

# International Undergraduate Student Engagement: Implications for Higher Education Administrators

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**Abstract:** Much has been written about engaging international students in their new campus environments. However, there is still a gap between literature and practice in terms of such students' initial experiences. A systematic review of 48 studies published between 2007 and 2018 was conducted to locate the research gaps, examine how and in what areas international undergraduate students are being encouraged to participate, and their unique experiences with the process. The findings show that few studies focused solely on international undergraduates. Their engagement varied depending on the student's background, major, region, and type of institution. These students faced unique and uneven experiences with social support, academics, community identity, connectedness, and perceived discrimination. Implications for higher education administrators, international students, and researchers are suggested.

**Keywords:** academic experience, administrator, higher education, international students, student engagement, undergraduate student

## Introduction

International students on college campuses around the world are a diverse and increasing population whose unique experiences have traditionally been overlooked. For example, the number of international students at U.S. institutions of higher learning has reached the highest levels to date. Enrollment has shown an overall increase of 7%, from 974,926 in the 2014–2015 academic year to 1,043,839 in the 2015–2016 term (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2016a). International students represent 5% of the total U.S. enrollment in higher education. In 2016, approximately 427,313 were undergraduates, representing 40.9% of the total number of international students in the United States (IIE, 2016b).

The increase in the number of international students has been commensurate with their contributions. Prior studies have stated that international students play an active role in enhancing internationalization and globalizing higher education (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bista, 2015). International students are also a significant financial resource, and

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especially important considering the ongoing decline in state funding. It is estimated that in the 2014–2015 academic year, these students contributed approximately \$36 billion to the U.S. economy (IIE, 2016c). It is clear that international students are essential to building a global society.

Despite a substantial amount of research being conducted on this special population of students, questions remain regarding how best to support international students' academic engagement and success (Telbis, Helgeson, & Kingsbury, 2014). A majority of previous studies focused on the challenges these students face related to transitioning, acculturation, the language barrier, and/or financial problems (e.g., Lee & Rice, 2007; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). International students are unique as a group, and comprised of individuals; their experiences undoubtedly vary. Relatively few studies have focused solely on international undergraduate students, despite the sharp increase in this group of students studying abroad (de Araujo, 2011). Thus, there is an increasing need to separately investigate their college experiences (Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Ross & Chen, 2015; Urban & Palmer, 2014; Zhao et al., 2005). Researchers who have attempted to compare students' levels of engagement have found that international students were either less engaged or lagged behind their American counterparts (Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Van Horne, Lin, Anson, & Jacobson, 2018).

Most institutions of higher learning have been attempting to increase international students' levels of engagement, making changes that are in line with certain policy requirements. A considerable amount of literature has emphasized the need to increase these types of opportunities for students (Van Horne et al., 2018). However, despite the various resources and programs that universities offer to improve international students' levels of involvement (Eldaba, 2016), evidence has suggested that schools are missing out on opportunities to fully integrate these learners and sustain their engagement with their academic environment (Siczek, 2015). Özturgut and Murphy (2009) analyzed the best practices for supporting international students and noted that there was a gap between the literature and common practice, especially in terms of programs designed for international students. According to Özturgut and Murphy (2009), universities are not using research to drive their practices for accommodating international students.

Changes in the overall political environment have also heightened the call for a greater level of engagement with international students. Durden (2016) argued that there is a need for campus leaders to pay closer attention to students, irrespective of their religion, culture, or background. How can colleges and universities enhance their students' engagement level? This question has become of primary importance not only to U.S. universities, but to schools in other nations as well. The purpose of this study was to identify the ways that international undergraduate students become fully engaged, compile a collection of their specific experiences, and determine any gaps in the current literature. This study amassed information useful to educational administrators, practitioners and researchers.

A systematic review of the literature on engaging international students was conducted for this research. First, the review describes the literature in terms of the kinds of research and analytical methods employed. Then, it highlights how and in what areas international undergraduate students are currently engaged. It then summarizes certain

unique experiences of international undergraduate students who engage with campus life, as reported in these studies. Next, this review presents a summary of the intervention practices and concludes with implications for higher education administrators and researchers regarding enhancing students' levels of engagement and their overall college experiences. This study focused on undergraduates because the transition to university life can be particularly difficult to manage at that age. Also, there are likely to be unique challenges and experiences encountered by these students while living in a foreign country, from which stakeholders could learn.

## **Definitions of Terms**

### **Student Engagement**

This research used Kuh's (2009) definition of student engagement: the "time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college," and "what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (p. 683). This definition alone, however, left the concept of student engagement overly broad. It is multifaceted and comprised of several dimensions. As a concept, Ashwin and McVitty (2015) noted that student engagement serves the purposes of various stakeholders, including students, educators, managers, and policymakers. Commenting on the ways researchers have used the term, Ashwin and McVitty (2015) argued that the inconsistent meaning of student engagement has made academics critical of the term. Therefore, because of this broad view, Kahu (2013) stated that no single research project has examined all of the dimensions of student engagement. However, focusing on the processes and relationships involved will help us understand a single variable without denying the existence of others or their importance in engaging students and meeting their needs. This study focuses on the behavioral perspective of student engagement, where students and their institutions devote themselves to meaningful educational activities that lead to desired outcomes.

### **Higher Education Administrators**

Higher education administrators are a group of individuals responsible for planning, organizing, directing, controlling, and evaluating the activities of major academic units (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2018). This study used the term to refer to individuals in charge of student services and who are frequently in contact with students. These staff members may include administrative professionals in the offices of international programs, resident life, student organizations, college departments, and career centers, as well as counsellors, student health center staff, and faculty.

## **Research Method**

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines were used to conduct the review for this study. PRISMA guidelines were deemed appropriate for summarizing and identifying gaps in the literature on undergraduate student engagement (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & The PRISMA Group, 2009). The

*Academic Search Ultimate, Psych INFO, Education Source, Humanities Source Ultimate, Humanities Source, ERIC, and SocIndex* databases were all systematically searched to retrieve abstracts of potentially relevant studies. A further search of journals that publish work on international students or issues in higher education was also conducted (i.e., *Journal of International Students, International Journal of Intercultural Relations, and Journal of Studies in International Education*). A secondary search scrutinizing the reference sections of the articles was carried out to ensure that all relevant and suitable publications were included in the review. The search encompassed four concepts: (a) international undergraduates, (b) engagement, (c) administrators or leaders, and (d) higher education. Appendix A presents the search terms used in this study.

## **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

To ensure that the retrieved articles applied to the stated aims, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established prior to conducting the systematic search. Retrieved studies were restricted to those (a) published between 2007 and 2018 and (b) that were peer-reviewed and empirically based. Articles were excluded from further review if (a) participants were not international undergraduate students at a university or college, (b) the study method was not presented in a manner clear enough to minimize the chance of misinterpretation, or (c) the work did not report outcomes separately for undergraduate and graduate students, especially when containing samples for both undergraduate and graduate or host students. Thus, articles that did not specifically show a contribution to international undergraduate student engagement were excluded.

The database and reference searches generated 987 publications, excluding duplicates. Other searches identified another 44 articles. A total of 1,001 articles were further screened for their relevance to the research topic. After reviewing the abstracts, 905 articles were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. After reviewing the articles, 40 studies were excluded because they did not report findings separately for undergraduate and graduate students and/or non-international students. Additionally, eight studies were excluded because they did not discuss the study's methods or process for data collection, and the trustworthiness of the findings could not be validated. The current review summarizes the 48 articles on this topic from different perspectives.

## **Results**

This section presents the findings of the literature review in five parts. The first includes descriptive information regarding the literature. The second discusses the research questions of how and in what areas international students are engaged. The third addresses the research topic of the unique experiences of international students who engage with campus life. The fourth presents interventions described in the literature, and the fifth offers implications of the findings for higher education administrators and future research topics related to enhancing international students' levels of engagement and their overall college experience.

## Descriptive Information

Twenty of the 48 total articles included in the review were published using data from the United States ( $n = 20$ , 42%). The remainder used data from Australia ( $n = 13$ , 27.1%), Canada ( $n = 5$ , 10.4%), the United Kingdom ( $n = 5$ , 10.4%), Hong Kong ( $n = 2$ , 4.2%), and Africa ( $n = 2$ , 4.2%). One study combined data from the US, Canada, UK, and Australia. Although all of the research reviewed was published between 2007 and 2018, the vast majority ( $n = 35$ , 73%) were published after 2010. Among the 48 papers, the sample sizes ranged from one to 55,000, all focusing on international students. Nineteen studies (40%) analyzed international students in general, including graduate students. Seventeen studies (35.4%) compared international and native undergraduate students, and twelve (25%) focused solely on international undergraduate students. Furthermore, the analysis showed that six studies (13%) involved students in engineering and physics. Two (4.2%) focused specifically on international black students, one in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines and the other in athletics. The rest did not address a specific discipline. This literature informed the current study's understanding of international students' engagement and experiences on foreign campuses. Most studies ( $n = 27$ , 56.3%) used qualitative research methods for their study design and data collection. Seventeen (35.4%) used a quantitative approach, and four (8.3%) used a mixed-methods tactic. Twenty-three studies used surveys, 15 employed semi-structured interviews and focus groups, and 10 included a combination of survey interviews, archival data, and focus groups for data collection.

The majority of the studies used more than one type of analysis. Of the total 48, 15 (31.3%) used  $t$  tests and analysis of variances to examine the differences among particular variables. Fourteen articles (29.2%) tested the associations between variables. Nine studies (18.8%) conducted content analyses. Ten (20.8%) applied thematic analysis. No study used specified qualitative approaches such as grounded theory. In sum, the descriptive statistics show that international student engagement has increasingly gained the attention of educational researchers, underscoring the importance of the present review.

## How and Where International Students are Engaged

Nine studies mentioned how students were being engaged. This literature showed that international students' engagement depended on their backgrounds (Bista, 2015; Özturgut, 2013), majors (Glass & Gesing, 2018; Zhang, Robb, Eyerman, & Goodman, 2017), and institution types (Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Özturgut, 2013; Van Horne et al., 2018). The literature review provided evidence that a student's background (i.e., ethnicity or country of origin) played a significant role in their level of engagement. George Mwangi, Fries-Britt, Peralta, and Daoud (2016) examined the intra-racial dynamics of student engagement and found that black international students were more engaged in areas relating to academics, collaborative and service learning, and interactions with faculty compared to other international students. The study pointed out that international students from China and Korea perceived themselves as more intelligent than other international students, so they were less likely to engage with others. Sam, Tetteh, and

Amponsah (2015) examined how international students in Ghana adapted and found that students from Western countries were more psychologically prepared for the challenges of studying in a foreign country. They turned what seemed like difficult academic and cultural situations into positive opportunities for learning.

Grayson (2008) and Korobova and Starobin (2015) found that international students were more involved in activities that led to high levels of learning (i.e., interacting with students and faculty) and personal development (i.e., technology). Advancing this idea, Zhang et al. (2017) examined activities that could increase the integration of international students into their higher education environments. The authors found that international students' learning and engagement was high, with e-learning tools such as virtual worlds and gamification being prominent. According to the authors, these collaborative social activities were better than formal courses for improving language skills and international students' overall performances. Although there is no prerequisite knowledge for this type of user, instructors are required to carefully plan if learners are to benefit from these resources.

Other studies determined that international students were less engaged in campus activities, which made them perceive the campus environment negatively (Glass, 2012; Hsieh, 2007; Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Tsevi, 2018). Korobova and Starobin (2015) compared the levels of student engagement and academic success of international and native students and found that international students were less engaged in areas such as writing papers or reports, tutoring other students (free or paid), participating in community-based projects, working with faculty members on projects outside of coursework, and doing internships and engaging in practical or field experiences. According to Korobova and Starobin (2015), international students preferred activities that featured interactions with other students.

This review has provided evidence that international students' levels of engagement differ by institution type (Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Van Horne et al., 2018). Furthermore, Korobova and Starobin (2015) explained that students in private institutions operated on the philosophy of "I deserve because I am paying for it," while those in public institutions were motivated more by the notion that "hard work pays." The two diverging philosophies determined the resources the institution allocated for student engagement.

## **Unique Experiences of International Students who Engage with Campus Life**

International undergraduate students reported uneven experiences, which can be categorized into the following themes: social, academic, connectedness and identity, and perceived discrimination. Below is a brief description of each.

### **Social Experiences**

Twelve of the reviewed studies mentioned international students' social experiences. Studies reported that students who participated in on-campus social organizations benefited from social support (Bowser, Danaher, & Somasundaram, 2007; Glass & Gesing, 2018; Hendrickson, 2018; Tsai & Wong, 2012; Van Horne et al., 2018). For example,

Bowser et al. (2007) analyzed a self-reported institutional survey of international students, finding that by participating in social organizations (i.e., professional, religious, informal recreational, and other student groups), international students made friends, which helped improve their sense of belonging. Through these friendships, international students benefited from assistance in planning their academic work, especially those who were unfamiliar with the foreign country's educational system (Hendrickson, 2018; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Tsai & Wong, 2012).

Conversely, some research reported that international students who lacked social support were negatively affected both academically and psychologically by experiences related to tension, depression, and confusion (Sato, Hodge, & Eckert, 2018; Tsai & Wong, 2012). However much international students tried, they found it challenging to establish levels of social support in their host countries that were comparable to what they enjoyed in their home countries. Similarly, Smith and Khawaja (2011), Young (2014), and Hsieh (2007) argued that unfamiliarity with the host country's social and learning expectations often led to a lack of participation in both academic and non-academic activities by foreign students. As a result, international students relied on each other to learn about social and educational practices, and the expectations of host country classrooms. According to a study by Rosenthal, Russell, and Thomson (2007), this kind of socializing pattern was limiting to on-campus engagement. The researchers noted that being aware of these and other differences among international students could help in establishing a multicultural environment that would improve all students' social experiences.

### **Academic Experiences**

Eleven of the reviewed studies presented international students' experiences related to learning environment, language, and curricula. Kim et al. (2017) examined the experiences of international undergraduate students at research universities in the US, using data from the 2010 University of California undergraduate experience survey that was distributed across 10 campuses. In that study, international students reported lower levels of learning involvement in critical reasoning activities. Also, international students expressed less satisfaction with the quality of instruction, academic advising, and communications with faculty. Researchers such as Smith and Khawaja (2011), Lee and Rice (2007), Eldaba (2016), Tsevi (2018), and Sato et al. (2018) also found that international students struggled to adapt to the learning environments in their host countries. Lee and Rice (2007) and Eldaba (2016) attributed this problem to difficulties in establishing positive relationships with native peers, lecturers, and administrators. In most cases, these students reported being accustomed to a teacher-centered form of learning, which encouraged memorization and evaluation and required the reproduction of lecture notes as a measure of learning. Hsieh (2007), in a narrative study, found that the nature of the higher education setting disempowered international students. Students reported being isolated and silenced in class, struggling to be acknowledged as intelligent despite their hard work; they were often considered incompetent. These findings complemented those of Glass (2012), Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, and Cong (2015), Van Horne et al. (2018), and Smith and Khawaja (2011) who found that international students struggled

to adapt to the learning environment, and this discouraged them from getting involved in on-campus activities.

In other studies, international students explained that language, especially academic English, hindered them from participating in academic activities (Earnest, Joyce, de Mori, & Silvagni, 2010; Eldaba, 2016). Advancing this idea, Eldaba (2016) used a logic model to evaluate a program for international students' social and academic development, finding that students lacked confidence in their communication and listening abilities. Similarly, Earnest et al. (2010) and Glass et al. (2015) found that a lack of proficiency in English kept international undergraduate students from participating in class discussions. As a result, this student group often opted to remain quiet unless asked to participate. Sometimes they did so because they felt that their contributions were not respected or properly taken into consideration (Hsieh, 2007). Other concerns ranged from worrying about failing exams (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Korobova & Starobin, 2015) and challenging pedagogies (Bista, 2015; Bowser et al., 2007) to feeling embarrassed when unable to answer a question or participate in class (Earnest et al., 2010).

In three studies, lack of academic support and inclusive curricula were mentioned as problems international students faced in foreign countries (Bourn, 2011; Grayson, 2008; Van Gyn, Schuerholz-Lehr, Caws, & Preece, 2009). Each study highlighted that a lack of academic and social support affected these students' overall performance. For example, Grayson (2008) evaluated the relationship between experiences and objectively measured self-assessment outcomes, finding that even though international students were equally involved in campus activities, they lacked academic support as compared to native students. According to the author, academic experiences explained more of the variance in self-assessment than did the objectively measured outcomes. Moreover, in studies by Van Gyn et al. (2009) and Earnest et al. (2010), international students described the teaching they received as including little consideration of international topics. In particular, Earnest et al. (2010) analyzed the ways institutions responded to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, finding that support systems and programs for international students were inadequate. Earnest et al. (2010) and Van Gyn et al. (2009) determined that professionals lacked the pedagogical knowledge and skills needed to make sophisticated changes reflecting a comprehensive implementation of an inclusive curriculum. Even though the foreign learning culture might promote a more equitable environment, the findings of a study by Kim et al. (2017) showed that international students experienced college differently, and needed extra time to understand the requirements and conventions in their new learning environments.

Contrary to the above findings, studies by Korobova and Starobin (2015), Glass and Gesing (2018), and Bista (2015) reported that international students participating in on-campus activities were enriched by their educational experiences. For instance, Bista (2015) used a sample of 705 to analyze Asian international students' relationships with faculty, peers, and administrative staff. The author found a small positive correlation between Asian students' involvement and the five domains of learning (i.e., personal development, science and technology, general education, vocational preparation, and intellectual skills). According to Bista, differences in learning styles, writing patterns, and academic expectations in native and international classrooms posed problems

for international students. Bista also pointed to four factors that were crucial in determining the quality of learning experiences for international students in new academic environments: gender, academic level, length of stay, and country of origin. For instance, Bista found that students who lived in their host country for 1 year or less reported lower learning gains than did students spending 2 or more years in their host environments. Also, undergraduate students had lower gains in learning compared to graduate students, and students from regions such as East Asia had lower gains in learning compared to those from Southeast, Central, and South Asia. The study findings suggest that international students need to cope with preconceived notions and habits when getting used to their new academic environments.

### **Self-Connectedness**

Ten studies mentioned that international students experienced a feeling of self-connectedness. In these studies, self-connectedness referred to the way international students came together and interacted (Cole & Zhou, 2014; Hirai, Frazier, & Syed, 2015; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2007; Tsevi, 2018). Connectedness or disconnectedness not only directs individuals' feeling, thoughts, and behaviors in social situations, but also determines one's self-esteem (Glass et al., 2015; Rosenthal et al., 2007; Tran & Vu, 2016; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008; Spiro, 2014; Van Horne et al., 2018) and may influence their satisfaction with their academic environment (Geary, 2015; Tran & Pham, 2016; Tran & Vu, 2016). Rosenthal et al. (2007) used a sample of 979 from a large university in Australia to examine international students' perceptions of social connectedness. Rosenthal and colleagues pointed to four aspects of social connectedness among students: (a) connectedness related to students' communication skills and cultural background; (b) social mixing and interactions with co-cultural groups; (c) involvement in organizations, associations, and groups; and (d) connections to home and family. The majority of the students reported helping others in Melbourne; however, some desired increased personal support from those who knew and cared about them as individuals.

A study by Cole and Zhou (2014) showed that self-connectedness can be achieved through multicultural interactions. Glass, Gesing, Hales, and Cong (2017) and Cole and Zhou (2014) found that multicultural interactions have a substantial impact on educational settings, both academically and socially (i.e., improving connectedness). However, this opportunity is not being fully exploited on campuses. Advancing this idea, Urban and Palmer (2014) examined the extent to which international students were utilized as cultural resources, and how this affected their perception of the value of the academic experiences they received from U.S. institutions. The authors found that these students were not actively involved as cultural resources even though they wanted to do more to help others understand their home countries and cultures. Furthermore, Urban and Palmer explained that diverse interactions depended on structural diversity and certain institutional characteristics. Urban and Palmer's study underscored a need to reexamine the institutional structures and features that might hinder diversity in student relationships. These studies challenge both institutions and international students to help develop approaches that allow multicultural interactions, as well as support.

## **Social Identity**

Several studies showed that social identity had a positive impact on academic performance, mental health, and well being during international students' life transitions (Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Hendres, 2011; Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). In one study, Bliuc and colleagues (2011) explored the relationships among students' social identities, academic achievement, and approaches to learning, employing two scales: surface and deep approaches to learning. Using a sample of 183 health psychology students, Bliuc et al. found that deep approaches to learning were positively associated with students' social identities and positively predicted academic achievement, whereas the opposite was found in surface learning approaches. The study further suggested that students' social identities determined their future professional identification. Haslam et al. (2009) reached the same conclusion. Haslam and colleagues used a sample of 237 international students in Australia to test hypotheses regarding social changes and international students' life transitions. The authors found that students who maintained their social identities in the context of life transitioning had good health and well being, and reported higher levels of academic performance.

Other studies have reported that international students who interacted with their learning and living environments facilitated changes in their lives. They developed strong personal identities, a sense of agency, and resilience by recognizing their unique cultural traits when they encountered different practices in their host countries (Gu et al., 2010; Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013). Pham and Saltmarsh (2013) further reported that despite feeling abnormal, most international students reported negotiating their identities by acquiring and embracing attributes of their host countries that allowed them to achieve their academic goals. On the contrary, studies such as those of Tsai and Wong (2012) and Gu et al. (2010) argued that international students lost their social identities and felt powerless. This challenge further contributed to international students' loss of professional identity (Gu et al., 2010). As stated by Tsai and Wong (2012), this feeling manifested more in administrative hurdles related to learning and in dealing with protocols such as health care and financial issues, which reinforced their feeling of being outsiders.

## **Perceived Discrimination**

Three studies pointed to international students' experiences of discrimination. Wadsworth, Hecht, and Jung (2008), Hsieh (2007), Smith and Khawaja (2011), and Van Horne et al. (2018) all reported that discrimination affected international students' satisfaction with their academic programs and social relations. In particular, perceived discrimination kept international students from forming and maintaining social networks, as well as participating in on-campus activities; these experiences directly and indirectly affected their learning outcomes. Studies by George Mwangi et al. (2016) and Lee and Rice (2007) argued that perceived discrimination against international students varied depending on gender, degree objective, and region of origin. Lee and Rice found that most students from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East experienced at least some discrimination, whereas learners from Canada, Europe, and Australia did not. In a study of 24 black undergraduate and graduate students in physics, George Mwangi et

al. found that black international students had different educational experiences resulting from race and nationality. The findings of that study suggest that students of color, and in particular black students, felt significant racial tension on campus, dealt with prejudice or discrimination from their peers and faculty, and experienced more pressure to conform to stereotypes. Similarly, Siczek (2015) found that international students were often stereotyped based on assumptions about their linguistic or cultural backgrounds and other differences.

### **Interventions to Better Engage International Students**

The interventions reported in the literature can be categorized into four subgroups: academic, social support, self-identity and connectedness, and discrimination. Many of the reviewed studies suggested two or more interventions; for example, increasing academic and social engagement and experiences could comprise one or more of the individual interventions, as presented in Appendix B. The interventions discussed in this section aim at increasing international students' engagement in academic and social activities, improving their self-identity and connectedness, and preventing discrimination in campus environments.

### **Academic Support and Engagement**

Several of the interventions focused on increasing academic support for and the engagement of international students. The intervention actions included increasing engagement opportunities (George Mwangi et al., 2016; Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Van Horne et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2017) in areas in which international students are most often engaged, and building staff capacity through campus training, workshops, faculty learning communities, and new faculty orientations, where educators can exchange ideas and concerns regarding engaging international students (George Mwangi et al., 2016; Gu et al., 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Rogers-Sirin & Sirin, 2009; Rosenthal et al., 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Other studies suggested building students' capacity to establish positive relationships with peers, faculty, and administrators (Eldaba, 2016; Hsieh, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007; Sawir et al., 2008; Urban & Palmer, 2014; Tsevi, 2018).

Other researchers have suggested creating awareness of existing support services and programs designed for international students as ways of facilitating their overall success (Brunsting, Zachry, & Takeuchi, 2018; Kenyon, Frohard-Dourlent, & Roth, 2012; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Sato et al., 2018; Tsai & Wong, 2012). Similarly, Korobova and Starobin (2015) and Earnest et al. (2010) proposed that institutions consider conducting special intensive orientation sessions and multiple summer bridge programs to support successful transitioning into the new academic environment. Acknowledging that institutions have already established programs for these students, Eldaba (2016) and Geary (2016) suggested evaluating and upgrading programs designed for international social and academic development.

## **Social Support**

Surprisingly, most of the interventions involving social support targeted institutions investing more resources in activities supporting students' adjustment. Three studies focused on creating a multicultural environment within which students could freely interact (Brunsting et al., 2018; Rosenthal et al., 2007; Young, 2014) as a strategy for increasing their social support. Two other studies suggested creating awareness of the social support services available on campus (Kenyon et al., 2012; Tsai & Wong, 2012).

## **Improving Self-identity and Connectedness**

Table A1 in the appendix presents the range of interventions that emerged from the literature. These interventions were categorized into five areas, as follows: (a) creating more intimate social activities that could bridge the gap between local and international students (Rosenthal et al., 2007); (b) providing incentives for native students to encourage them to volunteer as conversation mentors to international students (Eldaba, 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007; Sawir et al., 2008; Urban & Palmer, 2014); (c) improving publicity for social events to increase interactions among students of different nationalities (Spiro, 2014); (d) modifying course content and class activities to be more inclusive of international cultures (Gu et al., 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Rosenthal et al., 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011); and (e) organizing university trips/functions that would encourage student interaction because of shared connections from being at the same institution (Hirai et al., 2015; Rosenthal et al., 2007). The focus was on improving students' self-identity and connectedness.

## **Preventing Discrimination**

Another cluster of interventions, those dealing with perceived discrimination, was reported as an obstacle hindering international students from actively participating in on-campus activities. The researchers proposed creating campus events that would help integrate students and create awareness of the challenging environment international students faced (George Mwangi et al., 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007; Rosenthal et al., 2007; Sawir et al., 2008; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Siczek (2015) proposed ongoing professional development activities regarding how to respond to culturally and linguistically diverse students. This would improve these students' sense of belonging and enhance their confidence when engaging in on-campus activities.

## **Discussions and Conclusions**

A review of 48 articles was conducted to better understand the current state of the literature and identify the gaps regarding international undergraduate students' engagement and experiences. The study compiled information that will be useful for both practitioners and students. One of the key findings was the low percentage (25%) of studies focusing solely on international undergraduate students. Most considered international students in general or compared international students with native learners. This finding is similar to that of de Araujo (2011). The lack of separation between undergraduates and graduates international from native learners may hinder efforts to improve engagement.

The ways students became engaged and the areas attracting them varied depending on the student's background, major, race/ethnicity, and type of institution. Even so, the literature was inconsistent with regards to the areas in which international students were most engaged. Whereas some studies showed that international undergraduate students were more involved in activities that led to high levels of learning (i.e., interacting with other students and faculty) and personal development (i.e., technology; Grayson, 2008; Korobova & Starobin, 2015), others showed that students were less engaged in academic activities (Hsieh, 2007; Korobova & Starobin, 2015).

The literature provided evidence that international students had uneven experiences relating to social and academic topics, as well as networks and perceived discrimination. These experiences varied depending on factors such as region (Bista, 2015; George Mwangi et al., 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007; Sam, 2015), length of stay in the host country (Bista, 2015; Van Horne et al., 2018), competence level, academic program, and quality of interpersonal relationships with members of their organization and community (Hsieh, 2007; Kenyon et al., 2012; Rosenthal et al., 2007; Tsai & Wong, 2012). While these factors may have significant effects on international students' participation in on-campus activities and their overall academic success, there was a lack of demonstrated effort to factor them in to international student programming and planning; in other cases, they were underutilized.

Several interventions were described for higher education administrators to better serve international undergraduate students in the ever-changing campus environment. Some of the common interventions listed include: (a) facilitating regular professional development training for faculty, staff, and students to communicate regarding the significance of creating an inclusive learning environment for all (Gu et al., 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Rosenthal et al., 2007; Sato et al., 2018; Smith & Khawaja, 2011); (b) creating awareness of the university support services available to international students and their usefulness (Hsieh, 2007; Kenyon et al., 2012; Tsai & Wong, 2012); (c) formalizing peer support learning and mentoring for international students (Rosenthal et al., 2007); and (d) providing a broad range of content that includes multicultural elements for promoting student interactions.

In conclusion, engaging international student does not necessarily improve their experiences in foreign institutions; rather, there are multiple factors that need to be considered. The findings suggest that adjustment takes time, and international students require significant support from their host institutions. This work challenges institutional leaders to recognize the diverse needs of international students and suggests that institutions of higher education reexamine the ways they currently engage these types of learners; also, if possible, programs should change to accommodate students' evolving needs. Administrators should embrace an infusion approach that requires staff to accumulate new knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values by understanding their international students' unique experiences.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Higher Education Administrators and International Students**

The literature indicated that institutions have put in place mechanisms for engaging international students, but it was also clear that students' backgrounds, majors, and types of institution cannot be overlooked as considerable factors in their level of engagement, sense of belonging, and overall achievement. The results are significant for informing higher education administrators on the areas in which international students are more and less engaged, and the need for further investment in areas that would increase their participation and support their success. Moreover, the findings that international students' engagement differed by type of institution has significant implications for higher education administrators; they should conduct regular needs assessments of their international students to adjust their programming strategies to promote engagement of a diverse student population.

The uneven experiences of undergraduate students also have important implications for higher education administrators; they should endeavor to develop a more holistic understanding of the unique experiences of international students and factor them into their programming. International students have different needs and require a variety of patterns of engagement. Having a comprehensive grasp of the experiences of these students will help to clarify their expectations and assist in planning and allocating resources; it will also minimize some of the uncertainty and academic stress related to university life.

The various interventions highlighted in previous studies indicated that solely having an international program in place is not sufficient. There is a need to continually invest financial and human resources in these types of programs. Moreover, various interventions have suggested that there is a need to involve various stakeholders, ranging from top administrators to faculty, researchers, host students, and the community, as well as the international students themselves, to improve the experiences and engagement levels of international undergraduate students. Based on the findings of Brunsting et al. (2018) and Sato et al. (2018), international undergraduate students also have a role to play in improving their level of engagement. They need to be proactive, seek more intense academic challenges, plan meaningful interactions with faculty, staff, and other students, improve their connectedness by engaging in serious conversations with students from other races, regions, and personal backgrounds, participate in practical and field experiences, and get more involved in the learning community and community service to improve their overall academic experience.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The differences among international students in terms of backgrounds, countries of origin, competence levels, self-identities, and majors highlights the need for further examination of how these factors might affect overall engagement and performance, as well as how experiences might compare as students transition to foreign institutions. Future research

should investigate the ways international students react to their particular issues and experiences.

Some studies have noted that although institutions have implemented programs for international students, there is a lack of research that adequately examines the effectiveness of these programs and makes connections between practice and research and/or theory and practice. Based on the current study's findings, a model is needed for evaluating the effectiveness of programs for international students across institutions of higher learning. Although this study focused only on undergraduates, the literature was obtained from various nations that admit international students. Therefore, the findings could be generalized to all institutions with international students.

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