sense of their identities and college experiences while crossing

between San Diego and Tijuana. Eight participants were U.S. citizens and two were permanent residents. The two permanent residents resided in San Diego. Gaxiola Serrano developed a theoretical framework “*enseñanzas de la línea*” or the border teachings, as well as a name for her transborder student participants “*atravesados fronteristas*” or cross-border people. The concept of *enseñanzas de la línea* interested me, but I did not find the concept was developed robustly. Therefore, I did not apply it to this international student border commuter study.

A study by Falcón Orta and Monk has potential applicability to this study’s population. In this present study, a theme emerged that international student border commuters want to share their perspectives and have their voice heard. In 2021, the researchers engaged in participatory action research with eleven U.S. citizen transborder college students, and four faculty and higher education professional allies. Through the research they formed the Transfronterizx Alliance Student Organization (TASO) at San Diego State University (SDSU). TASO’s purpose is to “ignite change in higher education institutions through grassroots student-led initiatives focused on creating inclusive campus environments for Transfronterizx college students at the San Diego-Tijuana border region” (Falcón Orta and Monk, 2021 p. 297).

It appears that this student-driven organization could be of some use in El Paso, given how international student border commuters expressed needing a voice to help others. Falcón Orta also was the founding director of the Transborder Student Ally Program (TSAP) at SDSU. “TSAP is focused on creating a visible network of culturally competent allies in higher education institutions, high schools and communities in the

San Diego-Tijuana border region by educating faculty, staff, teachers, students and community leaders about the Transfronterizx student population” (Falcón Orta and Monk, 2021, p. 298). A similar program to TSAP would be of use to Border Colleges’ support of international student border commuters.

Additional Analysis: Alternate themes

The following sections are my own analysis which is distinct from the seven themes that emerged from my use of Giorgi’s phenomenological reduction technique. I call these areas of analysis “alternate themes,” that are interwoven amongst the seven main themes. I feel these five alternate thematic areas are important to present, in light of, and in addition to, the themes that resulted from the phenomenological analysis.

Campus Participation

For international student border commuters, border policing, as well physical distancing from campus, may exclude them from full participation in student life. Differential inclusion occurs when people are present in a landscape but do not fully belong (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012). This term often is used for immigrants in a new setting, but can be applied to commuter students, who are only partially engaged on campus.

In this study, differential inclusion applies to the university context on the border: students who belong at Border Colleges are those who live in El Paso and experience a student life closer to “traditional”, and those who are partially accepted, but who do not fully belong, are border commuters. Since border commuters have substantial travel time and responsibilities to return to in Mexico, it appears they do not and

cannot fully engage in the university community. Says Marcos, “I wish I could do all this stuff but I can’t. All the stuff that they do, I would like to go but I couldn’t.” Failure to participate in supportive programming and other academic resources outside of class due to the time spent crossing, may impact border commuters’ academic performance negatively.

In Cueva Esquivel’s study, the transborder students “felt alienated from the society, social groups, and the school’s social, cultural and academic life. They reported they often did not belong to any group with a definite function and role in American society. (2017, p. 206). In this study, Mila says, “The worst thing was that I felt like I didn’t belong anywhere.” On the other hand, a few of this study’s international student border commuters did demonstrate a high level of campus participation. Neza reports a list of many on-campus activities he participates in as a student commuter, and says,

If you're a commuter student, it's going to take a lot of time and that also depends on how you are personally. I'm very outgoing, but my first year it was just coming here, school done. Then I started spending more time due to my personality, because a lot of commuter students don't. I haven't seen them very involved.

Despite a few international student commuters in this study being very active on campus, more participants were less engaged. However, they generally wished otherwise, and often thought living in El Paso would lead to more participation. Luis says he thinks living on campus “might be very fun and everything. You get to know a

lot of different people and everything. I didn't have that experience. The only people I interact with were the guys in my class. That's it." Hiram agrees he would like to live on campus: "for me, it would be like the best thing." Andreas: "If you could live here, you are going to have more access to all these things that I didn't have access to."

Carlos doesn't feel comfortable doing much in El Paso other than what he absolutely has to do for school, and avoids socializing with friends there because he worries about something happening and him losing his status.

When I come to the United States, I'm not comfortable in doing almost anything. Because sometimes I feel that I don't know if I do something I might get stopped by a cop. Anything can happen and I don't really want to lose my status as a border commuter. So that's why when I come to El Paso, I just come for the thing that I have to do. I don't even party here. I mean I don't have a lot of friends here for the same thing. Because I don't like coming here and risking the opportunity to keep studying. Because I had a friend who, I mean, he always partied right here. He is from Mexico and he once got stopped, he once got busted by the police. And they canceled his visa. He's a very close friend of mine, and I was terrified that that might happen to me. So. Only on business. I have never consumed alcohol here in El Paso. Not even going to a club or dancing, anything. I don't really have a relationship here in El Paso and not many friends.

Differential inclusion also occurs in the workplace for international student border commuters. International students are restricted in the places they can work

inside the United States, and border commuter international students are even further restricted. Regular full-time F-1 students can work on-campus, for the institution where they study, automatically. Border commuter international students may not work on-campus automatically, and would need to wait one academic year after beginning study, which is when they qualify for special internship work authorization, which must be directly related to their field of study. Sofi tells a story about not getting a job.

I was thinking to get a job [at Border University]...I was talking to a professor and she told me that she could pick me, but it is a long process. It is not that [long] if you are a U.S. citizen. It is like actually they always ask for U.S. citizens. Always. The professor told me that they could make exceptions but it is a long process to do it. So, she offered me first like no payment. Just like practice. And after one semester, start my internship.

It appears in this anecdote that the internship work authorization paperwork was too complicated for the hiring professor so she offered the job without pay, which is actually a violation of federal labor law.

CBP Mistreatment

This study asked international student border commuters the question, “What is or was your experience with border security enforcement personnel?” Regarding treatment from CBP, Xochitl comments,

They ask things in a rude manner; they’re just not friendly at all. I don’t know if that’s the way to treat everyone like they’re criminals but it’s just not the way.

You cannot assume that a guy's criminal just because he's crossing the border...The officers feel like they're doing us a favor...I think they feel superior. Sofi comments that Mexican-descent border officials seem to be the harshest to her and other Mexican people crossing. "People who are Mexican but have the papers are the meanest." Roberto also says this in other words.

Most of the time they're good. Some people, I don't know, seem to have a Latino background and they sometimes try to be more strict and are more annoying. Sometimes they see their conduct as, I don't know the word, *déspota*, they feel like they're above people. Like superior, acting aggressive to an old confused man.

Fernanda has also noticed that CBP "are rude to older people, like they speak English when they know Spanish." Lorenzo has an interesting story to explain why he thinks Mexican-descent CBP are harder on Mexicans than Anglo CBP:

Actually, I've thought about this a couple of times during the bridge and I think just because, there's a saying in Spanish, it's like a small story. There's a basket full of American snails. And then there's another box with Mexican snails. The one that has the American snails has a lid on it and the Mexican ones don't have anything. Then there is a guy that passes by and asks, "Why, why is the American one has the lid?" "Oh, because these guys will help each other and they'll start getting out. And the Mexican ones, oh no, they see that [one] is going up and they'll pull it down." For example, if you're not with the right people, it doesn't matter if you're a good worker or not; you have to be a little bit

of a politician to get up in Mexico. To get a higher position, a better job, a better everything. So maybe that has to do [with it], because maybe they see us as people that are trying to get higher and they do not like it.

While it is unknown if this phenomenon is accurate, we do know that nine men in this study were handcuffed at some point in their international student border commuting career and all but one participant had been taken to secondary inspection at least once. For Jaime, this happened routinely. Apparently, a person with the same name as him was wanted as a criminal in the U.S.:

So, every time I crossed, the code they got was “A&D” - Armed and Dangerous. It was the worst time; some officers would know who I was and some wouldn't, so I would get handcuffed and searched, a lot of searching, it was very invasive. Basically, half the time I had to bear that, maybe once a week on average, sometimes more.

Marcos also feels like he gets extra trouble with CBP. “I always get that type of [negative] treatment. I don't know if I have a strange face or my name is very familiar. I don't know but it always happens to me.” He recalls one instance.

I was walking, although I normally drove. CBP was treating me hard like usual. They didn't even ask us; there was no consent for trying anything. They were just like, “Form this line. We're gonna do whatever we want to train our dog. He made me form a line with other people... someone put a little bag inside the pocket of one of the guys...the dog ran around our legs...They always treat me like they're doing me a favor to me. Like I'm letting you into my country and you

must do whatever I say...They didn't even ask for permission. And I was like, where are my human rights? But they always treat like we're dumb also. "Form this line. Don't move."...Treat me like a contributor, I pay taxes here; treat me like a normal guy, not like someone who is taking advantage.

Like Marcos, Ale also feels that CBP treats her like she is dumb. She tells a story about getting her SENTRI card taken away by CBP as punishment.

I work at [Border University] at a theater in my department, and my boss gave me boxes of mailers that we used to send. So, I will have to fold them and put a label on them. So, she asked me to take that home to make up some hours. So, I did that and then when I crossed, they checked my car. They were like, "What is this? This is not your property." And I was like, "Yeah, it's my job. This is what I work for." "Well, in that case, it's your boss's property. It's [Border University] property, you cannot have this. And I was like, "It's my job. I had to do that. I can't tell my boss, 'Oh I can't take this home just because.'" So, they weren't understanding, and they took my SENTRI card for about three days. I had to do the regular line for those three days to come to school and then I had to pick up my SENTRI card in the Zaragoza [Ysleta] bridge. And [CBP] were like, "Oh so you didn't know you couldn't cross this? What are you thinking?" and they were almost calling me stupid.

John provides a bit of positivity in his story.

I've had a ton of ugly experiences and a ton of nice experiences. I had one officer yelling at me it wasn't her fault I was born in Juárez. I've had officers

telling me I shouldn't be attending this university, like they were putting it down. Or they think I'm lying I was doing my PhD because I was young. I've also had people compliment my English or they wouldn't know I'm not a U.S. citizen if they weren't looking at my paperwork.

These international student border commuters cannot resist against the mistreatment by the officers. If they do, they may have their visa revoked. As Pamela said, “[U.S. citizens] start getting rowdy with the officers; they know they can do anything to them. The Mexican nationals feel scared; like, I shouldn't do this because I can get my visa taken.” According to Castañeda Pérez, it is possible that U.S. citizens are less likely to report negative perceptions of CBP because they may receive preferential treatment compared to non-U.S. citizens (2020, p. 12). This means international student border commuters may be treated worse than U.S. citizens. In addition, when international student border commuters suffer mistreatment from CBP, they are stuck dealing with it. U.S. citizen transborder students are more empowered than this study’s subjects.

U.S. Citizenship

International student border commuters are not U.S. citizens or permanent residents. This fact was the reason they were selected to participate in this study, but it also came up organically in the interviews. International student border commuters sometimes reflected on how their life was different from that of a U.S. citizen’s experience. “In the U.S. and Mexico, class and legal status map onto each other,

which reveals the extent to which class and legal status are intimately related transnationally” (Sarabia, 2016, p. 346).

This study did not collect data about economic conditions of the international student border commuters, though all of the Border University students qualified for the in-state tuition program for Mexican nationals with financial need. Sofi thinks both the border officials and Border University treat students who are full-time and do not commute like they have “a little higher status.” Border commuting, to Mila, brings up feelings about privilege:

I'm not proud to say, I just feel angry. Because I see other people not doing anything, wasting time and opportunity. Friends of mine are also of Mexican descent, but they are just born here and get all this financial aid money. They're just partying and spending, wasting time. It makes me go crazy because I just want to shake them.

Gabby would agree with Mila. “I have seen here that [U.S. citizens] don't care about school as much as we do as international students.”

David says he struggles with finding a job in El Paso and that it would be easier for him if he was a U.S. citizen. “Most companies don't even look at the resume once they read you're from another country.” Ana feels the difference in the currency valuation. “Everybody's making money in dollars and I'm over here with my pesos.”

Carlos presents the most explicit wish to be a U.S. citizen:

Sometimes my friends and I who border commute just wish we were born [in El Paso]. There's just this big gap from Mexico to the United States in

opportunities. Sometimes you feel like, why was I born in this country? I love Mexico and my culture, but you have to be a politician and very corrupt to make a living...Oh, I wish I was born here [El Paso]. I wish I lived here from the beginning. I wish I had a house right here...My father earns money in pesos...But you just have to refrain from [thinking] it. You have to stop because you know you have to go to school...My brother has been here since all his life...He's older but he is actually an American citizen. Yeah, but I don't know why I was not even born here. Actually, here in this [El Paso] hospital they had my brother. I was born in Juárez.

Carlos has a challenging situation in that his brother has more benefits and access to the U.S. based on his citizenship. Several researchers have recently discussed the transborder phenomenon of giving birth in the United States among those Mexican mothers who live along the border (Tessman & Koyama, 2019; Vargas Valle & Coubes, 2017; Orraca et al., 2017). Says Tessman,

For cross-border students, the decision to reside in Mexico and study in the U.S. is often rooted in their parents' decision to have their children born in the United States. To ensure U.S. citizenship for their offspring, it is common among future parents in northern Mexico who have social networks on the other side of the border or can afford costly U.S. hospitals to take the necessary measures to deliver their children in the U.S. (López, 1993)...Being born in the U.S. allows otherwise Mexican nationals to transit between both countries, access binational public resources and maximize their education and employment

opportunities. Moreover, it lessens the economic and educational disparities between both countries and provides a better chance of upward social mobility. (2019, p. 391)

Unlike this type of transborder student, who often has dual citizenship with the United States and Mexico (Tessman, 2019), international student border commuters cannot rely on U.S. citizenship in the admission process with CBP, nor for in-state tuition, or for future job possibilities.

Also in 2019, Mendoza's Master's thesis explored how U.S. citizenship affects transborder college students in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez area. He interviewed 23 students and found:

Findings suggest that while U.S. citizenship status offers transfronterizo college students the ability to cross the port of entry with no restrictions, allowing them to attend schools in the United States, but this status does not protect them from being viewed and treated as being culturally deficient due to their relationship to México.

Notably, Mendoza included three Mexican national students in his sample, but did not highlight any findings related to them, instead stating:

Future research may explore the ways in which transfronterizo students with Mexican citizenship experience higher education in the United States. This would be useful in providing more insight to the discussion on the significance of citizenship status in the lives of transfronterizo students. (2019, p.57)

This study serves to explore exactly what Mendoza recommended. U.S. or Mexican citizenship status significance is strong in this phenomenological study of the international border commuter student experience. International students are less included in U.S. society in that they have less rights (or no right) to live and work inside the U.S. Citizenship status makes the difference to providing full access to both sides of the border.

Confusion

This study had a subtheme of confusion running through it. Border commuters felt confusion stemmed from misinformation from both the government and the school. There also were a few instances where the border commuter themselves were confused.

For example, David says that he's had some negative academic impact related to being an international student and required to always be full-time enrolled: "I cannot drop any classes and it has affected my GPA badly." It sounds like David does not know that he could switch to being a part-time border commuter, and this confusion is impacting his grade point average. Marcos recalls a specific incident where his confusion had stressful consequences:

The International Office here told me I should carry my I-20 documents with me, but not the original. They told me the original is a very valuable document so you must keep it in your house or somewhere that you know it's safe. [Note: this statement is incorrect and it is doubtful someone in the International Office would advise that.] So, I carry with me the copy all the time and my visa. I was crossing the border and the customs asked me for my I-20. So, I just show it to

him. It was like, No, this is not a document. Are you trying to brainwash me? Or something like that. Like fool me. And I was like, No, why? That's my document. And he was like, This is a copy. This is not your original one. I told him, I know. The office that keeps me advised about this, told me not to, that you're gonna be fine without one. So, I just carry a copy with me. And he was like, No, no, no. I cannot accept this. This is wrong. Then he put my car in the secondary inspection and then brought me to another office where I got in handcuffs. And I was there like, Oh my god. You did that to me just because I brought a copy. And I remember that I had an exam that day so I was like, I have to get there now. So, I was very worried but in fifteen minutes the guy that was in charge of it just came out and told me, It's fine. Don't worry. Just bring the original next time.

Hiram says "Every bridge does something different. And I don't know why." He shares a story with a similar outcome to Marcos. The confusion is on a topic where no clear answer from the Department of Homeland Security exists.

For example, I have two visas. I have my tourist visa, a B-2, and I have my student visa, the F-1. If I want to go to Wal-Mart to buy some whatever, I will cross with my tourist visa. If I'm coming to school, I use my student visa. I shouldn't be taking the two of them in case I lost something, right? Just one of them. One time I was crossing, I don't remember, oh yea, I was going to Wal-Mart to buy hangers, for the clothes, and they arrested me. Yeah, they put me in the cuffs because they wanted me to show them the student visa and I told

them, No, I shouldn't be using that for Wal-Mart. So, they put me in handcuffs. They put me in a room for like one hour and then they released the cuffs, they told me that you can go. (Hiram)

Andreas recalls an incident similar to Marcos and Hiram. The confusion in Andrea's case was on behalf of the CBP not knowing about automatic revalidation of visas in U.S. contiguous territories. But Andreas' explanation about why he should be granted entry was also slightly confused.

Some of them were really rude at the time when they were checking the papers. One time I was asked why I was holding an F-1 expired visa and with the current I-20. I was explaining to this agent that since the visa expired the I-20 was the back-up. [Note: That is not a fully accurate explanation.] And he didn't get the idea and I was escorted to the secondary [inspection]. Inside there I was explaining and I was kind of desperate to explain the situation and then there was handcuffs at that time. And the supervisor comes and I explain that situation and he said:

No, you know what, you're right. This is a new regulation that new CBP agents that we have from another area that come from training that they don't know this. They just look at it, Ok you are expired. You are out of status. You need to go back. That's basically their mind.

So, he was explaining that and he explained also that I can fill out a complaint form. And since I was about two hours late to class, so I did not fill that out.

Gabby points to confusion by CBP being due to constant staffing changes:

What can you expect from them? They are always changing the people on the bridges. And, sincerely, they don't know anything. They don't know about international students. They just don't know. It's like, when you go to school you get trained and they tell you what to do, what you don't have to do. What to bring. What to don't bring and everything. And when you get to the customs, sometimes they don't know anything. They try to tell you things that the international student office told you to never do.

What is clear is that CBP experiences are very much out of the control of international border commuter students. The experiences may be highly traumatic.

Clandestine Practices

International student border commuters reported observing illegal trafficking activity in some cases on the bridge. They also regularly reported being concerned about someone putting something in their car. Xochitl says, "If people start knowing you're a border commuter, they might load up your cars with drugs." David shares an experience he saw waiting in line:

I heard someone yell "stop him!" And I see a guy running all the way back to Juárez, leaving the car there. He passed by my side and I thought if I opened the door, he would fall, but I didn't do anything. They didn't catch him. The officer dropped his gun and ran too, everything stopped.

However, the most regular clandestine happenings may be happening in regards to answering the border official's questions. In 2016, Velasco Ortiz published a study on clandestine practices in border crossings. "The clandestine component

results not just from a lack of documents but also from the rules for their use and people's reasons for crossing, producing uncertainty and fear in this border space" (Velasco Ortiz, 2016, p. 269).

International students, including border commuters, have to have non-immigrant intent by default as their immigration status is classified as such in the U.S. immigration system. Non-immigrant intent means the intention of the individual must be to return to the home country after finishing their currently authorized activity in the U.S. As a result of this requirement, students who have intentions to immigrate to the U.S. have to lie.

As Gabby says very accurately:

They're just like, "What are you going to do after finishing?" And you gotta say, "I'm gonna come back to Mexico." Cause if you say, "I'm gonna look for a job here," you get to the secondary [inspection]. They take your visa. So, they make those questions and you have to be like, "Oh, I'm gonna go back to Mexico," even when it isn't your plan.

Roberto thinks that "100% of the people who come from Juárez to El Paso, they are expecting to look for a job on this side [El Paso]."

Ricardo mentions that he hid when he was going to play a show with his band in El Paso after having a bad circumstance involving being handcuffed for mentioning it when the CBP questioned his guitar; instead, he would say he was going to practice. If he was compensated for the show, it could technically be considered unauthorized employment. Neza says that he would sometimes answer untruthfully to make things easier as well. He used to:

...cross using my F-1 status just to show and then go back not necessarily for school. And when they ask you, “Well, where you going?” “I’m going to school.” Just to make it easier. Or also, paying for lunch [in El Paso] is expensive, so I would bring lunch with me and then just not say. “What are you bringing?” “Just my school supplies.”

Neza also mentions that he said in his visa interview that he planned to live in the U.S., because he had applied for a full-time F-1 student I-20 document. He did so because working on-campus does not come automatically for international student border commuters, they are more restricted than full-time F-1 students. To follow the SEVIS reporting requirements that mandate a current U.S. address be input for full-time F-1 students, Neza says, “I use a friend’s address....but whenever some officer at the bridge asks me for where I live, I always say I live in Juárez.” This is anecdotally known to be a common reality, that there are students who have full-time F-1 international student status, but who actually are commuting, and technically misrepresenting information in order to permit them to have automatic on-campus work permission.

What is Left Unsaid

It is important to note that there may be aspects of the experience that are unrecorded here. For example, working without proper documentation is a possibility that no one mentioned, but I did not directly ask if anyone did that. I did not ask about stopping out of school or why someone did that, if they mentioned it. I did not ask about aspirations for the future. It also may be that participants would have expressed

certain things differently or more descriptively had I been able to speak with them in Spanish. In addition, because this study's data was collected in June 2016, the international student border commuters had yet to encounter what was to come in the following years.

Study Summary

This study explored the experience of international student border commuters living in Ciudad Juárez, holding Mexican citizenship, and commuting to El Paso to attend college at either Border Community College or Border University. The study aimed to provide an investigation of the experience of Mexican national international student border commuters, and utilized a phenomenological approach. My research questions included one overarching question, "What are the experiences of Border Colleges' international student border commuters in the Paso del Norte region?" and one concluding question, "What every day experiences and themes emerge among study participants that can establish an essence of the experience?" Twenty-three participants were interviewed, and through Giorgi's phenomenological method, their answers were transformed into seven thematic areas describing the essence of the international student border commuter experience:

1. Waiting on the Bridge: Stress
2. Power and Helplessness: *Impotencia*
3. Getting Used to it: Adaptation
4. Self-reliance and Resilience: Strength
5. Sacrifice is Worth it: Opportunity

6. Benefit from Both Sides: *Fronterizos*

7. Needing a Louder Voice: Help

In the Paso del Norte region, the international student border commuter experience has elements of similarity with the general transborder student experience. However, international student border commuters face more extreme challenges than U.S. citizen transborder commuters. International student border commuters do not have the power to resist questioning, and thus cannot destabilize the power of the border. International students cannot be fully engaged in the U.S. because they lack the U.S. citizenship that gives them security to work, live, and resist.

Conclusions

The international student border commuter experience is one full of stress, anxiety, and time wasted. The power dynamic between the border commuter and the Customs and Border Protection officer has a profound impact on the experience, causing feelings of helplessness and impotence. These negative feelings do not wane, but international student border commuters grow accustomed to them, as well as the border commuting process in general. Growing used to the experience is required, or else the negative aspects would be too difficult to face. International student border commuters exhibit resilience along with a strong sense of personal responsibility and self-reliance to succeed. They find that the daily challenge of the crossing is a sacrifice which is worth the educational opportunities provided on the U.S. side of the border. They also see the benefit of being in both cultural spaces, Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, simultaneously.

International student border commuters want their voice to be heard to help others, perhaps because they are muted in their daily immigration interactions. International student border commuters are unable to destabilize or resist power at the border, because they lack the citizenship status to afford to resist. The border is a limiting factor for them, unlike their transborder U.S. citizen counterparts who have full access on both sides of the border. International student border commuters are differentially included in campus and community life in El Paso. They cannot fully engage in the U.S. due to their commuting time, responsibilities in Mexico, and exclusion from full participation in the U.S. society and labor market. They endure repeated misunderstandings with and mistreatment by CBP in order to only partially participate in "transborder citizenship."

Limitations

A limitation is incomplete understanding of the economic/financial status of the students. While we know who was a recipient of the in-state tuition discount for Mexican nationals who demonstrate financial need, and the majority of our participants held this discount, we do not know exactly what their income level was. It is notable that this study's participants are probably better off financially than an average transborder high school student, since university tuition must be paid. According to Orraca et al.:

For those that were born in Mexico, their high income levels and frequent crossings of the international border suggest that they are largely constituted by what Sarabia (2015) refers to as Global South cosmopolitans, which is a

privileged and mobile class, composed of middle- and upper-class Mexican who cross into the U.S. on a regular basis and are usually better-off than the general population (2017, p. 400-401).

Future study should collect data on the household income of the international student border commuter.

This study did not compare border commuters and traditional international students' academic performance quantitatively. It does not provide much information about how students actually fared in school, since I did not look at actual academic outcomes for the participants. Some participants stopped out of enrollment at least temporarily, and the study provides little insight into what factors may have been involved.

Future Research Recommendations

As other transborder researchers have said, there are limitations to the body of research in transborder students in general. This study was qualitative, and most of the studies on transborder students have been (Orraca et al., 2017). As Alvarez said in 1995, more research is needed to “tease out the ways in which the myriad types of people in the borderlands negotiate life” (p. 462). Both qualitative and quantitative research should continue to occur.

I recommend doing a quantitative study of how international student border commuters fare academically as opposed to non-border commuters, controlling for confounding variables. We can surmise from these accounts that international student border commuters' academic performance and ability to succeed could be negatively

affected. Additional data on academic performance outcomes as well as retention of international student border commuters would benefit the existing body of research and guide Border Colleges in future program and policy development, for example, attendance policy.

Future study on the career and immigration outcomes for international student border commuters would also be interesting to study to better understand the long-term impact the experience has (Orraca et al., 2017). The official international student border commuters are limited to working in the border region on their post-completion work authorization (OPT). Does that restriction hinder their entrance into the broader U.S. labor market? Do international student border commuters end up immigrating to the U.S., or do they remain solely Mexican nationals?

While I did not notice participants struggling with the English language to express their ideas or thoughts, future research should occur allowing participants to utilize both languages. Also, while this study is single-case, future multi-case studies with similar research design could be interesting for comparison to this study's results. How does the experience and perception of border commuting differ for those international students who drive with SENTRI, as opposed to those who travel by foot or other methods? How does the experience and perception of border commuting differ for international students who are part-time vs. full-time enrolled? What about their academic outcomes?

In addition, future study could compare border commuters' experiences in other sister city border regions on the Mexican and Canadian borders and others in other

areas of the world (Castañeda Pérez, 2020). Findings of this study may not be applicable to other borders, but further research is needed. Is the border commuter experience different when international students go from Matamoros to Brownsville? What is similar or different about the experience going from Canada to school in Detroit or Buffalo? A follow-up study comparing the experiences of Canadian border commuters to Mexican border commuters could be interesting, potentially utilizing a critical race theory paradigm.

Border Colleges officials have an anecdotal sense that border commuters treat their immigration status with less care than traditional international students, and their lack of personal responsibility or understanding of their documentation requirements may cause them to stop out more (Border Colleges, personal communication, 2014, 2022). Some notion exists that because transborder students are commuting and seeing examples of commuting from such a young age, the importance of particular documentation becomes less clear. Both theories about decreased personal responsibility, and increased incidence of stopping out should be investigated with further qualitative and quantitative research, respectively.

In 2022, Gluckman, Gautsch and Hopkins describe how sociopolitical, sociocultural, sociolinguistic, and socioemotional factors influence transnationally mobile students' educational experiences. The researchers "assert that future research on transnational education within the U.S.-Mexico nexus and beyond should attend to the interconnectedness of these dimensions, rather than viewing them in isolation" (Gluckman, Gautsch, & Hopkins, 2022, n.p.). This study's intention was to capture the

essence of the international student border commuter experience. Like the factors these researchers have studied, the themes that emerged are all also interconnected.

Participant Recommendations: Border Colleges

The international student border commuters focused more on their own responsibilities than recommendations for Border Colleges themselves. This may be because they were scared to be critical, though I strove to assure them of the confidentiality of their responses. While participants demonstrated self-reliance, they did have some recommendations for the Border Colleges, when prompted.

A salient suggestion made was about paperwork submission efficiency, since border commuters have to do regular paperwork with the Border Colleges international office and other units. When study participant John was asked about the school supporting border commuters, he says though he doesn't see a difference in treatment between commuters and non-commuters:

I did find that people were inconsiderate sometimes about paperwork submission, setting a meeting, and then you would go [to pick it up] and they wouldn't have it. I don't think it crossed people's minds that it's not just, "I'll just drop by"...I'm a fan of being able to do things online. So, a lot of the departments across the university, you have to go and you have to submit a page here and there. You have to fill out a form here and there. And if you could just do that online you would save people here a lot of time. I think that we're way past the point where this infrastructure should be a given...It also helps

commuters a lot because if the only thing you have to do is come by and turn in some papers, it would save a whole trip if you don't have to come that day.

The pandemic has caused the necessity of paperwork being submitted online, so some policy and procedure has changed at Border Colleges since the study. However, online forms should be formalized and standardized across the Border Colleges' administrative units.

Carlos recommends that the International Office move away from in-person informational sessions and do more meetings on the internet, which the pandemic has also brought on by force. He also says "they should hold sessions for the student individually for their situation instead of the group." Sofi says that the school doesn't support border commuters very well, because she has dealt with some mistakes that apparently cost her the validity of her immigration status.

In my first semester I didn't know a lot of things here. The front desk was wrong more than once in telling me what to do. They forgot to get a copy of my passport so I had to come back. They were not prepared to give me the information, so I didn't know about the deadline [to get a new I-20]. In the end I had to start again and pay \$200 which was hard for my dad. Different advisors give different responses too.

Sofi suggests better training for Border Colleges' staff, as does Mila. As discussed earlier, inconsistency is a consistent theme in the experiences.

Neza says the school's services for commuters should be simplified (such as I-20 signatures) and also more standardized in their responses to students, because the

procedures and varying advice have caused him some additional stress. He and Ale both recommend CBP should be more connected with the International Office. The inconsistent answers between governmental agencies and schools come up often. Andreas and his friends have joked about creating a manual of “How to Survive in the United States Being an International Student,” because “all of us are getting different answers on the same things.”

Mila says the school could do more to help educate students about things border commuters should know or benefit from, for example, the American Opportunity tax provision, and Brian suggests the school could give more information about SENTRI, so students do not have to figure it out on their own. Gabby suggests that the school do more programs for international students and that “[t]here are a lot of people suffering for the same things, but they don't say anything. We would like to participate in research. We would like to be part of more things, but we are not allowed.” David feels the school should work with employers to educate them about the laws for hiring foreign nationals.

Fernanda suggests having more educational training for professors about the experience of international student border commuters.

Probably like letting all the professors know that sometimes it's harder for other students. Sometimes professors are like, Well, why are you late? And I try to explain and they don't understand. Oh, but you're late. Wake up earlier. Or stuff like that. So probably letting teachers know what a commuter student goes through every day. Cause sometimes they think well we're Hispanic or we're

international students but we live here in El Paso. But, no. Some students cross every day.

Participant Recommendations: Government Agencies

Participants made recommendations for governmental improvement, primarily centered around improving student access at the port-of-entries. Hiram suggests the government provide better support to border commuters by providing “a specific lane only for students, a walking lane, at each bridge, or automatic SENTRI for students.” Alexander echoes the need for a pedestrian student lane at each bridge, as well as a procedure for bikers. Brian suggests at least a student discount for SENTRI.

Gabby and Daniel mention that it would be helpful if the government could extend a consistent lane for college students.

When the officers do an extra lane in the middle for students at the Santa Fe bridge that really helps us, but I think that’s unofficial and more for high school students as it closes at 8 am...Sometimes we [are] flipping the coin to be on time or not. Monday and holidays, it can be congested, but today it was empty. It’s really inconsistent. (Daniel)

Neza suggests a particular student lane for college students rather than high schoolers.

Participants also made other transportation suggestions. Many of them reference that these ideas would work for the Santa Fe port-of-entry, closest to Border University. Roberto suggests a shuttle for student commuters to pick up in Ciudad Juárez and Deliver to the port-of-entry and back. Daniel also has an idea for a shared

ride experience for border commuter students, “so you don’t have to use your car. The city transportation hours are not arranged with the school schedule.” Relatedly, Lorenzo recommends expanding El Paso bus hours to allow students to get back to the port-of-entry during the evening. Marcos recommends a shared bike system specifically for going from campus to the port-of-entry.

International student border commuters regularly talked about CBP misinformation. Gaby says the officers need to be better informed about the rules for international student border commuter entry permits (I-94s). Mila also recommends more training for CBP on international students, because they are often confused and provide conflicting information with the U.S. Consulate – “it’s like a divorced couple.” Sofi’s major suggestion is that personal treatment at the border crossing needs to be improved, but also that CBP needs to communicate better among themselves because of misinformation coming from individual officers. Ricardo says something similar: “So the first thing they can improve is knowing their procedures, and [second,] not being rude.”

Fernanda recommends making the lines faster, to stop charging six dollars for the I-94, and thinks there seem to be “a lot of officers but they’re not working.” John also says the government should be more efficient. He is glad CBP has changed their I-94 renewal requirement and created a student line, but notes it’s only for pedestrians on the downtown bridge and can get pretty long. He thinks they could easily have a student line at all bridges as well as the consulate.

Marcos appreciates the government having the express line but brings up a different type of policy concern:

[There are] big concerns with ecological things, the environment, high cases of students who go to school near bridges with asthma. There's a lot of smoke. So, there is stress for the people and the environment. They need to see the secondary problems, not only what they're protecting at the border.

Ale recommends that the government reconsider the restriction on border commuters' OPT employment.

I recently just learned that since I'm a border commuter student I have to stay in the border area to do my OPT. I think that's like the biggest thing that I find that it's not very supportive. I thought I was going to be able to go for that year to explore more into the United States. There are not a lot of options for dancers here, if it's not teaching dance lessons.

The guidance she was given is that she can only work within 75 miles of the border, which is the same distance that schools are allowed to be located in order to sponsor international student border commuters in SEVIS. Thus, international students are again differentially included in the U.S. employment market post-graduation.

Researcher Recommendations: Border Colleges

I did not find substantial differences between the experiences of the international student border commuters who studied at Border University versus Border Community College, so I present these recommendations for both Border Colleges.

1. International student border commuter students predominantly reported that professors were overall fairly accommodating when students were late due to unexpected border wait times. As David says, “Most [professors] have been understanding about it. I actually take pictures and send emails [to show he is trying to make it on time]. One professor told me, ‘Boy, I have crossed and I know what it is.’” However, given that student reports of professors not being understanding do exist, the need also exists for additional training for faculty and staff at Border Colleges, to standardize the knowledge of the international student border commuter experience.
2. Border Colleges’ Institutional Research offices should engage in study about border commuters’ academic performance and retention. The results should be shared with relevant Border College units to develop programming to support academic performance and retention of the international student border commuter population.
3. Border Colleges should work with students to create an organization similar to Transfronterizx Alliance Student Organization (TASO) at San Diego State University (SDSU) (Falcón Orta & Monk, 2021).
4. Border Colleges should consider developing a program similar to the Transborder Student Ally Program (TSAP) at SDSU (Falcón Orta & Monk, 2021)
5. Border Colleges should work together and communicate to develop standardized interpretation of immigration policy/procedure, where possible. For example, Border Colleges banding together as a regional collective and

conducting outreach to local CBP and DoS officials to educate that DHS has authorized electronic signatures would be effective. This would reduce travel and paperwork burden on international student commuters, as well as traditional international students.

6. Border Colleges should continue offering virtual appointments beyond the pandemic and expand appointment times beyond traditional business hours. This recommendation applies to all academic and administrative units, not just the International Office.
7. Employ additional professional staff in Border Colleges International Offices.
8. Ensure part-time vs. full time and border commuter vs. non border commuter is easily distinguishable internally for future institutional research purposes.
9. Develop procedures for students to self-report border mistreatment, for example, an online form, that automatically is routed to ICE leadership.
10. Border Colleges should improve their online information for students. It is not easily possible to find online information about the rules and processes international border commuters need to follow at either institution, at the time of this study's completion. PDF memos about applicable policy should be readily available for border commuters to print and carry with them to inform poorly-trained CBP officers.
11. Since the data collection of this study, Border University has made strides in their online forms/applications. In 2018, Border University converted nearly all their international student paper forms to an online request system, with the

exception of I-20 travel signatures. In addition, due to the pandemic, Border Community College has also begun processing forms/applications remotely. However, while the pandemic caused knee-jerk strides in electronic processing, it is recommended to continue to transition to robust online form processing systems and standard electronic requests for all types of documents across both schools.

12. Maintain and strengthen programmatic support for the in-state tuition program for Mexican residents with financial need. According to Orraca, Rocha, and Vargas, the major factor that prevents Mexican residents from studying in the U.S. is the cost differential of the tuition (2017). The reason why the Paso del Norte region has the most transborder students is likely because of the in-state tuition afforded to Mexican nations who demonstrate appropriate financial need (Orraca et al., 2017). This is a Texas legislated program, and it must continue in order to allow Mexican international student border commuters the ability to continue their education.

Researcher Recommendations: Governmental Agencies

1. The Department of Homeland Security should make a decision on the 2002 Border Commuter Act, and take action, whether that is revoking it or implementing it. The policy and practice are currently in limbo as part-time status is regulatorily inconsistent with F-1 status full-time enrollment requirements.

2. DHS should pay CBP officers a higher salary, and require a Bachelor's degree, so that the position is more competitive and officers are retained longer.

According to CBP's website, you can qualify for being an officer if you have three years of experience that demonstrates the ability to "meet and deal with people" and "the ability to learn and apply a body of facts," which is not a very high standard for entering the field.
3. More resources should be devoted to the ports-of-entry to reduce wait times for students and others.
4. SEVP, CBP, and DoS must standardize their understanding about all aspects of international student border commuter policy. Staff in Washington, D.C., or other central locations removed from the border, should also be familiar with the border commuter status and rules. It regularly happens that SEVP's position is not aligned with CBP, when they are both part of DHS.
5. DHS should clarify under what circumstances border commuter students should enter using their visitor visa as opposed to student status. In this study, there were several accounts of confusion on this topic.
6. SEVP should clarify to schools whether I-20s for full-time border commuters should also be issued semester by semester.
7. CBP needs to understand SEVP has approved the use of electronically signed I-20s in all circumstances.
8. CBP needs to understand that when students lose their immigration status and have an I-20 terminated, the entry visa in their passport is not automatically

invalidated. The visa remains valid for use until it expires, and the SEVIS ID number may not match.

9. CBP should standardize date-certain admission on the I-94 to match the end date of I-20 rather than granting duration of status (D/S).
10. CBP should also implement electronic I-94 cards at land ports-of-entry.
11. Create more reporting mechanisms for border crossers to report mistreatment from CBP officers.
12. CBP should be required to publish annual research reports on treatment of border crossers.
13. CBP in the Paso del Norte area should establish working groups with Border Colleges' leadership to standardize inconsistent practices related to international student border commuters.
14. DHS and DoS should reconsider the non-immigrant intent requirement for students.

Chapter Summary

This chapter included analysis of the international border commuter experience themes. Emerging transborder studies were used to compare and contrast the general (U.S. citizen) transborder student experience as opposed to the international student border commuter experience. Additional happenings in society since this study's data-collection occurred were presented and analyzed, taking consideration of the essence themes of this study.

After providing analysis of the findings and additional data, I summarized the study and findings. Study limitations were discussed, as well as future research recommendations. The international student border commuters' personal recommendations for improvement in both Border Colleges and Governmental Agencies were presented. Finally, I shared my own recommendations, which I developed in light of this study's findings regarding the international student border commuter experience. Further study and interventions to improve the experience of international student border commuters should occur, because as study participant Lorenzo said, border commuting "is a way of life."

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Appendix A: Interview Questions Protocol

- 1) Demographic information collection:
 - a. Where are you from? (birth place, place raised, current area of residence)
 - b. What is your age and gender?
 - c. What is your family status (married, single, children, responsible for care for other family members)?
 - d. What are you studying, where, and how long have you been studying?
 - e. How long are you (or did you) border commute to study?
- 2) Why do (or did you) choose to hold student border commuter status?
- 3) What does border commuting mean to you?
- 4) What impact does the border commuter experience have on you (or did it have), if any?
- 5) What is or was your experience with border security enforcement personnel?
 - a. Have you been to secondary inspection or handcuffed?
- 6) What is (or was) your academic experience like as a border commuter?
- 7) How do you (or did you) participate in campus life as a border commuter?
- 8) How do you see the Border Colleges' support of the border commuter experience?
- 9) What suggestions would you have for more or different college support?
- 10) How do you see the government support of the border commuter experience? When I say government, this could include any part of the federal, state, or local governments in either Mexico or the United States.

- 11) What suggestions would you have for more or different governmental support?
- 12) What is (or was) the best thing about being a student border commuter?
- 13) What is (or was) the worst thing about being a student border commuter?
- 14) How did student border commuting affect your life in general, negatively or positively?
- 15) If you no longer hold border commuter status, why is that?
- 16) What advice would you give others who were considering or preparing to engage in student border commuting?
- 17) Is there any other comment or statement you would like to make about the experience you have (or had) as a student border commuter for the purpose of this study?
- 18) Why did you decide to participate in this study?

Appendix B: Letter to Border Colleges' International Offices

Date

Name

Position, Organization, Address

Dear (Name),

My name is Kristin Oberheide and I am a doctoral student in Educational Administration and Leadership at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Presently, I am working on a dissertation regarding Mexico-U.S. border commuter students' experiences in higher education and daily life. In this context, border commuter students are those Mexican national students who reside in Mexico and cross the border to attend school at (Border Community College) or (Border University), holding F-1 or F-3 non-immigrant student visa classification.

I am interested in interviewing current and former border commuters to attempt to gain a better understanding of the collective experience and phenomenon of border commuting to Border Colleges. This is the first known study of its kind. I have approval (exemption) from the Institutional Review Board. The intent of this study is to gain an initial understanding of how border commuters experience the pursuit of higher education.

As we discussed (on the phone) (or in person), I ask for your assistance in passing on my below letter of introduction to potential participants. I aim to reach current or previous students who are, or have been, border commuting in the last four years.

Please let me know if you have any questions at keoberheide@utep.edu or you may call me at (phone number).

If you can reply to confirm if you have sent my message to eligible participants at your institution, I would greatly appreciate it. Thank you very much for your support and advancement of this research.

Sincerely,

Kristin Oberheide

Doctoral Student

Department of Educational Administration and Leadership

University of Texas at El Paso

Appendix C: Letter of Introduction to Eligible Participants

Date

Dear Student,

My name is Kristin Oberheide and I am a doctoral student in Educational Administration and Leadership at the University of Texas at El Paso. I am working on a dissertation regarding Mexico-U.S. border commuter students' experiences in higher education and daily life.

This is the first known study of its kind about border commuting to attend college. I have approval (exemption) from the Institutional Review Board. The intent of this study is to gain an initial understanding of how border commuters experience the pursuit of higher education.

I am looking for volunteers to share individual border commuter experiences anonymously, to better understand the experience generally. For the purposes of this study, I want to interview you if you have been a Mexican national student who crosses (or crossed) the border to attend school at (Border Community College) or (Border University) and hold (or held) F-1 or F-3 visa type.

If you held a border commuter status in the last five years, I am very interested if you would be willing to assist in contributing to the data for this study. I aim to collect

experiences of current or previous students who are, or have been, border commuting in the last five years. Then I will synthesize the interview information into possible shared experience findings.

If you consent to participation, the interview would last approximately one hour in duration and would occur in El Paso between (insert dates here). The interview would be conducted in English with me, in person, in a private location. I would record the interview without using your name and keep the recording and later transcription secure.

Your participation in the study would be kept anonymous with a code name, and nothing about you as an individual would be reportable or discoverable. You would be able to opt out of any question and/or the entire interview at any time.

If you are willing to contribute to my research about the border commuter experience attending Border Colleges, let me know, and also if you have any questions or would like to learn more, you are welcome to contact me by emailing me at keoberheide@utep.edu or you may call me at (phone number).

Thank you very much for your support and advancement of this original research.

Sincerely,

Kristin Oberheide

Doctoral Student

Department of Educational Administration and Leadership

University of Texas at El Paso

Appendix D: Questions for Validation Panel

Date

Name

Position, Organization, Address

Dear (Name),

My name is Kristin Oberheide and I am a doctoral student in Educational Administration and Leadership at the University of Texas at El Paso. Presently, I am working on a dissertation regarding Mexico-U.S. border commuter students' experiences in higher education and daily life. Border commuter students are those Mexican national students who cross the border to attend school at (Border Community College) or (Border University) holding F-1 or F-3 non-immigrant student visa classification.

As we discussed, you agreed to provide input on validating the questions I am asking the border commuter participants about their experience. I appreciate your time in answering the below questions. You may email me your responses at keoberheide@utep.edu or if you prefer to send me a fax or mail a hard copy, just let me know. Please let me know if you have any questions at keoberheide@utep.edu or you may call me at (phone number).

I kindly request your response to the below questions by XXXXX date. Thank you for providing an important part of my dissertation study validation.

Sincerely,

Kristin Oberheide

Doctoral Student

Department of Educational Administration and Leadership

University of Texas at El Paso

Please respond to these questions:

1) Is the letter to Border Colleges' international students office leadership clear and appropriate for the purpose of the study? Why or why not?

2) Is the letter of introduction to eligible participants clear and appropriate for the purpose of the study? Why or why not?

3) Are the interview questions clear and understandable for participants? Why or why not?

4) Would you ask any additional questions for the purpose of this study? If so, what question(s) would you ask, and why?

5) Would you omit any of these questions for the purpose of this study? If so, what questions would you omit, and why?

6) Do you have any additional comments regarding this study or the documents you have reviewed as part of my validation panel?

Thank you very much again for your time, input, and expertise to assist in this research.

Appendix E: Participant Consent Form

University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) Institutional Review Board
Informed Consent Form for Research Involving Human Subjects

Protocol Title: A Phenomenological Study of the Mexico – United States Border

Commuter Student Experience

Principal Investigator: Kristin Oberheide, Doctoral Candidate

UTEP Educational Leadership and Administration (EDLA)

In this consent form, “you” always means the study subject. If you are a legally authorized representative (such as a parent or guardian), please remember that “you” refers to the study subject.

1. Introduction

You are being asked to take part voluntarily in the research project described below. Please take your time making a decision and feel free to discuss it with your friends and family. Before agreeing to take part in this research study, it is important that you read the consent form that describes the study. Please ask the study researcher to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand.

2. Why is this study being done?

You have been asked to take part in a research study of Mexican border commuter students' experience. Approximately eight to fifteen students will be enrolling in this study from both [Border University] and [Border Community College].

You are being asked to be in the study because you are, or have recently been, a Mexican citizen international student attending the University of Texas at El Paso and/or El Paso Community College. You have indicated that you currently or previously held F-1 or F-3 nonimmigrant student status.

If you decide to enroll in this study, your involvement will last for a single one-hour in-person interview in the Education building at the University of Texas at El Paso, Texas with the Primary Investigator, Kristin Oberheide, Doctoral Candidate. Kristin may also ask you a few follow-up questions after she transcribes your interview and analyzes it, if she needs clarification. This follow-up would be via email, phone, or Skype, and would take less than one hour.

3. What is involved in the study?

If you agree to take part in this study, the research team will:

An interview date and time will be arranged in advance via email between you and Kristin Oberheide, Principal Investigator and Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership and Administration at UTEP. The time scheduled will be a one-hour commitment. The interview will be with Kristin Oberheide only.

At this interview, you will be asked to sign this consent form. If you consent to participation, you will then be asked a list of questions in English by Kristin Oberheide,

in an in-person interview in a private room in the Education building at the University of Texas at El Paso. The questions will range from demographic-based about your background, to asking about your experience as a border commuter, to any recommendations you would have about making the experience better. If there is a question you wish to decline to answer, that is also your right.

The interview should last approximately one hour. If you do not wish to continue with the study at any time, you may discontinue participation at your will.

About recording the interview:

Your interview will be recorded (voice only) by Kristin Oberheide and kept securely under password protection. Only Kristin will have access to the recordings. You will not be identified by name during your interview. Instead a code name will be assigned to you to identify your interview. After your interview, Kristin will transcribe the recorded interview, which means she will listen to the recording (alone, privately) and write down what you and she said during the interview in its entirety. You may receive a copy of the transcription if desired. After the written transcription is completed, Kristin will delete the recordings permanently. The written transcriptions will be kept in Kristin's computer which has a secure login password. In addition, the Word document of the interview transcription will be password protected. Again, your name will not be on that written transcription document, your code name will be on it instead.

Data will not be reported about you to any international office employees, or other university faculty/staff, or government officials. Data will not be reported about you to anyone; the only use of the data will be in Kristin's dissertation study analysis.

Kristin's dissertation analysis will compare your interview transcription to the other participants' interviews, to see if similar themes emerge. If similar themes emerge, Kristin may be able to report some shared experiences of border commuters for the first time in academic literature.

Participation in this research project would not negatively impact your academic or immigration situation, and your story will only be shared in anonymous form to help show what the experience of border commuting is like to others who are unfamiliar with the process and impact.

Certain excerpts of your interview may be included in the dissertation, but with no details that could identify you individually. Any excerpt(s) of your interview included in the dissertation would be used to help describe the phenomenon of the border commuter student experience, and again, be used with careful protection of your anonymity.

4. What are the risks and discomforts of the study?

There are no known risks associated with this research. However, since Kristin's interview will ask you about your experience as a border commuter, if you have experienced a traumatic event that could be triggered through describing your border commuter experience, you might feel emotional or stressed by recalling the event. If

you need assistance with such trauma, the Counseling Center, Dean of Students, and International Student's Office may be of assistance.

5. What will happen if I am injured in this study?

The University of Texas at El Paso and its affiliates do not offer to pay for or cover the cost of medical treatment for research related illness or injury. No funds have been set aside to pay or reimburse you in the event of such injury or illness. You will not give up any of your legal rights by signing this consent form. You should report any such injury to Kristin Oberheide at (email address) or (phone number) and to the UTEP Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (915-747-7693) or irb.orsp@utep.edu.

6. Are there benefits to taking part in this study?

There will be no direct benefits to you for taking part in this study. The study aims to provide information about a previously unstudied student group with a unique student daily life, that you are a part of. You will be participating in the first known academic description of the lived experience of student border commuter in any context worldwide. Information you provide may in turn provide opportunities for improvement of the experience of your fellow students. Your participation will help others to learn from what you've experienced as a student border commuter.

7. What other options are there?

You have the option not to take part in this study. There will be no penalties involved if you choose not to take part in this study.

8. Who is paying for this study?

There is no funding for this study.

9. What are my costs?

There are no direct costs. You will be responsible for travel to and from the research site and any other incidental expenses.

10. What if I want to withdraw, or am asked to withdraw from this study?

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you do not take part in the study, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit.

If you choose to take part, you have the right to skip any questions or stop at any time. However, we encourage you to talk to Kristin so she understands why you are leaving the study. If there are any new findings during the study that may affect whether you want to continue to take part, you will be told about them.

Kristin Oberheide may decide to stop your participation without your permission, if she thinks that being in the study may cause you harm.

11. Who do I call if I have questions or problems?

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may call Kristin Oberheide at (phone number) and (email) You may also contact Kristin's Doctoral Chair (Dissertation Advisor), Dr. Rodolfo Rincones, at (phone number) or rrincones@utep.edu, if needed.

If you have questions or concerns about your participation as a research subject, please contact the UTEP Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (915-747-7693) or irb.orsp@utep.edu.

12. What about confidentiality?

Your part in this study is confidential. None of the information Kristin records for the dissertation research will identify you by name. All records will be coded with fake names and kept with double password protection electronically. Kristin will delete any emails setting up our interview. Any follow-up emails or communication with you will also be deleted. The recording of your interview will not identify you by your real name. The recording will be deleted once the interview is transcribed into written form. The transcriptions will also not identify you by your real name.

13. Mandatory reporting

If information is revealed about child abuse or neglect, or potentially dangerous future behavior to others, the law requires that this information be reported to the proper authorities.

14. Authorization Statement

I have read each page of this paper about the study (or it was read to me). I know that being in this study is voluntary and I choose to be in this study. I know I can stop being in this study without penalty. I will get a copy of this consent form now and can get information on results of the study later if I wish.

Participant Name:

Participant Signature:

Date:

Time:

Consent form explained/witnessed by:

Printed name:

Signature:

Date:

Time:

Vita

Kristin Oberheide has a Master of Public Administration with a specialization in Government, Politics, and Policy from Cornell University (2010). She earned her Bachelor of Arts with a double major in Psychology and German from University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (2002). She was also a non-degree student in Literature at the University of Freiburg (Albert-Ludwigs-Universitaet, 2001-2002).

In 2003, Kristin started her professional career as a data processor to convert paper I-20s and IAP-66s to the SEVIS system, for the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. This was at the advent of the DHS and many associated policies. She was promoted to be an International Student and Scholar Advisor and spent five years building rich experience with immigration regulations, policy, and practice.

After attending graduate school, she joined the federal government as a Program Associate for the Vietnam Education Foundation. Then, she spent three years as the Director of International Programs at University of Texas at El Paso, where the initial idea for this study formed. Next, she spent six years as Director of International Admissions and Recruiting at Kansas State University and had the opportunity to travel worldwide. Since July 2019, she is the Director of International Affairs for Pratt Institute, a non-profit art and design institution in Brooklyn, NY, where she lives with her cat and partner.

Kristin can be reached at k.e.oberheide@gmail.com