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Improving Sociocultural Adaptation of First-year Chinese International Undergraduate Students: Peer Mentorship and Intercultural Engagement

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ABSTRACT: *This action research explored ways to enhance the sociocultural adaptation of first-year Chinese international undergraduates at a private research university in the midwestern U.S. through peer mentorship and intercultural engagement. Cycle 1 of the study identified social and cultural challenges, such as forming intercultural relationships, leading to a heavy reliance on conational networks for adjustment and adaptation. In response, Cycle 2 introduced a four-part pilot program: the Chinese Student Mentorship Program, the Academic Peer Mentorship Program, the International Ambassadors Program, and the Residential Community Engagement Program. Using the Revised Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS-R), a post-program survey, and semistructured interviews, the study revealed improved SCAS-R scores and confirmed the effectiveness of peer mentorship and residential engagement in supporting daily life, academic transitions, and social connections. The study provided empirical evidence that diverse social networks enhance sociocultural adaptation and identified effective solutions for Chinese international students that may benefit peers from other international backgrounds.*

Keywords: Chinese international undergraduate students, intercultural engagement, peer mentorship, residential community engagement, sociocultural adaptation

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers have studied social integration difficulties among Chinese and other international students in U.S. higher education. International students, including high achievers, reported lower levels of social satisfaction than their domestic peers did (Van Horne et al., 2018). For Chinese students, barriers to social integration include cultural differences, personal motivation, and language and confidence issues, with many expressing dissatisfaction with interactions with local peers (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). As a result, social challenges can negatively affect academic performance and mental well-being (Zhou, 2023).

At Lakeside University (pseudonym), a private Midwestern research university, Chinese international undergraduate students similarly reported challenges in adapting to and engaging with campus life. In Cycle 1 of this study, which involved 13 students and 4 employees, more than 75% of the student participants cited challenges such as forming friendships with American peers, intercultural communication, and social isolation. Consequently, many relied heavily on conational networks¹ for social support—a common pattern among Chinese international students at U.S. institutions (Chi, 2023; Ma, 2020; Tang et al., 2018). However, overreliance on these networks may limit intercultural engagement opportunities. Cao et al. (2017) reported that close to half of Chinese international students adopt separation or marginalization as their acculturation strategy². This pattern was echoed in Cycle 1 of this study, which revealed a gap between students' desire to form multicultural friendships and their limited engagement with non-Chinese communities. The campus-wide inclusion survey in 2022 reinforced these findings, with international students reporting a lower sense of belonging than their domestic peers did; among ethnic groups, Asian students reported the second-lowest sense of belonging, after Black students did. These findings indicate a need for intentional efforts to improve the sociocultural

¹ “Conational networks” refer to social connections among individuals from the same home country (e.g., Chinese students forming friendships primarily with other Chinese students).

² *Acculturation strategies* describe the different ways people adapt when entering a foreign culture, showing how much they take on the local culture while also keeping their own cultural traditions. The combination generates four strategies: integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization (Berry, 1997; Berry & Sabatier, 2011).

adaptation and social engagement of Chinese international students at Lakeside University.

This action research study investigated how the sociocultural adaptation of first-year Chinese international undergraduate students at Lakeside University can be improved through a Campus Engagement Pilot Program integrating peer mentorship and intercultural community engagement. The study sought to generate knowledge that would inform, develop, and strengthen institutional practices to improve international students' sociocultural adaptation. In this study, "sociocultural adaptation" is the ability to understand the host society's cultural customs, acquire and apply culturally appropriate skills for daily functioning and communication, and form positive relationships with members of the host community (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Wilson, 2013); Peer mentorship refers to one-to-one collaborative relationship in which a more experienced and senior student (the mentor) guides a first-year student (the mentee) to enhance the mentee's success (Gibson, 2005; Livingstone & Naismith, 2018). Intercultural community engagement is defined as communication and social interactions with university community members from diverse cultures, involving the recognition of cultural similarities and differences and the application of this understanding to cross-cultural communication (Hwang et al., 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent research highlights sociocultural adaptation as central to international students' successful transition. This literature review examines three interrelated areas of literature: (1) theories and evidence on sociocultural adaptation and social networks, (2) the formation and characteristics of social networks among Chinese international students, and (3) intentional institutional relationships that facilitate adaptation.

Sociocultural Adaptation

Sociocultural adaptation refers to the ability to acquire culturally appropriate skills for daily functioning and relationship building in the host environment (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Bochner (1982), Berry (2005), and Kim (2001), which are elaborated in the conceptual framework section, recent empirical studies affirm that diverse social networks promote sociocultural adaptation (Gu & Usinger, 2021; Sheng et al., 2022). However, this positive effect is not universal. Kashima and Loh (2006) reported no significant link between sociocultural adjustment and any form of social ties, noting that individual characteristics moderate this relationship and that the value of social networks depends on how students engage with them. Building on this foundation, the next section examines how Chinese international students form and experience social networks in host institutions.

Social Network Formation of Chinese International Students

Studies have revealed that students from East Asia, particularly China, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, report lower levels of friendship satisfaction and often adopt separation as an acculturation strategy (Gareis, 2012; Lai et al., 2023; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). Although Chinese international students may find greater satisfaction with friendships with conationals than with their host country peers (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017), monocultural networks do not facilitate the cross-cultural interactions necessary for deeper integration (Sheng et al., 2022).

Social networks between international and domestic students rarely form naturally. Local students often lack incentives to engage, whereas international students face structural and social barriers (Agostinelli & Albert, 2025; Brebner, 2008). Repeated engagement, particularly early in the academic year, facilitates relationship building, especially for less socially confident students (McFaul, 2016; Metro-Roland, 2018). However, institutional efforts such as orientation programs often fail to maintain long-term intercultural relationships (Mohzana, 2024; Pinto et al., 2024), highlighting the need for ongoing institutional support. To address this gap, Ivanova et al. (2025) proposed that universities promote reciprocal interaction between international and domestic students and offer event series or long-term programs rather than one-time events, which highlights the importance of sustained, structured institutional initiatives.

Despite these challenges, Chinese students bring considerable cultural capital to institutions, including academic motivation, global aspirations, and commitment to the community (Yin, 2022). Recent empirical research has examined factors that support Chinese students' cultural adaptation (Auschner & Jiang, 2025; Wei, 2025; Xue & Singh, 2025), but these studies fall short of translating proposed recommendations into practice to leverage the group's potential. This lack of evaluated programming highlights the gap this study seeks to fill.

Intentional Relationships that Support Sociocultural Adaptation

As relationships between domestic and international students rarely develop naturally (Agostinelli & Albert, 2025; Brebner, 2008), intentional efforts are necessary to foster diverse social networks and intercultural engagement. Additionally, as the impact of social networks on sociocultural adaptation may depend on individuals' traits and behavior patterns (Kashima & Loh, 2006), building intentional relationships for support and learning is critical to international students' sociocultural adaptation. Two key forms of such relationships—peer mentorship and residential engagement—have been identified as especially influential.

Peer mentorship has been shown to enhance students' academic, social, and emotional adjustment (Lorenzetti et al., 2019), although only one of the 45 reviewed articles focused specifically on international students, highlighting a critical gap. Despite limited research, emerging studies have shown promising

results. Psychosocial assistance, interpersonal communication, and networking are among the key mentorship needs of international students (Oloruntoba et al., 2022). International students, paired with domestic student mentors, experienced improved sociocultural and psychological adaptation and reduced acculturative stress (Thomson & Esses, 2016). Zhuang et al. (2013) reported that home country mentors provided stronger psychosocial and role modeling support, whereas host country mentors better facilitated career development and work adjustment, highlighting the benefit of culturally diverse mentorship networks. Extending beyond one-to-one models, group-based peer mentorship also fosters international students' participation, social involvement, and emotional adjustment (Hyden & Coryell, 2023). Together, these studies indicate that mentorship can support academic and sociocultural adaptation, but only a small number of mentorship programs have been intentionally designed for international students' adaptation (Hyden & Coryell, 2023; Menzies et al., 2015; Thomson & Esses, 2016).

Extending from mentorship, research also highlights the importance of an active and participatory residential life in supporting students' transition and social integration. Residence halls allow international students to learn and practice cultural behaviors and norms, interact with domestic peers, and gain intercultural competence (Paltridge et al., 2010; Sim & Stahl, 2022). In particular, international students may benefit more than domestic students from residential activities. For example, living on campuses was found to increase first-year retention by 80% for international students compared with 26% for domestic students at Canadian universities (Paltridge et al., 2010).

However, residential life presents challenges. In addition to roommate conflicts over noise, schedules, and habits (Jobbehdar Nourafkan et al., 2020), roommate relationships involving cultural differences may exacerbate disconnection (Sim & Stahl, 2022). For example, Chinese students in U.S. dorms reported frustration with the party culture and difficulty bonding with American roommates, leading to feelings of disconnection or social isolation (Razek & Brown, 2015; Yao, 2016). Despite these barriers, informal peer mentorship often emerges in residence halls, providing support comparable to formal structures (Graham & McClain, 2019). Informal interactions in a constructed residential environment emphasizing relationship building play a central role in building meaningful, lasting relationships (Lukens, et al., 2022). These findings suggest that while residence halls hold promise for adaptation and integration, such outcomes are mostly effectively achieved when students actively engage within a supportive environment.

In summary, research has established that diverse social networks and intentional relationships support the sociocultural adaptation of international students, but gaps remain in how institutions can operationalize strategies to foster these relationships. This study addresses that gap by intentionally designing, implementing, and evaluating a campus engagement pilot program that integrates peer mentorship and intercultural community engagement to enhance the sociocultural adaptation of first-year Chinese international undergraduates.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by the theoretical perspective that a diverse social network facilitates international students' sociocultural adaptation (Bochner, 1982; Gu & Usinger, 2021; Kim, 2001; Ng et al., 2017; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). Sociocultural adaptation refers to the ability to navigate daily life, engage in culturally appropriate communication, and form meaningful relationships within the host community (Bierwiazzonek & Waldzus, 2016; Sheng et al., 2022; Ward & Kennedy, 1999, Wilson, 2013). Bochner (1982) identified three types of social networks—monocultural, bicultural, and multicultural—each serving a unique function in supporting international students' adaptation. The monocultural network connects students with conationals and sustains their cultural identity. In this study, the Chinese Student Mentorship Program aimed to cultivate such connections. Bicultural networks, involving host culture members, support academic integration, cultural learning, and language development. The Academic Peer Mentorship Program and the Residential Community Engagement Program fostered these relationships. Multicultural networks refer to interactions with international students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Bochner, 1982), encouraging intercultural experiences and recreational activities. In this study, the International Ambassadors Program and the Residential Community Engagement Program aimed to cultivate multicultural networks that include both international and domestic students.

Aligned with this conceptualization, peer-group affiliations are believed to enhance students' satisfaction and institutional commitment (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 2016). By strategically fostering all three networks, the Campus Engagement Pilot Program supported Berry's (2005) integration strategy and the inclusive global mixing model (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2018), representing a balanced model of social relationships that facilitate international students' sociocultural adaptation. This framework, as shown in Figure 1, informed the design, implementation, data collection, and analysis of the Campus Engagement Pilot Program.

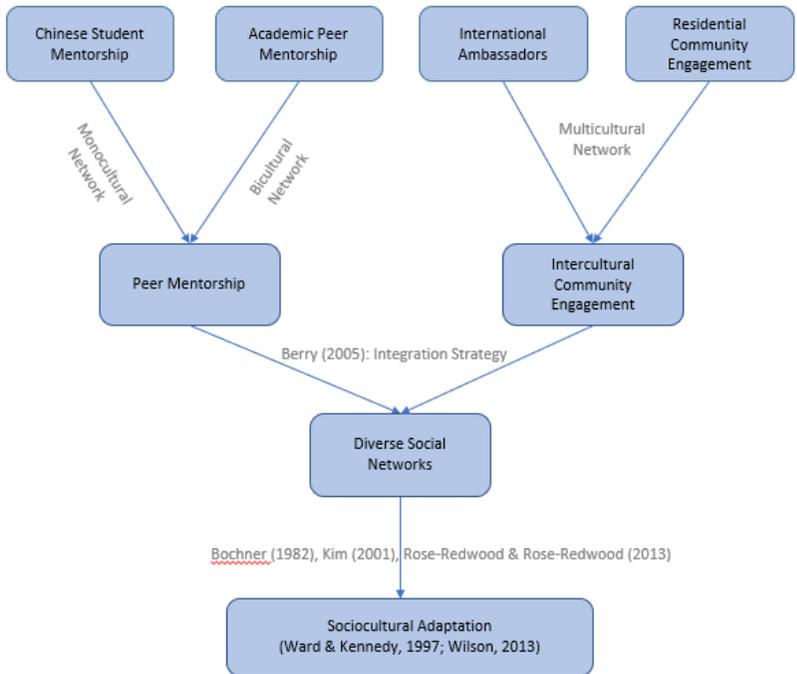


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: From Campus Engagement Pilot Program to Sociocultural Adaptation

As illustrated in Figure 1, this conceptual framework provided both the theoretical foundation and practical guidance for the study. Bochner’s (1982) social network types and Berry’s (2005) acculturation strategies informed the design and core components of the Campus Engagement Program, whereas the sociocultural adaptation concept and measurement (Ward & Kennedy, 1997; Wilson, 2013), operationalized through the Revised Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS-R), guided the data collection and analysis.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at Lakeside University, a medium-sized private research university in the midwestern United States. Known for its academic rigor and strong residential tradition, the institution emphasizes holistic student development—mind, heart, and spirit. International students constitute a single-digit percentage of the undergraduate population, with China representing one of the largest home countries.

This action research project sought to understand participants’ experiences, identify effective solutions, and initiate change (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2021;

Stringer & Aragon, 2020). The study consisted of two cycles guided by the following research questions:

Cycle 1: What are the beneficial and challenging experiences of Chinese international undergraduate students in the process of adapting to campus life and engaging with campus communities at Lakeside University?

Cycle 2: How can the sociocultural adaptation of first-year Chinese international undergraduate students at Lakeside University be improved?

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed.

Participants

Cycle 1 included 13 Chinese international undergraduates (five first-year, three second-year, two third-year, and three fourth-year students; seven females and six males) and four university employees—a residence hall rector, a new-student engagement officer, a cultural-programming officer, and a religious-programming officer (two females and two males). Cycle 2 involved 10 first-year Chinese international undergraduates (six females and four males).

The student participants were Chinese nationals aged 18 years or older who had completed their pre-college education in China, held active undergraduate status at Lakeside University, and resided in the United States during data collection. The employee participants in Cycle 1 were staff whose professional responsibilities involved serving undergraduate students.

Multiple sampling strategies, including criterion, purposive, snowball, and quota sampling, were employed to ensure a relevant and diverse sample (Miles et al., 2020). Criterion sampling was used as the initial recruitment step, with email and WeChat group invitations sent to all eligible Chinese international undergraduate students at Lakeside University (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling was then used to intentionally select participants likely to provide rich insights aligned with the research questions (Campbell et al., 2020). Snowball sampling allowed initial participants to refer eligible peers, which increased the sample size to collect rich and diverse data and approach data saturation (Naderifar, et al., 2017). Quota sampling was applied for representation across academic years, gender, and campus roles, ensuring that key subgroups were included while allowing flexibility in the final sample composition (Robinson, 2014).

Program Design

Cycle 1 participants completed one-on-one semistructured interviews, each lasting 30–50 minutes, to describe both beneficial and challenging experiences in adapting to campus life and engaging with campus communities. Drawing on Cycle 1 findings and the literature, Cycle 2 introduced a Campus Engagement

Pilot Program to build and maintain a diverse social network to facilitate participants' sociocultural adaptation. The program integrated four components:

- **Chinese Student Mentorship Program:** The program paired participants with upper-classman Chinese mentors for four meetings from August to November 2024 addressing challenges associated with cultural and educational transitions.
- **Academic Peer Mentorship Program:** Each participant is assigned to an upperclassman domestic student in the same academic major for four meetings aligned with key points on the academic calendar, such as midterms and course registration.
- **International Ambassadors Program:** This program engaged upper-classman student leaders to guide groups of 10–15 first-year international students with diverse cultural backgrounds during orientation and monthly social events.
- **Residential Community Engagement Program:** The program involved four structured activities with roommates, dormmates, residential assistants, and rectors, such as getting to know new friends and learning about dorm resources, with the aim of building a social network and support system in the residence hall.

Data Collection and Analysis

Cycle 2 employed a mixed-methods approach to assess participants' sociocultural adaptation and program experiences, with data collected at three points. Qualitative data were obtained through semistructured interviews with all 10 participants, conducted in English or Chinese as preferred. The interview transcripts in Chinese were translated via ChatGPT and approved by the participants through member checking (Birt et al., 2016). The interviews were analyzed in NVivo via in vivo, descriptive, structural, and concept coding methods to identify key themes (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2016). Specifically, in vivo coding uses participants' own words to honor their voices (e.g., "take initiative to reach out"); descriptive coding succinctly summarizes participants' specific descriptions (e.g., "lack of Asian or Chinese events"); structural coding categorizes responses according to the interview topics (e.g., "why we are friends"); and concept coding is applied to represent broader concepts or constructs (e.g., "multicultural network"). The quantitative measures included pre- and post-program assessments of sociocultural adaptation status via the Revised Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS-R; Wilson, 2013) and a feedback survey on participation and satisfaction.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed the principle of "do no harm" (Miles et al., 2020) and adhered to Creswell's (2013) ethical guidelines for qualitative research. The Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from Northeastern University, along with site permission from Lakeside University. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and minimal potential risks

before providing consent. Numeric codes replaced names, and identifying details were removed or modified to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Interviews were conducted privately and in person. As part of the member checking process, transcripts were shared with, reviewed, and approved by participants. Multiple perspectives, including both positive and negative results, were truthfully disclosed to ensure balanced and credible interpretations.

RESULTS

Cycle 1 revealed that participants experienced both positive and challenging sociocultural adaptation experiences, with five key findings highlighting the central role of interpersonal relationships and community interactions in shaping their transition, as summarized in Table 1 and detailed in Ma (2025). Across all the themes, the quality of interpersonal relationships was crucial: positive experiences often stemmed from harmonious relationships, whereas negative experiences often came from barriers to connect. Drawing on these findings and the literature on the benefits of diverse social networks, Cycle 2 programming focused on improving sociocultural adaptation and addressing challenges through interpersonal relationship building.

Table 1: Cycle 1 Findings, Key Themes, and Participant Voices

Finding	Key themes	Representative participant voice
Predominant issue: Social and cultural challenges	Communication challenges; cultural and preferential challenges; difficulty in forming friendships with American peers	“I say the biggest challenge truly lies in trying to make friends with peers, because you just cannot jump into a conversation as we did in China...there are some presumptions about the background of such conversations that people who are born in America know but we do not” (Student 12, third-year male, 2023)
Chinese student community: Critical support and dominant social circle	Strong reliance on conational networks for guidance, friendships, and belonging	“All my friends are Chinese” (Student 1, third-year male, 2023) “At least 95% of them are Chinese” (Student 10, second-year female, 2023)

Two-way impact of residential life	Both positive and negative experiences are prominent	“The rector and the RA in my section were very helpful and truly supportive. In addition, they are willing to listen.” (Student 5, fourth-year female, 2023) “My roommates did every single thing together and I was not with them... I was in a very lonely state of mind and miserable” (Student 10, second-year female)
Academic engagement: The most prominent positive experience	High satisfaction with faculty relationships and academic events	“The academic talks provide a lot of connections and resources. It is a great way to connect with faculty and staff. It definitely feels great to meet someone who shares the same interests and passion with you” (Student 3, second-year female, 2023).
Community building in orientation events: Meaningful but brief	Orientation events were beneficial for early community building and adaptation; initial impact did not last	“At the orientation, everyone was willing to talk to strangers. After a while maybe they just stick with their friends” (Student 13, fourth-year male, 2023).

In Cycle 2, participants’ sociocultural adaptation was assessed twice via the 21-item Revised Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS-R): once in late August 2024, one week after arrival, and again in late November 2024, after completing Cycle 2. All ten participants completed the first assessment anonymously, and nine completed the second assessment.

Table 2 presents the SCAS-R scores before and after the program. Welch’s independent-samples t-tests were used to compare pre- and postprogram means, as surveys were completed anonymously by two small groups of different sizes ($n_1=10$, $n_2=9$), and equality of variance could not be guaranteed. The mean overall SCAS-R score increased from 3.33 (SD = 0.67) to 4.23 (SD = 0.58), a 27.0% increase. The postprogram mean scores were higher across all the domains, with significant differences for overall SCAS-R ($p = .006$), Interpersonal Communication ($p = .005$), Academic Performance ($p = .018$), Personal Interests and Community Involvement ($p = .014$), and Ecological Adaptation ($p = .016$). Language proficiency did not significantly increase ($p = .119$). The largest percentage increases were observed in Interpersonal Communication (33.2%), Personal Interests and Community Involvement (28.9%), and Academic

Performance (26.8%). The results were compared with those of Mahmood and Burke (2018), who assessed 413 international students with an average residence of 20 months in the U.S., and Mehta (2023), who surveyed 10 graduate students within one to six months of residence. The postprogram scores in this study were higher across most domains than those reported in both studies.

Table 2: Comparison of SCAS-R Scores Before and After Programming

Item	Pre program <i>M (SD)</i>	Post program <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>p</i> -value	Increase (%)	Mahmood & Burke (2018)	Mehta (2023)
Mean SCAS-R of participants	3.33 (0.67)	4.23 (0.58)	.006	27.0	3.50	3.41
Interpersonal Communication (IC)	3.14 (0.29)	4.17 (0.16)	.005	33.2	3.43	3.41
Academic Performance (AP)	3.40 (0.22)	4.31 (0.19)	.018	26.8	3.61	3.58
Personal Interests and Community Involvement (PI & CI)	3.25 (0.26)	4.19 (0.17)	.014	28.9	3.33	2.73
Ecological Adaptation (EA)	3.52 (0.26)	4.31 (0.36)	.016	22.4	3.51	3.40
Language Proficiency (LP)	3.60 (0.14)	4.22 (0.16)	.119	17.2	3.76	4.50

In addition to the quantitative results, the qualitative data from semistructured interviews with all ten participants in Cycle 2 revealed five key findings:

Finding 1: Chinese Student Mentorship—Conational Network, Academic and Life Support

Mentorship from Chinese students provided practical, academic, social, and emotional support. Mentors guided mentees in navigating university life and local resources, including club involvement, dining options, transportation, and seasonal preparation. One student reflected, "I wanted to get a driver's license, so I asked her questions about where to buy a car, when it's a good time to buy one, or if a Chinese driver's license could be transferred here" (Student 20, first-year female, 2024).

Chinese student mentors helped mentees build and expand their social networks, especially within the Chinese community. One participant shared, "*She helped me connect with many upperclassmen in the Chinese student community... Through this, I made a lot of friends and integrated better into the local Chinese community*" (Student 17, first-year female, 2024). Mentors contributed to academic adjustments. One mentee shared, "I also discussed potential majors with him... He shared their experience and focus areas, which helped me realize that this wasn't the right path for me" (Student 14, first-year female, 2024).

These findings echo those of Zhuang et al. (2013) and Tsang (2023) on the role of conational mentorship in sociocultural adaptation. Additionally, participants referenced their mentors' emotional encouragement more frequently than other support sources combined (academic peer mentors, residential halls, and international ambassadors), which aligns with Zhuang et al.'s (2013) assertion that home country mentors are more effective in providing psychological support.

Finding 2: Academic Peer Mentorship with Domestic Students – Academic Guidance, Community Involvement, Social Life

Academic mentors with shared academic interests support participants academically, socially, and personally. One participant noted, "He was very familiar with core requirements and how to balance writing-intensive and math-intensive courses. He provided excellent advice" (Student 14, first-year female, 2024). Others described encouragement to explore extracurricular activities and develop personal interests. "He also introduced me to the choir. It's very interesting...It's a pretty good experience, and I like it a lot" (Student 16, first-year male, 2024).

Some mentors went above and beyond to address unexpected life challenges, such as resolving a hacking incident by "advising me to talk to IT staff and guiding me to reset my password" (Student 20, first-year female, 2024). Mentors introduced mentees to broader social connections: "We walked from the student center to the library together, and he introduced me to many people along the way" (Student 21, first-year male, 2024). Mentors also fostered linguistic confidence. "He really encouraged me... to just speak confidently and that it's okay to make mistakes" (Student 18, first-year male, 2024).

These findings align with prior research highlighting domestic peer mentors' impact on enhanced social interactions, English skills, and confidence (Thomson

& Esses, 2016), with most studies reporting social benefits in friendship, networking, and social capital (Lorenzetti et al., 2019).

Finding 3: Residential Community Engagement – Harmonious Community, Cultural Understanding, and All-Around Support

All ten participants reported positive relationships with their residential communities in Cycle 2, whether with roommates, dorm mates, resident assistants, or rectors. This marked a notable improvement from Cycle 1, where both positive and negative residential experiences were prominent. In addition, no major conflicts with roommates were observed in Cycle 2. “Even though our daily routines are quite different, we are both willing to talk about it and make adjustments” (Student 19, first-year female, 2024). This reflects a clear contrast with Cycle 1, in which different sleep schedules and lifestyles posed significant challenges for many participants.

Dorm mates and Resident Assistants (RAs) offered wide-ranging support, from locating research opportunities to handling pest issues. One student described RAs as “like a mentor for life—everything” (Student 14, first-year female, 2024). The residential community also facilitated cultural learning, such as American social norms, religious practices, and university traditions. “I felt like our conversations were more culturally focused and went deeper, which really helped me gain a better understanding of the culture” (Student 20, first-year female, 2024).

Although no formal mentorship was arranged, residence hall engagement fostered informal mentoring relationships, such as peer mentoring among roommates and dorm mates and conventional mentorship with RAs and rectors (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Graham and McClain (2019) use the word “preexisting” to describe the social network that informal mentorships arise from, indicating the importance of establishing the social network in the first place. Since both institutional support and individual initiative are essential for meaningful intercultural interactions (Brebner, 2008), the Residential Community Engagement Program encouraged participants to take proactive steps to connect with others, creating fertile ground for informal mentoring and peer support to emerge.

Finding 4: International Ambassadors – A Starting Point for Connections yet Limited Continuous Engagement

International ambassadors were most effective in fostering initial connections among international students during the orientation. One student described the setting as “very relaxing and not overly formal,” noting that “one of the people I randomly talked to that night became a really good friend” (Student 22, first-year female, 2024), suggesting that the informal atmosphere created by international ambassadors fostered organic friendships. However, most enduring relationships among international students were sustained through other channels. Some maintained contact with Chinese peers from their group or forged lasting

connections due to shared majors, but participants' postorientation interactions with their international ambassador groups declined: "No one really knows each other" (Student 23, first-year male, 2024), highlighting the program's limited role in sustaining multicultural social networks.

Echoing prior research, this study suggested a need for repeated, early, and interest-based interactions (Kudo & Simkin, 2003; McFaul, 2016; Metro-Roland, 2018). Future improvements may include more frequent gatherings soon after orientation and grouping students on the basis of common interests or academic fields to foster meaningful relationships.

Finding 5: Psychological Support Emerged as a Significant Outcome

Although this study focused on sociocultural adaptation, the participants frequently highlighted the psychological and emotional support gained through mentors and residential communities. Chinese mentors fostered a sense of familiarity and belonging through shared experiences. Student 18 noted that his mentor "felt like a warm, older sibling," echoing Thomson and Esses's (2016) finding that peer mentorship reduced acculturative stress and increased life satisfaction.

Residential life also contributed to emotional well-being. Student 15 recalled, "When I was feeling a lot of stress, I talked to them (RAs), and they provided me with a lot of emotional support" (first-year female, 2024). This finding aligns with those of Tolman et al. (2024) and Lashari et al. (2018), who reported that social support and peer relationships in residence halls provide psychological support to mitigate loneliness and improve psychological adjustment.

In addition, students described the unique bonds among other international students. "Spending time with international students gave me a sense of inclusivity. You feel like being different is okay because there are many others who are also different" (Student 20, first-year female, 2024).

DISCUSSION

The Campus Engagement Pilot Program produced notable improvements in students' sociocultural adaptation. Both the overall SCAS-R score and all five subscales improved, with the largest gains in interpersonal communication (33.2%), personal interest and community involvement (28.9%), and academic performance (26.8%). The pattern of subscale rankings shifted from Language Proficiency > Ecological Adaptation > Academic Performance > Personal Interests and Community Involvement > Interpersonal Communication to Ecological Adaptation = Academic Performance > Language Proficiency > Personal Interests and Community Involvement > Interpersonal Communication, suggesting that participants gained greater confidence in navigating academic and day-to-day life. Interpersonal communication, despite its most noticeable improvement, still remained the lowest-rated domain, indicating the challenge in this area. Collectively, these outcomes demonstrate the program's effectiveness in building a diverse social network and support system, developing intercultural

communication, understanding university systems and cultures, and facilitating academic transition.

Empirical and Theoretical Contributions

A key contribution of this study is to confirm the critical role of diverse social networks in facilitating students' sociocultural adaptation. Participants demonstrated the strongest growth in interpersonal communication, driven by social interactions with surrounding communities. The enhanced sociocultural adaptation was supported by three networks: conational (Chinese student mentors), bicultural (domestic academic peer mentors), and multicultural (residential community and international ambassador groups). This study suggests that a combination of conational, bicultural, and multicultural networks rather than exclusive host culture integration plays a significant role in sociocultural adaptation, which aligns with the findings of previous studies on the positive role of diverse social networks.

The study reinforced Bochner's (1982) framework but provided new insights. The study confirmed Bochner's (1982) proposal that monocultural networks allow students to retain cultural identity and practices. Second, Bochner argues that bicultural networks provide practical assistance in acculturation, whereas the present study revealed that all three networks serve instrumental functions such as navigating academic systems, accessing campus resources, and managing daily life. This suggests that, in addition to host nationals, conational and international peers can be valuable sources of practical support. Furthermore, while Bochner associated multicultural networks formed by other international students with primarily social and recreational functions, the present study revealed that such benefits were shared across all three networks, each playing a distinct role. Monocultural ties offered a sense of familiarity and the strongest emotional support, bicultural ties facilitated cultural and social learning most effectively, and multicultural ties formed in residential communities in the current study provided integrated, all-around support. Notably, the multicultural network formed in this study blended relationships with conational, domestic, and other international students, reflecting the inclusive nature of residence halls. Although the formation of an international student network did not quite meet the expectations, the present study still demonstrates that fostering a diverse social network, rather than focusing solely on engagement with the host community, maximizes the potential of social contact in enhancing sociocultural adaptation, reinforcing Bochner's (1982) framework.

Second, the study identified peer mentorship and residential community engagement as two key relationships that support sociocultural adaptation. Both the conational and domestic mentoring relationships contributed significantly to improving participants' sociocultural adaptation, as measured by the Revised Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS-R). These two networks were found to provide comparable support across four of Wilson's (2013) five sociocultural adaptation factors: interpersonal communication (e.g., expanding social networks and building friendships), academic performance (e.g., navigating academic

systems and resources and academic planning), personal interests and community involvement (e.g., joining student organizations and managing daily life), and ecological adaptation (e.g., finding the way around and adapting to the pace of life). The fifth factor, language proficiency, was less mentioned in interviews. This finding aligns with prior research highlighting the positive roles of both domestic and international peer mentors in facilitating international students' transition (Menzies et al., 2015; Thomson & Esses, 2016). However, it is in contrast to Zhuang et al. (2013) that home country mentors were more effective in helping expatriates with nonwork-related life adjustment in the host country. This may suggest that the content and structure of mentoring relationships matter more than mentors' cultural backgrounds do.

This study not only enriches the existing mentorship literature, but also addresses a noted literature gap, where international students' mentorship experiences remain underexplored (Lorenzetti et al., 2019). By applying a cultural adaptation lens, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how structured mentoring relationships support sociocultural adaptation.

Third, participants reported the highest level of engagement with their residential community, as evidenced by the most frequent references to residential life in their narratives. The academic and life support received from residential staff and peers mirrored the benefits of both mentorship programs, highlighting the role of residence halls as informal mentoring spaces. This finding supports Graham and McClain's (2019) assertion that informal mentorship can be as effective as formal mentorship in fostering belongingness and adjustment.

Compared with peer mentorships, the residential setting played the most significant role in helping students understand U.S. culture through everyday interactions. As one student noted, cultural norms are best learned "through observation and interaction" rather than direct instruction (Student 22, first-year female, 2024), echoing Sawir et al. (2008). Participants' intentional efforts to engage with their residential community were also instrumental in their positive experiences. One key impact of the Residential Community Management Program was to empower participants to build support networks for positive influences, including informal mentoring relationships.

Finally, in addition to improving participants' sociocultural adaptation, the Campus Engagement Pilot Program may have improved participants' psychological adaptation by promoting integration as an acculturation strategy, supporting academic success, building social support networks, and lowering sociocultural adaptation difficulty (Gebregergis & Csukonyi, 2025; Neto, 2024). As this study did not employ a formal measure of psychological adaptation, further research is needed to confirm this finding and explore the psychological impact of community-based interventions on international students.

Limitations

First, the small sample size ($n = 10$ in Cycle 2) limits the generalizability of the findings. Larger-scale replication is needed to confirm these results. Second, the context-specific design implemented at a private U.S. research university may

not fully apply to other institutional types, such as public universities, liberal arts colleges, or community colleges.

Implications for Practice and Research

The study highlights the importance of intentional, structured programming that supports international students' sociocultural adaptation by fostering diverse social networks through peer mentorship and residential engagement. It offers practical recommendations for both practice and research. First, institutions should prioritize programs that facilitate monocultural, bicultural, and multicultural engagement, as each contributes uniquely to adaptation. Second, both formal and informal mentoring relationships—whether with conational or domestic mentors—should be encouraged to ease students' transition. Third, both institutions and international students should intentionally leverage residence halls as a key space to support international students' adaptation. Finally, institutions should create intentional opportunities for domestic students to engage in international students' cultural adaptation. This not only benefits international students but also cultivates intercultural competence and global citizenship among all students.

Future research is recommended in several areas. First, studies could examine the impact of relationship-building programs on the psychological adaptation of international students. Second, researchers might explore the applicability of such programs across diverse institutional contexts, such as large public universities, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges. Third, future studies could investigate how these programs operate among different student populations, considering variations in cultural background and linguistic proficiency. Finally, additional research is needed to identify strategies that effectively engage domestic students in intercultural peer interactions with international students, a key yet often underexamined dimension.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrated the impact of fostering diverse social networks through a Campus Engagement Pilot Program on the sociocultural adaptation of first-year Chinese international undergraduate students at Lakeside University. The mixed-methods evaluation, including the SCAS-R and semistructured interviews, revealed substantial improvements in participants' sociocultural adaptation, particularly in areas of interpersonal communication, community involvement, and academic transition. While affirming Bochner's (1982) categorization of monocultural, bicultural, and multicultural networks, the study offers new insights that all three networks can serve instrumental, emotional, and recreational functions, blending support across cultural boundaries. This suggests that fostering a diverse social network, rather than focusing solely on host community engagement, maximizes the potential of social contact for sociocultural adaptation. In addition, peer mentorship and residential life play critical roles in supporting sociocultural adaptation. The content and structure of

mentoring relationships may be more critical to student adjustment than the cultural background of the mentor, and an intentionally built residential community can foster equally effective informal mentoring relationships. This study also contributes to the literature by examining peer mentorship and residential life through the lens of cultural adaptation.

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