Empirical Article

"It is always hard at the beginning:" Peer-to-peer Advice for International Students Transitioning to University Life in the U.S.

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This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT or other support technologies.

Abstract

Formal and informal peer-to-peer support through advice plays an important role in enhancing students' experiences and ensuring their success in higher education. For international students who often face social and cultural challenges adapting to their new university environment, direct and authentic guidance from peers can be vital in helping them acclimate and cope with their transition to campus. This paper examines the cross-cultural adjustment experiences of over 400 international students enrolled at a mid-sized, research-intensive university located in the United States (U.S.). Relying on a qualitative research design, we analyzed data from reflection essays written by international students between 2013 and 2021 and used Oberg`s culture shock theory (1960) as a lens to interpret data on experiences that impacted their sociocultural adjustment. Based on their lived experiences, these students identified specific areas that current and future international students could focus on to ease their adjustment to a new culture and academic environment. Guided by five main themes, the discussion highlights salient factors that impact international students, calling for new ways for addressing their adjustment to university life in the U.S. Our findings enabled us to offer insights to university officials as they develop and deliver acculturation and transition programs to their international student community.

Introduction

In recent decades, U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) have continuously enrolled larger numbers of international students, averaging about one million students since 2017 (Institute of International Education, 2022). This growing number of international students is increasingly diverse, with a varied profile similar to the changing domestic student composition on U.S. campuses (Chapman, 1999; Veerasamy, 2021). Scholarship reveals that international students arrive from different sociocultural and economic backgrounds accompanied by different levels of academic and language preparedness (Bista & Foster, 2016; Jean-Francois, 2019). These students are often not ready to face the complex sociocultural norms that characterize the U.S., and, within classrooms, this can impact their academic goals (Li & Zizzi, 2018; Smith & Khawaja 2011; Zhou et al., 2008). This unpreparedness is not necessarily based on a lack of agency on their part but is instead based on the "sojourner's" experience as they enter new cultural spaces.

In general, when international students transition into new norms in their host culture, the acculturation process is often challenging (Ammigan, 2021; Shafaei et al., 2018). The process of acculturation occurs when individuals from different ethnic backgrounds interact, and during these interactions they often negotiate to avoid conflict, allowing for "cultural and psychological change" (Berry, 2005, p. 698) to occur While sociocultural adjustments align with behavioral adjustments, psychological adjustments correspond with emotional and affective changes during a sojourner's adaptation phases (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Unfamiliarity with host cultures requires intercultural adjustment. As they transition into their new environment, students often need to adapt their cultural norms to engage effectively with peers from the host culture, including with members of the broader campus and local communities (Koo et al., 2021). Unfortunately, adequate support for cross-cultural adjustment and developing a sense of belonging tend to be lacking on university campuses (Jean-Francois, 2019). The current study helps fill this gap by pinpointing specific aspects of culture that accompany *culture shock* during international students' transition to their new environment. To this end, we identified information from the lived experiences and voices of existing international students and turned them into insights and advice to support the sociocultural adjustment of incoming international students.

Our analysis of reflective essays written by 430 students between 2013 and 2021 enabled us to highlight factors and themes across international student experiences that affect their sociocultural adjustment in the U.S. Relating narratives from their initial arrival experiences to navigating the first semester on campus allowed participants to provide informal advice to their peers on navigating and adapting to their new environment. Peer-to-peer advice was gathered informally, namely from international students based on a relationship outside of a formal or campus supported peer-to-peer advice program. Although student experiences are influenced by multiple factors including race, ethnicity, cultural background, gender, economic status, academic preparedness, and more (Kim, 2012; Lynch et al., 2023; Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022), we do not disaggregate students along these differences. Instead, we offer an initial overview of the common patterns of international student experiences as a group and identify participant quotes by student home country. We discuss areas of challenges to international student sociocultural adjustment and share their advice to better support the adjustment process of future international students. Research has established that peer interactions have a positive impact on learners' cognitive and social experiences as they develop and transition into higher education environments (Mckeachie et al., 1986; Magolda & Astin, 1993; Keup, 2012). Over the years, HEIs have harnessed the various forms of peer interactions to use in support of student success (Shook & Keup, 2012). In this study, we valorize informal peer advice offered by international students to facilitate the sociocultural adjustment of future international students to the U.S. and recommend using this advice to enhance campus supported international student services programs.

Literature Review

When internationally mobile students transition between institutions and systems of higher education, they also have to adjust to their host environment - including the city, country, culture, institution, and people (Roberts & Ammigan, 2024). Institutional support mechanisms are vital structures to have in place, but much of the intercultural transition, namely

interactions between cultures, occurs outside of the classroom, and often depends on an individual student's ability to transition (Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009). Scholars have suggested that international students are expected to adjust or adapt to American norms to benefit from "social capital," namely "the social relationships that provide access to institutional resources and knowledge of cultural norms" (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013, p. 413). Acknowledging two components to "social capital," namely an institutional and a non-institutional aspect, Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) state that "social capital" has a broader definition which includes "social resources that can be mobilized through the construction and maintenance of institutional and non-institutional social networks" (p. 413).

When international students arrive in the U.S., they are transitioning from the context of their known cultural norms into unfamiliar territory. Cultural norms exist within individual cultures. According to Hofstede (2011), "culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (p. 3). The term culture has been applied to several types of collectives including ethnic groups, nations, organizations, and individuals who exist within these collectives. On the whole, research has shown that cultural differences at any collective level impact international students on university campuses (Le & Gardner, 2010).

Institutional Support

Over the last 50 years, institutional support has been identified as a critical component of international student success in research studies. Relying on *transition* theory, Schlossberg et al. (1995) suggested that HEIs should examine the support they provide as international students begin to transition through *culture shock,* namely the accompanying anxiety of being abroad in a different cultural context (Oberg, 1960) or "the collective impact of… unfamiliar experiences on cultural travelers"(Zhou et al., 2008, p. 63). In his seminal work on cultural adjustment, Oberg (1960) coined the term *culture shock,* theorizing that it is characterized by different stages. Acknowledging the heterogeneous nature of international students as a group, researchers have recommended that institutions be mindful of the varying levels of personal development and of adaptable support services for this diverse student body (Perez-Encinas & Rodriquez-Pomeda, 2018; Roberts et al., 2021). In 2008, Zhou et al. pointed out that some international students are "unaware and falsely assume that the new society operates like their home country" (p. 63). In his Input - Environment - Output (IEO) model, Astin (2012) asserts that the college environment impacts student development. In this vein, scholars have examined how environments shape international students' experiences and success on campus.

In their Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model, Museus and Smith (2016) recommended paying attention to campus environment when addressing student sense of belonging on campuses. To enhance student sense of belonging, the scholars suggest cultivating cross-cultural interactions for international students on campus. The CECE model emerged after Museus (2014) examined the experiences and outcomes of diverse college students and measured the extent to which campus environments are culturally engaging. Briggs and Ammigan's (2017) Collaborative Programming Outreach (CPO) model stresses the importance of partnerships between different units on campus, including with the wider community, to better serve the academic, social, and cultural needs of international students.

In 2017, Heng explored how host institutions could better support the college experiences of international students in the U.S. and discussed implications for faculty, school administrators, support services staff, and local students. Students interviewed in their study wished that professors would be more patient and reassuring in class and would consider their cultural background as newcomers when teaching, assessing, and interacting with them. Students welcomed the opportunity to receive feedback on draft assignments and homework ahead of time due to language barriers and their unfamiliarity with the U.S. system of education. Also, students asked that their host peers be more inclusive, open-minded, curious, and less stereotypical about their culture. The international students in Heng's (2017) study also hoped to receive better support and resources from the university's academic and student services units, including from their international student office. Expectations included improved academic orientation programs, course availability and selection, group work and discussions, student mentorship programs, social activities, opportunities to practice English, immigration and career support, and housing and dining experiences. Gomez et al.'s (2014) study found that students who engaged in campus groups, including those related to recreational activities and social programs, showed greater accumulation gains.

Tozini and Castiello-Gutiérrez's (2022) study examined the importance of institutional support during COVID-19 and found that HEIs need to provide clear and prompt communication to international students, ideally tailored to students by academic level and subsequent needs. Additionally, HEIs need to provide better support and socialization opportunities to reduce occurrences of stress and isolation (Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022). Similarly, Lynch et al. (2023) examined how institutional support structures related to international students' trauma experiences during COVID-19 as well as challenges posed by shifting immigration policies. They found that students who felt the institution provided adequate outreach and support and had a friend with whom they felt comfortable sharing and communicating with, showed lower levels of trauma (Lynch et al., 2023).

Not only is providing institutional support essential, but university officials and administrators must continuously adapt to changing student needs and identities. Critical international education scholarship has examined how college faculty, staff, and students can unintentionally marginalize international students, particularly students of color. In Lee and Rice's (2007) seminal study that examined neo-racism as a construct in the international student experience, student interviewees indicated that non-white international students experienced racism at an alarmingly high rate (Lee & Rice, 2007). The authors recommended that institutions shift from enrolling international students and expecting acculturation, toward tailored support and a critical analysis of how welcoming the campus is in its policies and interactions. A study of first year international students of color by Yao et al. (2019) found that these students navigated common stressors and transitions while experiencing micro aggressions and challenges with finding social networks (Briscoe et al., 2022). They discussed how the intersectionality of international students is often not considered in typical university programs or support structures. Students may be seen only as an international student, when other identities they hold such as race, religion, or gender are more salient (Yao et al., 2019). As such, HEIs must evolve to better understand and support the intersectional needs of international students.

Non-institutional Support

Scholars of student development, such as Baxter Magolda (2001), state that students in college embark on a journey of "self-authorship," namely "the capacity to internally define [one's] own beliefs, identity and relationships" (p. xvi). This requires students to trust external authorities that impact their lives and understand the wider world including their own selves. During this journey, Baxter Magolda (2001) states that any discord with their external authorities brings students to a crossroads where they are challenged to rely on their internal sense of self. The scholar posits that students feel supported when their thoughts and feelings are respected and when they are encouraged to handle their experiences and solve problems in a collaborative environment (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

In their new cultural context, international students face cultural challenges (Deardorff, 2006), and studies have addressed specific cultural challenges faced by Asian students in particular (Chennamsetti, 2020; Heng, 2018; Li & Gasser, 2005). These include homesickness and loneliness from having to live away from family and friends; self-doubt and low self-confidence due to the lack of English proficiency; and higher levels of anxiety resulting from the fear of being misunderstood and misinterpreted by faculty and peers. In general, when navigating cultural challenges, social support from other people helps with tackling psychological stressors (Dalton et al., 2001), and international students are often in need of extra support compared to domestic students (Jou, 1993; Roberts et al., 2021). International students need interactions with their peers for recreational and social support; and when students interact with their own compatriots, it enhances their self-esteem, reinforces their cultural identity, and reduces acculturative stress (Bochner et al., 1977; Shadowen et al., 2019). Notably, scholarship shows that as they transition into an individualistic society, international students from collectivistic cultural backgrounds prefer to turn to their social networks and trusted communities to seek advice and recommendations when facing challenges in college. This is largely due to the understanding of and perceived familiarity with the issues at hand by students from the same culture (Heng, 2018). According to Louw et al. (1998), support from like-minded groups, such as social peers who have similar shared experiences, help students develop coping skills. If students have peers they can relate to and ask questions, this usually helps create a caring and inclusive campus environment (Arthur, 2017; Tanaka

& Reid, 1997). Hence, peers who have lived experiences when adjusting to life on American campuses can be a good source of "noninstitutional [support by] social networks" (Rose- Redwood et al., 2013, p. 413).

Understanding the host culture and developing skills to transition into it can facilitate students' integration in their new university life–academically, linguistically, and socioculturally (Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017; Li & Zizzi, 2018). Targeted advice from international students in Heng's (2018) study revealed the need for international students to prepare themselves linguistically and culturally prior to arriving on campus. Furthermore, suggestions called for students to improve their reading skills and familiarize themselves with contemporary digital and non-digital media as ways to adjust academically and socially. How international students from different countries adjust or adapt to American culture will impact their educational success, and the challenges that stand in their way can be learned from personal or shared experiences. Connecting with peers not only with similar international roots, but with similarities in ethnic, racial, or cultural background, can help students to find their place and flourish (Gomez et al., 2014; Lee & Rice, 2008; Yao et al, 2019).

Peer-to-Peer Support Programs

Peer-to-peer support for students has been a cornerstone of campus programing at American HEIs. Research has established that students learn best from each other and peer-to-peer academic and social support contributes to both learner and institutional success (Latino & Unite, 2012). Peer-to-peer interactions have led to varying types of support and advice, namely academic, social, mental, and more. While the nature of campus supported peer-to-peer programs have targeted the student population in general, peer-to-peer interactions among international students have received attention from scholars such as Briggs & Ammigan (2017). The scholars have advocated for campus supported programming that brings international students together through initiatives like coffee hours, shopping trips, and other social engagement events. Yet, attempts to gather advice by current international students to incoming international students, formally or informally, are scant.

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Theoretical Framework

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This paper uses a theoretical interpretive lens to explore the subjective experiences of international students who are enrolled at a mid-sized public research university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. It also aims to share analysis on informal peer-to-peer advice by international students, based on their cross-cultural adjustment experiences, to better support the adjustment and adaptation of incoming or future international students, and to inform campus programming on international student services. The following research question guided our study: Based on student experiences as expressed in their essays, what examples of informal peer-to-peer interactions can help create advice to incoming international students to help them adapt to university life in the United States?

We use Oberg's (1960) seminal work on *culture shock* theory as the guiding framework for data analysis because of its continued relevance in the field. Culture shock has been more recently defined as 'the process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment' (Pedersen, 1995, p. 1). In his seminal work on *culture shock*, Oberg (1960) identified four stages of cross-cultural adjustment by sojourners, or short-term visitors, to new cultures. Over the years, the sojourner definition has been adopted to describe temporary residents in a culture such as international students (Arthur, 2004).

In Oberg's model of *culture shoc*k, sojourners first undergo the *Honeymoon* stage which lasts for approximately 6 months. During this stage sojourners are fascinated and elated with the new culture. During the second stage (*Irritation*), sojourners become hostile to the new culture, and they display emotionally stereotyped attitudes towards the host culture and identify with fellow sojourners. During the third *Adjustment* stage, sojourners increase their knowledge of language and their ability to get around in the new culture in preparation for the last stage. During stage four, sojourners enjoy a state of *adaptation*. During this stage, sojourner anxiety and social discomfort dissipates and customs from the new culture are accepted and enjoyed.

As a foundational basis in cross-cultural studies, Oberg's model was extended by Adler's (1975) *transitional experiences* concept to include more stages of cross-cultural adjustment. Oberg's model approaches culture shock from the

paradigm of symptoms, cause, and cure, and has been used extensively including when examining cross-cultural adjustment of international students (Zhou et al., 2008) and studying identity formation by international students (Kim, 2012). Relevant extensions of Oberg's *culture shock* phenomena include the 'cultural learning' theoretical approach. *Cultural learning* is a theory embedded within cross-cultural adaptation that describes the process and challenges that sojourners may face in novel cultural environments as they navigate daily life (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). It focuses on the behavioral adaptation and understanding that is needed for an international student (in this study's case) to function well in a new cultural environment (Ward et al, 2001). This may often include both verbal and non-verbal communications, and cultural nuances that are not apparent even to students who may be familiar with the host culture through technology and globalization (Pacheco, 2020). Although these theoretical extensions and modifications provide additional context, we chose to use Oberg's original theory to connect to the large contingent of the field that continues to utilize his original theory.

Methodology

This study is part of a broader research project that examined international student experiences on a U.S. campus. Using a qualitative research design, namely document analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Krippendorff, 2013), we collected data from 430 reflection essays written by international students between 2013 and 2021. Using Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, we analyzed content from the essays and coded the raw data using both Nvivo 12 Qualitative Software and non-software coding (Creswell, 2013). The first round of coding using Nvivo 12 Qualitative Software was focused on axial coding while the non-software coding process used lean coding. This dual approach helped add depth to our analysis. We approached our codes inductively, allowing them to reflect the data set, and we reorganized our codes under themes following discussions. This allowed for cross-verification triangulation and validation to ensure trustworthiness of our findings. Our joint codes yielded five themes: (1) American Culture is Often Different than Expected; (2) Practical Challenges of Social Adjustment; (3) Navigating Academic and Classroom Differences; (4) Resiliency is Vital; and (5) Developing a Sense of Belonging.

Data Collection

In 2013, the International Student Services office at the university site launched a reflection essay contest to gather information about international student experiences on campus. During the fall semester since 2013, all registered international students were invited via email to share an essay about their cross-cultural experiences on campus, including any advice they might offer to incoming international students adapting to their new environment. Between 2013 and 2021, 430 reflection essays were submitted, with most essays collected in 2014 (*n*=91) and the least in 2020 (*n*=28). The contest did not run in 2019 due to an adjustment made to the site's programming calendar.

Participants

The average age of the participants in this study was 25 years, with 50.2% between 21 to 26 years old. About 57% were female and 43% were male. The two most common nationalities were Chinese (24.7%) or Indian (17%). In terms of their level of study, 65.8% were graduate students, 24% were undergraduates, and 10.2% were enrolled in an English Language Training program. Top programs of study were represented by Arts & Sciences (41.2%), Engineering (24.7%), and Business & Economics (18.6%). Participants consented to their essays being used for research and publication purposes. Their participation was voluntary and was not part of their academic program. Their identifying information was removed prior to analysis, and this project was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Results

We report our findings under five themes within Oberg`s (1960) four stages of *culture shock* theory.

American Culture is Often Different than Expected

During Oberg's first stage of adaptation, the Honeymoon stage, sojourners are often elated with the new culture. International students often arrive in the U.S. with a perceived sense of familiarity. This familiarity with American culture is usually based on knowledge gathered from movies and television shows. Peer advice dismantles this myth as demonstrated by one student: "Although you have watched many Hollywood movies…take out time to appreciate the fact that new places come with new challenges" (Participant-14, Nigeria). Another shared:

> Given what I had seen in high school dramas or other TV shows I was anticipating some rude, impatient
> brats from whom somebody was definitely going to throw something at me within the first ten minutes of
> the class. Nothing of that sort happened (Participant-383, India).

With diverse expectations in mind, one student's advice summarizes how to navigate the new cultural landscape: "The best path to get beyond living abroad is not to be afraid of learning the language, overcoming prejudices, and finding out the advantages hidden at first sight" (Participant-37, Colombia), while another student warned: "Americans are very expressive and conversational people, you better be ready to talk and hold an engaging discussion when you meet an American" (Participant-104, United Kingdom).

Connecting with Others

Excited about being in a new country, students often forget that connecting with locals requires new communication styles. Learning to connect with Americans can be a new process and international peers advise that Americans interact differently than people from their home countries. For example, a French student noted that small talk had to be interpreted within the American context:

> Social interactions in the United States are different from what we are used to. The culture of 'small talk' is
> a real thing here…, I was amazed at how friendly people were. And they are… Most Americans engage in
> a conversation with me and ask questions, they most likely do not truly care for an answer. This feeling of
> "friendly welcomeness" from Americans I used to perceive is mostly meaningless greetings" (Participant-
> 411, France).

A female student from Cameroon felt that American students were welcoming and helpful. Two American students reached out to her when she first arrived.

> One day they took me out to eat and to do some shopping. They helped me to figure out the administrative
> and practical matters… I was so moved by their acts of generosity towards me… having those two friends
> in my residence was truly a blessing (Participant-427, Cameroon).

Students appreciated the opportunity to engage not only with American students but also with other international students to learn about their cultures and connect through shared transition experiences.

> I've not only made American friends, but friends from Malaysia, India, China, South Korea, Tunisia, and
> Germany and the cross-cultural experiences and knowledge gained have been invaluable. These are
> friendships I'll treasure for the rest of my life (Participant-365, United Kingdom).

During Oberg's second stage (Irritation), sojourners tend to become hostile to the new culture displaying emotionally stereotyped attitudes towards the host culture and identifying with fellow sojourners. Observations by a Canadian student reveal that nationality and conforming to American expectations matters:

America boasts itself as a melting pot of cultures, and there is understandably an expectation for immigrants to respect and conform to the American way of life. However, I have noticed a discrepancy between how my Canadian friends and I are treated and how my friends from the "more international" countries are treated (Participant-341, Canada).

And another stated: "I am convinced that the strongest borders exist in our mind, which sometimes, unfortunately, prevents us from fully experiencing other cultures and customs" (Participant-037, Colombia).

Practical Challenges of Social Adjustment

During Oberg's Adjustment stage, sojourners increase their knowledge of language and their ability to get around in the new culture in preparation for the last stage and peer advice from participants went beyond language. A participant from this study expressed:

The difference when being abroad is that small problems suddenly become really big issues. So then comes the list of questions: what do I do? Who do I ask? Where do I belong? What am I doing here? Why has this small thing turned out to be such a big thing? Why can't I solve this problem in the same way I usually do? (Participant-20, Spain).

To overcome frustrations that arise when adjusting to the "new challenges," one international student advised breaking down the adjustment process into three distinct spheres: "adjusting to the new culture; dealing with being away from home; and getting used to the academic life, especially if English is not your first language" (Participant-86, Colombia). Numerous students mentioned recurring areas of social adjustment, as summarized here: "climate… food, timeliness, transportation, and making friends" (Participant-40, Saudi Arabia). These are typically the first layers of adjustment for students and may permeate their daily existence.

Climate

Adjusting to differences in climate between their home country and the U.S. was an important aspect of adjustment. Students stated that: "confusion starts within the first 24 hours of landing at JFK [international airport], when you wake up and it's supposed to be 9 am and sunny, but it's actually 3 am and snowing" (Participant-181, South Africa). America has four distinct and well pronounced seasons in most parts of the country and one student stated, "I experienced all four seasons for the first time and enjoyed it" (Participant-146, India).

One student described their shock at "the thick of a severe winter marked by not so friendly but frequent blizzards" (Participant-140, India). For another student: "[...], my regrets flourished the moment I [experienced] gray sky, smothering heat" (Participant-157, Spain). A student shared differences from her hometown: "Chengdu is famous for its cloudy and wet climate all year round. When I arrived … it [was] the end of July. I enjoyed the bright and beautiful sunshine and also suffered from freezing cold air condition" (Participant-137, China). Yet, describing fall leaves, another student "felt like in mystical land standing between the spectrum of colors in those trees dotted streets. I was enchanted by the blossoming picturesque that covered the boulevards" (Participant-266, Kenya). No matter where students came from, weather was a common adjustment challenge.

Food

For many international students, adapting to American food was a challenge. They offered advice on grocery shopping, ordering food at restaurants, and on differences in culinary habits. Going grocery shopping in America for the first time, for instance, can be a learning experience due to confusion over ingredients in food and the inability to recognize products that are on the shelf. One student shared that:

I could not identify any of the products in the store and had no idea what to eat, which was real

frustrating… I had also treated myself to some chocolate, since you can never go wrong with chocolate, or so I thought. However, I could not finish eating it: this was the moment I became aware of the first thing I would miss about Belgium (Participant-85, Belgium).

For those who came from spicy food cultures such as India and Nigeria, they shared: "we add a lot of spices to pizza" (Participant-179, India); "most Nigerian food is spicy" (Participant-104, Nigeria); and "initially everything tasted bland" (Participant-74, Bangladesh). For others, being "a vegetarian became a major issue" (Participant-76, India) because "sometimes really unusual ingredients are mixed inside the meal: salad with lettuce, apples, strawberries and bacon. But most importantly, access to food from a student's culture could be far away as one student experienced: "the closest Bosnian restaurant to [campus] [...] was in NYC" (Participant-91, Bosnia and Herzegovina). Practical advice called for learning to cook your own dishes before leaving home. "Learn how to cook…I was considered as a man who never touched the cooking set back home (Participant-73, Indonesia) and during this process some students "became top chefs" (Participant-100, China).

The other area of advice was to learn about ordering food at restaurants and one student advised "when eating out, be aware of the size of the portions. They are big!" (Participant-86, Colombia). And another reminded incoming students of the variety of choices available at restaurants: "The lady behind the counter asked me five questions regarding my order after I selected it. I was flabbergasted. I didn't know there were so many ways to make a cappuccino!" (Participant-81, India)

Transportation

For many students, traveling in the U.S. was very different from their experiences back home, mainly due to a lack of public transit in U.S. cities. Most students had to figure out how to get to campus from their port of entry, and one stated: "in the U.S., everyone has a car, so no wonder public transportation is complicated" (Participant-115, China). For one student who did own a car, the responsibilities posed problems "when we opened the window of the room… the car had gone missing! …The car had been towed… The office had forgotten to give us the 'Parking Permit'" (Participant-2, Brazil) Another student pointed out differences in other modes of transportation:

Not only the traffic, even the brakes in the bicycles in the US are reversed with rear brakes on the right and the front brakes on the left. While these reversals, initially confusing especially during turns, helped me to develop some ambidextrous skills with time. (Participant-67, India).

Relatedly, another student shared: "In Indonesia, the traffic drives on the left as well as where people walk. So, it is different here" (Participant-73, Indonesia).

Navigating Academic and Classroom Differences

Numerous students pinpointed differences in teaching and learning styles and offered advice on navigating the academic environment. Many students referenced anxiety with respect to language offering advice:

When I started my master's degree…, I was still having difficulty in understanding course contents in terms of language. I would spend longer time reading through papers and put more effort on focusing on the lectures. It was due to my lack of knowledge in some professional words, so I utilized many online resources such as YouTube and Wikipedia to enrich my knowledge and increase my understanding (Participant-381, China).

While differences in the academic environment exist and academic expectations vary, on the whole, most students enjoyed the journey of transitioning to study in the U.S. In the words of one student: "I feel intellectually enriched from exposure to different ways of thinking, by way of class participation and group discussions, which are integral components

of graduate business education" (Participant-13, India). One student was aware of the differences in their home academic system and the U.S.:

> Lots of Chinese students, even for those who've kept particularly high scores in primary schools and secondary schools in China, would come across great challenges when studying in USA because of the different cultivation styles from Chinese education system and American education system—each system has its different perspective on defining what is a brilliant student (Participant-68, China).

One student shared salient advice based on lived academic experiences:

> Good time management allows adequate time for preparing the assignments and tests. Look ahead to know the due date of the homework because there is a time difference between my country and the United States. Self-discipline is significant. A backup plan is needed. Feel free to ask the professors, teaching assistants, and mentors for help. Make more frequent communication with the teammates than before to understand others (Participant-368, China)

Resiliency is Vital

Another pervasive theme throughout the essays was the need for resiliency to overcome sociocultural and psychological challenges. As such, incoming students were advised that: "The bottom line is that having confidence in yourself and being unafraid of making mistakes will help you because you can learn a lot from them" (Participant-200, China).

It took resilience to manage homesickness, which is pervasive and undeniable among international students. One student stated:

> I had a whole new culture, a different language, and living alone to get used to. To be honest, it was a lot to cope with. It got rough at times, but I stayed positive, never gave in. I made it through the transition… I miss home... I miss my old life. I am really proud of myself... It took courage and perseverance... I stuck with what I wanted, where I could have chosen the relatively risk free and easier option of staying home (Participant-379, Turkey).

It is challenging to study in a foreign culture, especially as political leaders engage in racially charged rhetoric. The overarching recommendation was for students to recognize American citizens for who they are and to stay positive:

> Do not lose hope during these challenging times. Because behind the veil of polarizing political messages and the aggressive voices of a select loud few, lies a landscape full of adventure, home to a majority of people that are kind, welcoming and loving. All you must do is reach out - either in person or virtually, as it is the people and the qualities they exhibit and express that make this country the land of the free (Participant-354, Australia).

As students experienced life during the pandemic, one student stated:

> COVID-19 pandemic broke out. I had had only one in-person semester, and I was disappointed. At times, I only saw all the negative developments brought on by the emergent disadvantageous situation. It was challenging for weeks, maybe months, I cannot say otherwise…There was fear, uncertainty, the lockdown happened, but everyone around was busy learning how to keep themselves and others safe. We were all learning and sharing and having conversations on what is going to happen. A few weeks into the lockdown, we were forming support groups and devising ways in which we can connect (Participant-357, Egypt).

Others reminded that:

> Being an international student is a wonderful opportunity to explore the world, to widen your horizons and to break stereotypes. Each day you find something new.Yes, there are some moments when you have to be flexible and adjust, but isn't this ability a sign of a mature person? (Participant-104, United Kingdom).

Developing a Sense of Belonging

In stage four of Oberg's *culture shock* theory, sojourners enjoy a state of *adaptation*. During this stage, sojourner anxiety and social discomfort dissipates and customs from the new culture are accepted and enjoyed. Participants revealed that after an initial period of feeling lost, they found their footing in a new place:

> Fast forward, and I was celebrating the fact I made it past a week on campus. After getting lost looking for my classes, having no one to talk to, trying to figure out the…, bus shuttle app, and the struggle of navigating canvas, it was most certainly a challenging week (Participant-380, Nigeria).

Students advised to find or create a place where you belong, and one student summarized what many shared on cultivating a sense of belonging: "You go out and make friends, join clubs, participate on campus. You will fail and you will learn, and you will find your way" (Participant-359, India). Another stated: "Joining some notable groups in the university like the Catholic Community was really helpful. It aided my transition into the custom and tradition of the community" (Participant-14, Nigeria).

Lastly, most students echoed the following sentiments stated here by one:

> No matter how hard it can be at the beginning, hang in there! Because it definitely gets better. You will have your degree, will make friends for life, have a town to remember, and you will be part of the great family. Just try to enjoy this experience as much as you can because time flies by, and after all… we are living the dream!" (Participant-86, Colombia).

One participant described the importance of agency and positivity in her own happiness, and stated:

> Being an international student has never been easy. However, I learned that things could change depending on how you act or feel toward it. Being positive, and motivated, led to so many accomplishments. I have joined many different student organizations. I have also been working as an International Ambassador under the Admissions office (Participant-124, China).

Placing the international student experience in the larger context one student shared:

> I hope that more and more people will be able to have an international experience like mine, because I strongly believe that if we want to work for a better world, it is crucial to develop empathy and understanding among different cultures and nations (Participant-18, China).

Discussion

Our findings highlight the cross-cultural adjustment experiences faced by international students as they transitioned into the U.S. and based on these experiences, students offer advice to support the transition and adaptation of incoming international students to their HEI environment The student narratives aligned well with Oberg's culture shock theory (1960), beginning with an initial sense of fascination and elation when they arrived in the U.S., known as the *honeymoon stage.* Also, based on exposure to Hollywood movies prior to arrival, many felt familiar with American culture and even

anticipated experiencing some behaviors by Americans as seen in movies. Hence, they advise incoming students to be cognizant of the misconceptions that accompany such a mindset. As students experienced American culture in real time they gravitated towards Oberg's second stage of culture shock, the *Irritation* stage, especially as they sought deeper connections. During this stage, they identified painful cultural differences and looked at American culture critically. International students identified with each other through their common experiences and advice gleaned from these revolves around the fact that this is part of the transition and adjustment process and that incoming students must make the extra effort to connect with the local culture.

Additionally, and in line with Oberg's third stage of cultural adjustment, the expectations of students in this study were related to climate, food, transportation, the ability to make friends with locals, and academic environment and expectations. Most reported learning new ways and having to adapt their behaviors. New ways of doing things ranged from grocery shopping, to ordering food at restaurants, and adapting to limited availability to public transportation. As such they advise making the effort to adjust to the new environment. They felt lost, found their way, made friends, joined clubs, and reminded themselves that they were on a mission to make their family and friends proud of them. They wanted to belong to their new environment and made extra efforts. During the fourth stage of adaptation, they displayed resiliency and pushed themselves to be able to navigate their new culture and advise incoming students to do the same.

This study provides support for the four stages of Oberg's culture shock, but also calls on new models and ways of understanding international students' transitions. Culture shock was originally envisioned as a clinical illness, but recent scholars and literature have advocated for a shift away from deficit thinking and toward a cultural learning approach (Furnham, 2019; Pacheco, 2020). With respect to psychological adaptations, international students displayed symptoms of homesickness and frustration based on unfamiliarity with the host culture. In 2015, Goldstein and Keller found that students attribute culture shock to external, environmental factors (language, culture) as opposed to internal factors (identity, psychological stress), which connects to the behavioral aspect of the cultural learning framework. Typically, most international students make an intentional choice to study abroad and often have the 'self-determined motivation' to succeed in the host culture, which has been shown to minimize the negative experiences of transitions to new cultural environments (Yang et al., 2018). In this study, we found that students had the determination and resiliency to overcome their psychological challenges, including during the pandemic. Although cultural nuances of American culture were not always apparent and psychological stressors did not receive professional attention, most students adapted psychologically. The onus to overcome culture shock rested on the students and as they socialized with their international peers, they found support in their shared experiences prompting them to want to advise others.

Recent reviews and analyses have prompted scholars to rethink the process of culture shock and called for the inclusion of technology and internationalization efforts as relevant factors that aid international students in their adjustment process (Pacheco, 2020). Indeed, as the current study shows, students began their academic journey unaware of the host environment, much less unfamiliar with the U.S. or its overall culture. What may often be surprising to students is the 'hidden curriculum' that is part of the cultural learning process (Furham, 2019; Ward et al., 2001). In this study, we found that these challenges were ameliorated through social interactions, institutional support, and through knowing that their peers had endured the same experiences, feelings, or symptoms (Heng, 2018; Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022).

Implications and Conclusion

Our findings lead to several practical recommendations for incoming international students on how to better prepare for life in the U.S. Relying on the informal peer advice obtained, we outline a number of implications for international students and for campus units that provide services to international students. Based on their lived experiences, participants in this study share the following advice:

Become Familiar with the Potential Cultural Differences Before Arriving in the U.S.

Consistent with findings from Heng (2018), students stressed the importance of being prepared for what to expect culturally and linguistically in the U.S. They urged incoming students to read more and ask questions about how to navigate the new academic, personal, social, and cultural landscape rather than rely on media outlets for information.

Adjust to Differences in Food, Local Climate, and Transportation

Students' advice around areas of social adjustments included learning about how to cook and how to order in restaurants, prepare for different seasons, and better understand how transportation works.

Consider Meeting New People and Making Friends

Aligned with established literature as well as anecdotal beliefs, students underscored the importance of connecting and building relationships with Americans as a way to understanding local norms, traditions, and values (Ammigan & Jones, 2018; Arkoudis et al., 2013). Incoming students are encouraged to move out of their comfort zone to initiate new friendships, engage in discussions with Americans, practice the language with confidence, and develop empathy throughout the process.

Expect to Navigate a Different Academic Environment and System of Education

Participants discussed the possible differences in teaching styles, grading structure, and class expectations, and the impact on student success. They suggested working with university support units, especially during the first year, for help with navigating deadlines, managing learning expectations, and accessing resources such as tutoring services and language acquisition support.

Be Prepared to Cope with Homesickness and Seek Help if Needed

Salient advice also pertained to staying positive and courageous in difficult situations, remaining flexible and challenging stereotypes, maintaining a balanced personal life in addition to academic demands, and staying connected with loved ones from home despite being far away were some of the first-hand advice shared. More importantly, they urged new students not to hesitate to seek support from friends, their international office or academic department.

Believe in Yourself and Challenge Your Comfort Zone

Participants advised others to have confidence in themselves, remain positive, and not to be afraid of making mistakes, despite difficult times and unexpected challenges. They suggested for new students to learn from others and to listen to their stories, ideas, and feedback.

Engage with the Campus Community to Develop a Sense of Belonging

International students advised on the importance of being engaged and involved with the rest of the campus to increase their university life experience and ensure their wellbeing and success. Examples include joining student organizations and leadership groups, participating in volunteer and service-learning initiatives, attending social events and mixers, and going out for long walks with friends.

Conclusion

Based on the informal advice obtained from students, we offer a few recommendations for international student services officials to facilitate students' cross-cultural adjustment to campus, both inside and outside the classroom:

- Implement in-person and virtual peer-to-peer mentorship and student leadership and development programs that generate student-driven feedback, support, and recommendations for incoming, new, and continuing international students to help with their transition to a new academic and social life.

- Increase diversity, equity, and inclusion programming as well as campus safety and security efforts to address and support the emotional wellbeing of students and build an inclusive climate on campus.
- Develop a crisis management and emergency response plan that includes culturally informed counseling services, student wellness resources, and funding to support students experiencing health and wellness, academic, personal, and financial difficulties.
- Implement culturally sensitive training for faculty, staff, and students to promote awareness, encourage the sharing and learning of cultures, and facilitate communication, teaching, learning, and working across cultures.
- Encourage faculty and academic staff to develop course curricula that include intercultural and global perspectives, nurture student-faculty interaction, class participation and involvement, and teamwork across cultures.
- Provide transportation services to students during their initial days in the country and on campus, including airport pick up, trips to the shopping mall and grocery stores, and organized tours to local landmarks and entertainment events.
- Ensure ongoing assessment that measures the needs, challenges, and experiences of students, both qualitatively and quantitatively, to enhance support services and inform initiatives that help maintain a welcoming and internationally friendly campus.

Formal and informal peer-to-peer advice is key to student support, development and success in higher education. For international students who often face challenges adapting to their new university environment due to social, cultural, and language barriers, direct and authentic guidance from existing students can be vital in helping them acclimate and cope with their transition to campus.

By outlining recurring themes in student experiences, we identified and reported on areas of challenges to international student sociocultural adjustment and relied on student input to advise and support the adjustment process for future U.S. bound international students. Using data from one institution in the U.S., this study is limited in its breadth, yet it offers insights which are applicable to institutions that serve international students locally and overseas. As a qualitative inquiry, it is not generalizable nor did it set out to develop a replicable experiment. Nonetheless, by utilizing lived experiences of international students, the study gives voice to hundreds of international students and contributes to salient analysis of their experiences. Future studies may compare lived experiences of international students between institutions and regions within the U.S. and analyze student feedback by nation states to further understand and support international students. Addressing the issue of time, i.e., how student experiences differ from year to year, would be another angle future research could take.

Acknowledgements

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