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Seeking a Sense of Belonging: Social and Cultural Integration of International Students with American College Students

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ABSTRACT

International students studying at higher education institutions in the United States experience challenges as they adjust to new environments. Social connectedness to American college students could mitigate such challenges and assist international students with social and cultural integration. This study, using qualitative data from interviews, examined international students' experiences and their sense of belonging on an American college campus, including the factors that contribute to or deter from it.

Keywords: belonging, college students, cultural integration, international students, social integration

INTRODUCTION

International students are a population in higher education that has been rising in recent years. According to the Open Doors Report on International Education Exchange (2016a), the enrollment of international students to the United States (US) increased 7% over the previous year academic year with a total of over one million international students accessing higher education in the US during the 2015-2016 academic year. This increase marks the tenth consecutive year that Open Doors reported growth in the total number of international students in U.S. higher education as there are now 85 percent more international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities than were reported a decade ago (Institute of International Education

[IIE], 2016b). Still, the number of globally mobile students is expected to continue to increase (Altbach & Basset, 2004).

International college students come to the US to access superior education; however, during their academic journey, they encounter many demands, which include building new friendships, navigating different social and cultural norms, and confronting the challenges associated with daily living (Mori, 2000) such as adapting to new cultural values, foods, and weather (Li & Gasser, 2005). In addition, they face challenges in adapting to the academic and social environment, which may include difficulty with the English language and communication, developing friendships, and a lack of knowledge of the American culture (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007). Social connectedness to American college students could mitigate such challenges and assist international students with social and cultural integration. Social connectedness, defined as “the subjective awareness of being in close relation with the social world” (Lee & Robbins, 1998, p. 338), is considered a significant predictor of adjustment (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003). In general, experiencing positive social interaction can encourage psychological well-being and adjustment of international college students (Li & Gasser, 2005; Ye, 2006).

International students also face significant challenges in adjusting and developing a sense of belonging on U.S. campuses often due to difficulties in acclimating to a new social life, potential language barriers, and limited knowledge of the new culture (Bentley, 2008). As sense of belonging and social and cultural integration are critical for success in higher education, it is important to investigate the factors that positively impact the social connectedness of international students. This research study, using qualitative data from interviews, examined the experiences of international students with sense of belonging and social connectedness on an American college campus, including the factors that contribute to or deter from it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In conjunction with the educational experience, traveling to the US provides international students with the opportunity “to participate in transnational networks—social networks in which day to day interactions involve people from two or more countries” (Gargano, 2009 as cited in Glass, Wongtrirat, & Buus, 2015, p. 53). Studies have demonstrated that interaction between international students and American peers are linked to several benefits, which include higher levels of satisfaction and a more positive experience academically and non-academically (Trice, 2004). A survey of 497 graduate international students regarding their social interactions with Americans found that those who socialized with Americans were more involved on campus and socialized with students from other countries as well (Trice, 2004). On the other hand, international students with little interest in social interaction may tend to isolate themselves, causing higher probability of suffering from low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Darwish, 2015).

In a study at two Midwestern universities, 143 international students were surveyed to identify students’ social support systems, life stress, academic stressors, and reactions to stressors. The results of this study demonstrated higher reactions to stressors for female international students compared to males in the sample pool

where higher level of academic stressors were predicted by higher levels of life stress and by lower level of social support (Misra, Crist & Burant, 2003). In addition, Sinha (1988) proposed that individuals in individualistic cultures often have more skills in entering and leaving new social groups than those in collectivistic cultures; but making new “friends” implies lifelong intimate relationships with many obligations and not non-intimate acquaintances which occurs more often in individualistic cultures.

There are several factors that influence the ability of international students to effectively become socially and academically integrated. Such variables that could impact international students’ sociocultural adaptation to a new environment include one’s country of origin, cultural distance based on whether students come from a collectivist or individualist background, student’s culture and customs, language ability, length of stay in the host culture, social connectedness, interpersonal skills, and frequency of contact with host nationals (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005; Darwish, 2015; Searle & Ward, 1990; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Tafarodi & Smith, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1992, 1993a, 1993b; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999; Ward & Searle, 1991; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). Therefore, social connectedness and support are important for this population of students. A study conducted by Sherry, Thomas, & Hong Chui (2010) demonstrated that international students face English language problems, financial problems, and difficulty adapting to new culture. Suggestions to improve such obstacles include improving financial assistance and scholarships, creating opportunities for international students to improve language and practice speaking English with American students. Each of these studies demonstrated some obstacles to which international students are exposed when studying in the US. Araujo (2011) explained that international students with higher levels of English proficiency experienced lower levels of acculturative stress, which can positively influence their academic experience; and students with lower English proficiency have more probability of experiencing depression, low self-esteem and anxiety. These studies illustrate the challenges that can affect international students in every area of their lives. However, with adequate support from American colleges and universities, international students can obtain the benefits of higher education in the US (Glass et al., 2015).

Gaining an understanding of international students’ social belonging and integration while at U.S. universities is imperative to determine whether institutions are meeting their needs and, ultimately, to ensure that these students have a positive educational experience to support their academic persistence. Using participants’ narratives, this phenomenological study investigates the following research questions:

1. What factors impact international students’ sense of belonging and connectedness with American students?
2. What are international students’ perception of culture and social interaction in America?

RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, the researchers used qualitative methodologies (Creswell, 2013) to extensively explore the experiences of international students and obtain a more robust comprehension of their perspectives related to their transition and social belonging. We examined how participants described their experience with the phenomenon of sense of belonging in their collegiate experience in the US and attempted to determine what participants had in common by reducing “individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Qualitative research is both exploratory and descriptive, employing intensive fieldwork through interviews (individual and focus group), observation, and document analysis (Creswell, 1998) and provides intersections of personal narratives in a way of making meaning (Glesne, 2006).

Using interviews for data collection, this study examined four characteristics associated with international students’ lived experiences and transition: (a) perspective of American culture; (b) social interaction with American college students; (c) sense of social belonging; and (d) academic and campus experiences. The format for the individual interviews was semi-structured, which enables the researcher to pose a set number of predetermined questions in a specified order but offers the flexibility to probe (Herman & Reynolds, 1994). Broad and general questions were posed in the interviews were helpful in getting “a textural description and structural description of the experiences, and to provide an understanding of the common experiences” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). After receiving IRB approval, in-depth interviews were conducted with participants in a person-to-person format and recorded with a digital voice recorder and transcribed. Data were also collected through a demographic survey.

Participants

For this research study, a mid-sized public institution in the southern region of the US was used as the site. International students were selected through purposeful sampling. In 2015, the enrollment of international students was 1,377 at the institution, which had more than doubled over the previous five years. Students from Saudi Arabia, China, and India accounted for over 63% of all international enrollment in 2015. The interviewees were contacted via email and recommendations from other students and staff were also considered. The sample consisted of 17 international students from diverse educational levels and ethnicities. There were 10 males and seven females, with nine studying at the undergraduate level (including Exchange and Author: please spell out this abbreviation here and add brackets are it ESLI students) and eight at the graduate level (including ESLI students). The average age of the participants was 25.1 (minimum=19 and maximum = 38). Approximately 59% of the participants had been at the institution two or more years and about 29% less than a year. The majority (nine) were from the continent of Asia with the most from the countries of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Most of the participants have majors/programs of study in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) areas (47%). Table 1 provides a detailed profile of the participants.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Student	Length of residency	Gender	Age	College / major	Country of origin	Prior activity
P1	<1 yr	M	22	ESLI (G)	Saudi Arabia	Employed
P2	<1 yr	F	19	Sports Psychology (U)	Canada	Student
P3	<1 yr	M	23	ESLI (U)	Peru	Student
P4	2 yr	M	23	Dental Hygiene (U)	Brazil	Student
P5	<1 yr	F	22	Electrical Engineering (U)	Pakistan	Student
P6	>2 yr	M	22	Mechanical Engineering (U)	Jordan	Student
P7	>2 yr	M	23	Engineering (G)	Nigeria	Student
P8	<1 yr	M	27	Photojournalism (E)	Denmark	Student
P9	>2 yr	F	34	Nursing (U)	Nigeria	Business
P10	>2 yr	F	38	Folk Studies/ Religious Studies (G)	Iran	Employed
P11	2 yr	M	20	Biology (U)	Ukraine/ Angola	Student
P12	>2 yr	F	28	Public Health (G)	Nigeria	Student
P13	2 yr	F	26	Public Health (G)	Pakistan	Student
P14	>2 yr	M	26	Engineering Technology Management (G)	Saudi Arabia	Student
P15	>2 yr	M	27	Computer Science (G)	Pakistan	Student
P16	>2 yr	M	27	Engineering Technology Management (G)	Pakistan	Student
P17	1 yr	F	21	Exploratory Studies/ No major (E)	Taiwan	Student

Note. ESLI = English as a Second Language International; G = graduate; U = undergraduate; E = exchange student.

Data Analysis

To systematically “uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10) of international students, data analysis involved coding and the development and discovery of patterns. Coding, described by Charmaz (2001) [Author: please add this citation’s reference to the References section] as the “critical link between data collection and their explanation of meaning” (as cited in Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 72), provided an opportunity to develop constructs, categories, and attributes through finding patterns and interpreting meaning in the participants’ narratives. To examine perspectives, cultural values, and relational experiences of the participants, values coding was used to “reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 75). The codes were collapsed into similar categories and three themes emerged.

RESULTS

A number of salient themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis. We highlight only a select number of narratives that best reflect each theme and offer insights regarding the factors that impact the participants’ feelings of belonging and ability to connect with American peers. The main themes include perspectives of the US, factors impacting social belonging and social life, and academic and campus experience.

Perspectives of the US

During the interviews, several questions about the participants’ perspective of the US were presented. The majority of the participants provided similar opinions by referring to Americans as having a sense of superiority, being hard to get close to, and exhibiting superficial interactions. As expressed by an undergraduate student from South America, “For me American people are very reserved, very closed in their own lives; so, it’s kind of hard to get a close relationship with American people.” Although international students recognized the friendliness of Americans, participants also perceived building close friendships to be very difficult due to the lack of reciprocation on the part of Americans.

The degree of social interaction an international student establishes is an important variable in social connectedness and belonging, and culture influences how they view and approach connecting with others and social networking with American students. Students who experience cultural differences can present difficulties establishing social network with Americans (Trice, 2004). Previous studies demonstrate that students who come from collectivistic cultural backgrounds (e.g., China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Argentina, Brazil, and India) tend to have a difficult time understanding how to connect with their American peers, as American culture emphasizes assertiveness and self-reliance (Darwish, 2015). An individualistic culture (e.g., North America and some European cultures) emphasizes and prefers independent and personal individual development and self-expression whereas

collectivist culture (e.g., East Asia, African, Latin American, and Middle Eastern or Arabian countries) focuses more on the group than the individuals where everyone is connected to others because each is part of a group, tribe, family, or other type of unit and behavior dependent on the values and preferences of others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Schmidt, 2006; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). Sinha (1988) proposed that individuals in individualistic cultures often have more skills in entering and leaving new social groups than those in collectivistic cultures; but making new “friends” implies lifelong intimate relationships with many obligations and not non-intimate acquaintances which occurs more often in individualistic cultures. This concept is maintained by a graduate student from Nigeria (P7) who asserted as follows.

Social relationships in America are quite different from the international. I have to say that because America, being an individualistic country, social network here is not as close as it is for internationals and that is why internationals here come together and that is why we are very flexible in terms of bonding together; whereas Americans, they are a little, I don't want to say, kind of scared of stepping up and meeting new internationals.

Several participants acknowledged the cultural differences between the US and their country of origin while also referring to those differences as challenging experiences due to the lack of understanding, autonomy, and in some cases, exposure to other cultures. A graduate student from Saudi Arabia (P1) provides examples of becoming more autonomous and independent since he began to study in the US.

I think here I do everything for myself, not same for my country. In my country father will give me money, mother makes me food for me. But here, I make everything for myself. I go for cell phone. I buy it every month. I give money for it so I can talk to my home. Also, I make food for me. I do everything for myself. I like that.

Factors Impacting Social Belonging and Social Life

Finding a sense of belonging for international students in American institutions presents challenges. Most of the participants interviewed expressed finding a deeper connection with other international students rather than American peers. The lack of understanding and assimilation of cultural differences results in feelings of disappointment or loneliness in some cases, which creates a more profound connection with other international peers (as cited in Darwish, 2015). An undergraduate student from Brazil (P4) expressed that he had a closer connection with international peers due to cultural understanding,

I am not sure why I have more international friends. I think we are closer because we understand each other better. We are more interested about... I don't want to be like saying that we are not interested about other cultures, but that is what it seems because we always come to talk with each other, you know. I feel that Americans don't have the interest about other cultures

or something like that. I don't want to generalize, like I said, I have some American friends but I lean more to internationals.

This statement aligns with the finding by Yang, Teraoka, Eichenfield and Audas (1994) that there is a belief that Americans are not interested in other cultures, which can serve as a barrier to intercultural interactions. Additionally, although a positive social interaction facilitates connections with others and can have a beneficial impact on well-being, a negative interaction can have a harmful impact and a more influential effect on psychological well-being for individuals (Lincoln, 2000). A 20-year-old undergraduate male (P11) reported as follows.

I had some bad experiences with American students and whenever I approach some American students, I don't find that same mutual impact as I find with international students. It's just, I would say, I connect better with internationals and from what I have heard, internationals connect better with internationals.

The level of social belonging also depends on the disposition of the international student. For example, participants who perceived themselves as having a more social personality tended to look for more interaction with others and, therefore, felt more comfortable in making connections with others. Conversely, individuals with less social interest tend to become isolated, which generates a higher probability of suffering from low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Darwish, 2015). A 27 year old male graduate student from Pakistan (P16) revealed possessing an interest in enhancing his social life as follows.

I have an active social life. I felt I cannot stay by myself, to be honest, like doing nothing or I cannot focus on one thing for a long time; so, I need to get out, meet new people, get to know them, get to share my experiences.

Furthermore, a female undergraduate student from Nigeria (P9) shared a similar opinion but added that the onus of social interaction is on the international student as well.

I think it's the same everywhere, because we are human beings. If you really want to be social, if you really want to be friendly with people, you will. You will go out of your way to do things and be social, but when you want to be isolated, you can still do that, and I think it's the same way everywhere in the world.

Academic and Campus Experience

Participants in this study expressed encountering different challenges throughout their academic journey which included language barriers, differing educational systems, and discrimination. A lack of English proficiency represents a significant barrier for international students to become academically, personally and professionally successful (Darwish, 2015). In fact, language is considered the most challenging aspect for international students (Araujo, 2011). Some participants indicated having to mentally interpret sentences before verbalizing the desired

statement, which at the beginning of the acclimation process could cause participants [Author: please reword the following for clarity and grammar.] withdrawing feelings and intimidation. A 22 year old female from Pakistan (P5) described her difficulties with speaking English as follows. “I find it difficult for speaking because I have to choose what I am going to say and sometimes I have to make structures in my head before saying them.” This sentiment was also expressed by a 26 year old male (P14) from Saudi Arabia.

You speak another language and the biggest challenge is getting over making mistakes. I hate making mistakes and that is one of the reasons why I stopped talking. Like at the beginning, I hated to talk. Like if you ask me something, I will have the shortest answer ever; like I will always find the shortcut to the answer, so I won't talk a lot and I won't make mistakes.

Despite language and cultural obstacles, the majority of participants in this study acknowledged that they found English to not be difficult and to have a high satisfaction level of academic performance.

Some of the participants also noted a difference between their home country's education system and the American educational system. As indicated by Greenfield et al. (2006), a student from a collectivist society may wait for directions to follow instead of asking questions, may need to fit into the surrounding culture rather than feeling comfortable standing out, or may be more passive than a student from an individualistic society. Adjusting to the differing educational paradigms is yet another cultural change to which international students must acclimate and could also become a stressor. In addition, a 23 year old male from Brazil (P4) said, “We always have the same classmate for the same year. We don't keep changing, so we stay really close with each [other] and create bond.”

Many American institutions of higher education have a “diverse set of functional areas that provide student services and academic support” for students and the campus community (Long, 2012, pp. 15–16). Abe, Talbot, and Geelhoed (1998) contended that although campus resources are available and provided to all students, these were the least used resources by international students. Accordingly, most participants in this study admitted to not using these services. Instead, most relied on other resources such as the internet, professor, or other international students' support. An undergraduate international student from Pakistan (P5) explained, “I just google it or ask friends; like we get together and do homework together.”

Discrimination and prejudice are also obstacles international students encounter on American campuses, which affect the level of social connectedness (Araujo, 2011). The perceptions of prejudice and discrimination from members of the host culture can create stresses among foreign students and impede their acculturation process, along with negatively impacting their educational satisfaction (Eimers & Pike, 1997; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). It is important to note that some participants in this study reported experiencing discrimination on campus. Specifically, a student from Nigeria (P7) shared his experience with discrimination in one of his courses.

I am the only Black senior in my department currently and it being the case, I get little racial situations. Sometime, I don't feel comfortable being there

because everyone is White and I am the only Black and everybody knows that because I am a senior and we have been through all the courses together; so, it's known to everybody that I am Black and with that being the case, sometimes I experience some racialized experiences here and there.

Another student from Saudi Arabia (P1) provided an example of a biased experience with a professor.

There was a time we were supposed to meet for a project. On a Friday morning, the professor came in and said, "Hey, I've got four people that will volunteer for tomorrow's activity." Out of the four people, three were international students who just stood up to volunteer for that and there was one American. So then he says, "But I want one person to take care of the key to the room" and then he later mentions, "preferably an American." So, he knows us very well because he teaches in the class, he knows we are three international and one American in the group. So, to me that was like, okay. Situations like those I go through but I just move on with life.

In spite of such inimical experiences, most of the participants cited one of the primary benefits of attending college in the US as gaining exposure to and an appreciation of diversity. Several described how studying in an American university exposed them to individuals of other countries and cultural backgrounds. A participant (P11) reported how he learned to embrace the differences of classmates and of mainstream culture.

I believe only here in America, this is the place where you have so much diversity and you can find anything for yourself here in America. You can be from any part of the world and you still find something for you and it is amazing because I would never think I would meet so much people from different cultures and countries and I've never thought that people from Pakistan or Egypt would be so close to me in terms of, you know, not beliefs, but the same mindset or understanding of things, how people would be close. That always amazed me.

Being aware of international students' cultural backgrounds, perspectives of American culture, and factors that impact their experiences may be helpful for higher education professionals in the US in promoting their acclimation and success. Helping international students with their acculturation to a new cultural environment and bridging the cultural divide between international students and American students on campus, both in and out of the classroom, could enrich the experience of both student populations.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

International students arrive to this country with positive expectations of quality education and learning experiences. While here, they interact with individuals outside of their host country and must eventually make adjustments in their perceptions, attitudes, and expectations, as cultural differences between their home country and

the host country exist (Chaney & Martin, 2005; Krapels & Davis, 2005). However, during this process, international students face several challenges that impact every area of their lives. They must learn to manage social interactions with Americans, develop effective English language fluency to engage in social and academic situations, meet their academic learning and career goals, and maintain relationships with family and friends in their home country (Chaney & Martin, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to explore international students' sense of belonging in higher education institutions in the US. We utilized qualitative research to describe the common themes that emerged from interviews with 17 participants. Although the narratives regarding their experiences as international students were unique, they also shared some commonalities. The three most prominent themes from the interviews were the international students' perspectives of the US, factors that impacted their social belonging and social life, and their academic and campus experience. In general, participants in this study perceived a difference in the cultural world views and attitudes between themselves and Americans; felt a stronger connection with other international students compared to American students; identified common values of fellowship and diversity among international students (e.g., gender roles, religion, customs, and values); and noted language barriers in their academic experience and a preference to utilize resources other than student services. In addition, sense of belonging was more positive in participants who described themselves as having a more social (extroverted) personality compared to those who did not. International students in this study recognized that a sense of belonging develops more as time elapses. Despite the difficulties presented during their educational journey, international students expressed satisfaction with their current academic performance and enjoyed the interactions with diverse individuals for the most part.

Ensuring that all students, domestic and international, are made to feel welcome and accepted into the campus community should be a priority for institutions of higher education. Considering the complexity of international students' life abroad and the challenges they encounter when studying in the US, attention should be given to their social and academic integration. Since social and academic challenges could hinder students' success in college and persistence to graduation (Tinto, 1993), it is also imperative that institutions of higher education recognize such barriers and implement initiatives and programs to aid in the matriculation of international students socially, academically, and culturally. In order to assist international students throughout their academic career in the US, higher education institutions should implement various initiatives which would improve the academic and social aspects of these students' lives. For example, according to Araujo (2011), interdisciplinary courses should be created to promote confidence in their language abilities and improve English language proficiency. In conjunction with academic support, social support programs could be developed to provide opportunities for interactions with other international students and Americans as well (Trice, 2004). These types of programs could be mutually beneficial for international and American students as a means to break down cultural barriers and welcome cultural differences as well as offer a neutral safe space for learning and inclusiveness. Furthermore, if international students fail to integrate socially and form meaningful connections with American

students, both groups—domestic and international students—will miss out on valuable learning opportunities. For example, an increase in the number of diverse peers on an American college campus often promotes more complex thinking in addition to increased cultural understanding and relationships (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). Therefore, there are benefits for college campuses to provide opportunities for improved peer interactions between domestic and international students and to create the proper environments that can lead to positive relationships through formal structures such as facilitated intergroup dialogues (Quaye, 2012; Zuniga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002). Such experiences can promote international students' sense of belonging among their American peers and assist those students who may struggle to adapt culturally (which could negatively impact their academic success and psychological well-being) and bond with like-minded American peers.

Additionally, it is vital to cultivate stronger connections across all departments, programs, faculty, and staff to provide exceptional, inclusive services to all students. In order to foster a culture of inclusiveness and learning, faculty and staff should also be accountable for engaging in a meaningful culture of learning and developing long-term comprehensive strategies to develop a more concrete and profound understanding of cultural and ethnic backgrounds of students they teach and advise (Glass et al., 2015). These types of initiatives could include a variety of options such as multicultural trainings and faculty international field trips. Multicultural trainings could include presentations, guided discussions, and coffee hours hosted by international educators or students. Within the classroom and extracurricular programs, a climate of inclusion could be fostered by soliciting and valuing diverse viewpoints and encouraging domestic and international students to collaborate with one another during assignments and activities. International students can also benefit from receiving purposeful support from the institution during the early period of their arrival as they adapt to the new culture and environment. Such initiatives could include educating international students on cultural norms to ease their adjustment; pairing them with a guide to help them navigate the campus, local community, and local culture; and providing a safe place for international students to give voice to their concerns and address any issues. Furthermore, it is critical that institutions gather information about the experiences and needs of international students as they develop programmatic efforts and strategies for student support.

Although the present research offers insight into an understudied but important issue in higher education, there are limitations. All participants were international students from one institution located in the south central region of the US; therefore, it is difficult to generalize the results. For applicability to other colleges and universities and geographical areas and a more varied perspective, it would be judicious to replicate such research more broadly by using a larger sample size and in different types of institutions in different regions of the country. Nonetheless, these findings give insight into the select international students' personal stories and perspectives.

The findings of this study highlight the relevance of social connectedness and belonging for international students studying in the US. It also underlines several areas in which higher education professionals can work to positively impact students'

sense of belonging and connectedness with domestic students and assist in their efforts to intentionally enhance a support network and build a solid infrastructure to better meet the needs of international students.

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