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Initial Arrival and Transitional Experiences of International Students at a U.S. University

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ABSTRACT: *The globalization of higher education has increased cross-cultural educational exchanges. As international students navigate their new environment, they face numerous challenges. Challenges during the transitional phase are especially critical, as they diminish international students' sense of mattering and marginalize them. This qualitative study explores the initial arrival experiences of eleven international students at a public university in the U.S. through the lens of the theory of marginality and mattering. The findings of this phenomenological study reveal that international students' transitional challenges included issues related to housing, food, and transportation. Their sense of mattering is not linear and is highly dependent on specific spaces, recognition from staff and educators, and relationships with peers. Overall, the findings indicate that international students' adjustment is situational and requires sustained, institutionally tailored support. The lack of this support marginalizes them, diminishing their sense of worth and negatively affecting their academic experience in the U.S.*

Keywords: international students, phenomenology, marginality, mattering, transition

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INTRODUCTION

The United States (U.S.) is a global leader in hosting international students, with 1,126,690 international students from over 210 countries in the 2023/24 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2025). Despite its prominence, the U.S. needs a comprehensive national policy to recruit international students and promote the internationalization of higher education (Becker & Kolster, 2012) so that U.S. colleges and universities do not admit international students without a clear plan for integration (Goodwin & Nacht, 1983). During the integration process, international students face transitional challenges (Rabia & Hazza, 2017). Institutions of higher education (IHEs) cannot expect international students to adjust to a new educational system without providing appropriate transitional support to address the challenges they face (Andrade, 2006).

Transitional experiences are often marked by challenges that can affect international students' sense of mattering. They frequently experience challenges related to accommodation, transportation, documentation, and the sociocultural environment of their new location (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). While American universities make efforts to provide the best services to international students, they may not fully account for students' diverse cultures and experiences (Ozturgut, 2013). Despite various support programs, a persistent gap remains in adequately addressing the unique needs of these students, resulting in a sense of isolation and diminished feelings of belonging (Perry, 2016). This gap can lead to academic underperformance, self-doubt, social alienation, and overall dissatisfaction with the educational experience (Chennamsetti, 2020). Addressing these challenges is therefore critical not only for students' academic success but also for their overall well-being, as societal mattering is positively associated with unconditional self-acceptance and an enhanced sense of meaning in life (Kam & Prihadi, 2021).

This paper treats the initial phase as *the critical transition phase* and calls for a comprehensive understanding and practical strategies needed to support international students during this time. Based on the theory of marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989), this study highlights that international students experience marginalization during transitions between contexts that affect their sense of mattering. It differs from the notion that transitions are linear, emphasizing the context-dependent and relational nature of international students' experiences. While prior studies have examined the barriers international students face and their perceptions of value (Hao & Prihadi, 2022; Ward et al., 2001), there remains a need to empirically examine how transitional experiences unfold among international students.

By examining the transitional experiences of international students through theoretical and empirical lenses, this study not only fills a gap in the current literature but also provides practical insights for universities. These insights can guide universities in better supporting international students and capitalizing on the benefits of a truly diverse and inclusive campus. They will also inform incoming international students about the experiences of current students so that they can develop strategies to adjust rather than experience shock (Walton &

Cohen, 2011; Chennamsetti, 2020). Hence, the research question for this phenomenological study is as follows: What are the experiences of international students in the transition period, including the initial arrival and early stages of their university experience?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The United States of America is a popular destination for international students to pursue higher education. The highest number of students is from China, India, South Korea, Canada, Vietnam, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, and Türkiye. This enrollment growth contributed \$40.1 billion to the U.S. economy and supported over 368,333 jobs (NAFSA, 2023).

Benefits of International Students

Beyond financial and employment benefits, the internationalization of education offers several advantages for host countries, their institutions of higher education, and students. This educational exchange helps host countries develop international relations with other countries and their universities (Jibeen & Khan, 2015). Diverse perspectives from international students in the classroom help domestic students expand their understanding of other countries and cultures (Lee & Rice, 2007). International exposure during higher education also enables domestic students to broaden their multicultural experiences (Singh, 2021) and to participate in international learning environments, research, and innovation (Gebregergis, 2018). International students play a crucial role in research initiatives at US universities. They serve as research assistants and provide essential support beyond academic skills that faculty members highly value (Chellaraj et al., 2008). For instance, research has shown that a 10% increase in international graduate students correlates with a 4.5% increase in patent applications (Chellaraj et al., 2008). Their enrollment at high research activity institutions underscores their pivotal role in benefiting American competitiveness in research and development (Hegarty, 2014).

Challenges Faced by International Students

Amid the benefits of talent mobilization in global higher education, international students often face challenges when transitioning from their home country to the host country. International students come to the U.S. with dual aspirations: to pursue high-quality education and to experience a new culture (Gautam et al., 2016). However, their initial year in a new country is marked by significant adjustments as they navigate unfamiliar landscapes, cultural norms, and academic expectations (Phillips, 2001; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). These adjustments include challenges such as securing housing, navigating bureaucratic processes for government documents, registering for classes, and learning to use public transportation (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

Academic Challenges: Language, Pedagogy and Accents

Academically, international students encounter several hurdles, including language barriers, differences in pedagogical approaches, and insufficient support from advisors and the university (Andrade, 2006; Martirosyan, 2022). The language barrier affects their comprehension and participation in class, as well as their ability to engage meaningfully in group projects and academic discussions (Andrade, 2006; Lee, 2010). Furthermore, concerns about accent and language fluency often undermine their confidence in social interactions, contributing to a sense of isolation from American peers (Leong, 2015).

For instance, African and Asian students often struggle with developing fluency in English, which is essential for their academic success and integration into university life in the United States (Gautam et al., 2016). Conversely, some European students view their accent as a distinctive marker of their international identity and an opportunity to connect with others, facilitating the formation of friendships (Okusolubo, 2018). Such linguistic challenges are also experienced by South American international students, who face differences in grammar, pronunciation, and language proficiency, resulting in longer study times and greater academic stress than their peers (Okusolubo, 2018).

Sociocultural Challenges: Individualism, Food, and Disconnection

Culturally, international students often struggle with divergent social norms, values, and communication styles, which can hinder their efforts to form meaningful connections with domestic students (Williams & Johnson, 2011). While some international students welcome the opportunity for cultural immersion, others find the individualistic culture of the U.S. to be alienating compared to the collectivist culture of their home countries (Gartman, 2016). As a result, many international students socialize predominantly with fellow international peers, reinforcing feelings of cultural isolation and affecting their sense of belonging within their academic community (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Food also plays a crucial role in cultural adjustment, as many international students struggle to find familiar, culturally appropriate food options in the U.S. (Chennamsetti, 2020). Dietary preferences and restrictions based on cultural or religious practices further complicate their experiences and contribute to feelings of homesickness and cultural disconnection (Leong, 2015; Yeo et al., 2019).

International students, particularly those from Asian countries, are vulnerable to racial discrimination and xenophobic attitudes, especially after global events such as the September 11 attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic (Bhojwani et al., 2020; Lee, 2010). These incidents range from verbal harassment to institutional biases that affect their educational experience and sense of safety on campus (Gibson et al., 2023; Koo et al., 2023). Such discriminatory experiences not only undermine students' academic confidence but also perpetuate feelings of exclusion and cultural alienation in their host country. Hence, microaggressions

related to food choices or cultural practices exacerbate feelings of marginalization and stress among international students (Yeo et al., 2019).

Financial Challenges: Financial Aid, Employment, and Health Care

Financially, international students face significant challenges due to the high cost of tuition, limited availability of financial aid, and restrictions on employment opportunities (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005; Olatunji et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic increased these financial hardships, with many students experiencing job losses or reduced income, making it even more challenging to cover essential expenses such as rent and healthcare (Olatunji et al., 2023). Furthermore, differences in currency values between their home countries and the U.S. amplify financial strain, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds (Lee, 2010).

Additionally, navigating the U.S. healthcare system presents a daunting challenge for international students, who struggle to understand complex insurance policies and face exorbitant medical costs (Jang, 2023; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Hence, students avoid seeking medical care altogether, resorting to self-medication or enduring health issues without proper treatment, which can have severe implications for their well-being and academic performance (Jang, 2023; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

Implications of the Challenges: Marginality and Mattering

The above section reviews the literature, highlighting the challenges faced by international students. However, they remain problem-focused rather than providing insights into how students make meaning of their experiences during transition. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that academic, sociocultural, and financial challenges significantly shape international students' adjustment. However, few studies have analyzed how these challenges intersect with students' perceptions of marginality and mattering during their early arrival. This limitation highlights the need for a conceptual lens that accounts for feelings of marginality while also recognizing the situations under which students feel valued and supported. Hence, the theory of marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989) will be used in the study.

Marginality is a universal experience and an outcome of transitions in which individuals often feel socially isolated and peripheral as they move from one context to another (Schlossberg, 1989). During such transitions, individuals may feel less significant to others, and the desire to feel important to others increases, thereby shaping their sense of belonging in the new environment (Schlossberg, 1989). In the case of international students, due to transitional and adjustment challenges, they face stronger feelings of alienation than domestic students (Klineberg & Hull, 1979), which can lead to a sense of marginalization (Becker, 1971). Students who encounter different systems, communication styles, and interpersonal relationships may face adjustment barriers, which can lead to uneasiness, fear, and anxiety (Worae & Edgerton, 2023). These feelings emerge

when students experience cultural shock due to sociocultural differences between their own culture and that of the host country (Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

When international students feel marginalized, issues related to mattering will impact their experiences (Schlossberg, 1989). A stronger sense of mattering is regarded as positively impacting several other aspects of human life, profoundly influencing individuals' inner selves, and predicting positive life outcomes (Pearlin & LeBlanc, 2001; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). It is a critical resilience factor in stressful situations, yet its absence can leave individuals vulnerable (Flett, 2018). The feeling of being mattered increases a sense of significance among individuals who positively impacts emotional wellbeing across the lifespan (Prilleltensky, 2020; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021; Flett & Heisel, 2021)

By employing Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering, this study not only documents the challenges but also examines them through the theoretical lens. Within the framework of Schlossberg (1989), mattering functions are a multidimensional construct comprising attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation. Drawing on these elements, this study examines students' lived experiences, highlighting how initial experiences at the university shape perceptions of mattering. There is an urgency to acknowledge and explore the marginalization strategy, as feeling marginalized also entails rejecting one's home and host cultures simultaneously (Krsmanovic, 2021). Hence, the lack of adequate support during this critical transition period increases their feelings of hopelessness and stress (Leong, 2015).

Importance of Institutional Support

The transition of international students to U.S. higher education often involves significant challenges. However, the misconception that these students are solely responsible for overcoming them overlooks the crucial role of university support (Witkowsky, 2024). Adequate institutional support from the university can significantly enhance international students' college life satisfaction and reduce psychological stress (Cho & Yu, 2015). When universities provide comprehensive support, international students are more likely to engage positively with their academic work and the university community (Cho & Yu, 2015).

Universities can offer support services to assist international students, including English language tutoring and equal opportunities for financial aid and employment (Wu et al., 2015). International students often emphasize the importance of financial aid, on-campus jobs, career services, academic advising, and student life activities. In contrast, international education administrators typically prioritize academic support, acculturation efforts, orientations, visa and academic tracking systems, writing and tutoring programs, and emergency funds as retention strategies (Redden, 2014). These differences in priorities can create an imbalance between the support international students expect and what the university provides.

To address this gap, universities can focus on providing tailored support services and detailed prearrival information for international students (Nguyen & Larson, 2017). This should include assistance with housing, food, and transportation (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). The international office can also play a crucial role by offering resources from wellness centers and providing personalized support (Ozturgut, 2013). Conducting culturally sensitive training for administrative and academic staff can further enhance cultural competency (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

Additionally, universities can implement international student mentorship programs (Korobova & Starobin, 2015) and peer groups (Telbis et al., 2014) to reduce feelings of isolation and exclusion. Integrating international and domestic students in orientation programs can foster intercultural communication, familiarize students with campus resources, connect them to the local community, and support academic integration. Further support can be provided through ongoing peer mentoring and living-learning communities (Witkowsky, 2024).

Conclusion

The prior literature widely describes international students' challenges in the host country and the importance of the sense of mattering. While international students bring several benefits to the host country, more institutional support could positively impact their experiences. Although several studies have examined the challenges faced by international students, a notable gap remains in understanding their lived experiences through the lens of marginality and mattering during *the critical transitional period*. Mattering is relatively underresearched, despite recognizing that it could profoundly enhance individual lives and institutional quality (Flett, 2018). Hence, this study will explore international students' initial experiences and perceptions of mattering at a public university.

METHOD

This qualitative study examined the experiences of 11 international students attending a public university in the Southern Front Range region of Colorado, with 11,025 students in Fall 2023. There were 189 international students from 57 countries, primarily from India, Nigeria, China, Bangladesh, and Saudi Arabia, who contributed \$ 5.3 million in 2022-23 to the large metropolitan area of the research site. A phenomenological approach is used because the study group shares a common phenomenon: they have left their home countries for higher education and live in the United States on F-1 visas. A 60-minute semistructured interview was conducted with each participant. The interview included questions such as “Can you recall any specific instances in which you felt marginalized or excluded during your initial time at the university?”, “How did you cope with these experiences?”, “How do you perceive the concept of mattering within the university community?”, and “Did you feel valued and respected as an individual during your initial experiences at the university?” The study used snowball

sampling to identify participants, and their participation was voluntary. More details about the participants are available below.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Preferred Name	Gender	Current Degree Level	Country of Origin	Age Range	Semester of Enrollment
AP	M	Doctoral	Nepal	26-30	Spring 2024
Adam	M	Doctoral	Iraq	31-35	Fall 2014
Adrian	M	Doctoral	Bangladesh	26-30	Spring 2021
Balal	M	Doctoral	Pakistan	31-35	Spring 2023
Bloom	F	Masters	Bangladesh	20-25	Spring 2024
Chandler	M	Undergraduate	Vietnam	26-30	Fall 2021
Heidi	F	Masters	India	26-30	Fall 2023
Moh	M	Doctoral	Libya	36-40	Spring 2023
Sheldon	M	Doctoral	India	26-30	Spring 2021
SS	F	Doctoral	India	26-30	Fall 2022
Tom	F	Doctoral	Bangladesh	31-35	Fall 2021

For this study, 11 international students representing diverse backgrounds were interviewed. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. Most participants were enrolled in a doctoral program. The sample included four female and seven male participants. The countries of origin varied, with the majority of participants from Asia.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, this study followed a four-step process outlined by Moustakas (1994) to analyze the data. The epoche (bracketing) process was employed to limit biases and assumptions, thereby allowing for an explanation of a phenomenon without personal preconceptions of the author. Then, horizontalization was conducted by reading all transcripts and picking out the essential parts. Similar ideas were then grouped to see patterns, and descriptions of each interview were developed. After that, the patterns generated through coding and categorizing were analyzed. Building upon the findings, a descriptive synthesis was created in the final stage to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

Various verification strategies were employed to establish the trustworthiness of the measures, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The triangulation method was used to ensure credibility by corroborating evidence from multiple sources (Creswell, 2013). Transferability was achieved through rich/thick descriptions, allowing

readers to transfer information to other scenarios and settings (Erlandson et al., 1993). Moustakas's (1994) data analysis method ensures accuracy and consistency, thus increasing the dependability of the findings. Finally, confirmability was achieved through peer debriefing sessions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), where the author's peers provided an external review of the research process and findings.

Limitations

This study has limitations concerning representation and generalization (Polit & Beck, 2010). First, because the study was conducted at a single university with a relatively small sample of international students, the findings may be transferable only to a subset of international students (Firestone, 1993). Relatedly, since all participants are from the same university, the findings may be transferable only to interpreting international students' experiences at the study site (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants may have engaged in impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) to consciously control how they present themselves, thereby influencing others' perceptions. Despite these limitations, this study has potential for broader application: it offers a framework for conducting comparative studies within universities or across universities in different countries to understand the lived experiences of international students in diverse environments in the future.

Positionality

This study was conducted by an international student currently enrolled in a PhD program in the U.S. The author moved to the U.S. in 2020 and faced challenges as they adjusted to American university culture. The author has also worked as a student employee in the International Affairs Office at the study site and is familiar with international students' experiences in the U.S. As an international student currently enrolled at the study site, the author ensured that her personal biases did not unduly influence the research outcomes through transparency, peer review, advisor feedback, and rigorous analytical methods.

RESULTS

This section presents the study's findings, focusing on the perception of marginality and mattering during *the critical transition phase*. The results are presented to illustrate a phenomenon that occurs during the transition and adjustment journey of international students in the U.S. Overall, the findings highlight the struggles international students face during this phenomenon, providing a foundation for the discussion in the following section.

Reason for Transition

Participants chose to pursue education in the U.S. based on academic, financial, personal, and social factors. PhD students Moh from Libya, Sheldon from India, and Balal from Pakistan decided to transition based on research opportunities, a research interest match with their advisors, and specialized lab equipment. Adrian from Bangladesh excitedly emphasized the academic factor that motivated him to transition:

I love academia. I would like to gather more experience in the research area and do work in this field that I am interested in. I wanted to go somewhere where they will give that facility, that scope, that opportunity. That is why I applied here.

Financial aid was another critical factor for PhD students, such as AP from Nepal and Tom from Bangladesh, who received full scholarships from their advisors, and Adam from Iraq, who received a government scholarship from his country. Heidi was able to secure educational loans from India that contributed to her decision to pursue a master's degree. SS, who had never lived outside India, viewed her PhD journey and transition to a new country as an opportunity for personal growth. Bloom's decision to transition to the U.S. for a master's degree was shaped by concerns about her security as a minority woman in Bangladesh. Chandler, an undergraduate student from Vietnam, sought comfort in being close to his aunt's house in Colorado.

Landed: Now what?

Many international students landed at a larger airport 85 miles away from the university's location. They faced difficulties at the airport, where they were unable to access the ride-sharing applications. AP, Heidi, and Adam shared their initial negative experience, which started due to the lack of U.S.-based bank accounts or internet access. Therefore, they were unable to access public transportation or ride-sharing applications. AP had to request a friend to book him an Uber, which turned out to be very expensive.

They had to seek help from strangers residing in the U.S. from their home countries. For example, Adrian reached out and received a ride from a man from Bangladesh whom he had never met before. Similarly, Tom also reached out to a stranger she met on the internet, who gave her a ride in return for the gas cost. Tom remembers her experience of trusting a stranger for a ride and considers herself lucky that she reached her apartment safely. Tom signs a relief as she adjusts her hijab, "I was totally dependent on my God," as her faith became only an anchor to support her in uncertain times.

Chandler and SS had a more positive experience. SS's friend, who had picked her up from the airport, and her journey to the apartment were smooth. Similarly, Chandler shared that his uncle and aunt came to the airport to pick him up, which made his journey easier.

First Impression of the US

After arriving in the United States, international students report varied first impressions shaped by environmental, cultural, academic, and social factors. They appreciated the natural beauty of Colorado, the campus infrastructure, and a sense of scholarly independence. Bloom highlights the mountain view, while Sheldon notes improvements in his overall health due to better air quality. For many international students, the idea of living the American Dream during their initial days was surreal. Sheldon appreciated the “freedom of expression,” and for Tom, the transition was so surreal that she needed some time to process the reality of being in the US. With brightness in her eyes, she shares:

This is like a dream come true, like that, because as a student from a third-world country, I was feeling like a dream. OK, I will pursue my graduate studies in the United States.

SS shares a burst of child-like excitement, expressing her fascination with the dynamic American life, “Oh my God, American dream, those flashing lights, those cars.” Beyond the excitement, international students also valued the opportunities the U.S. provided, particularly in terms of comfortable campus environments, infrastructure, advanced classrooms, and college buildings. Despite initial excitement, students faced challenges after a few weeks. Homesickness was a recurring theme, particularly for those with limited experience living away from family, such as Adrian and Tom. Adrian, with his soft smile and tone of nostalgia, shares his experiences:

OK, so the first few days were kind of like, I was very excited to come here. Therefore, after one or two weeks, I was having some emotional barriers. I, actually, in my life, I have not been away from my family much. I was kind of depressed for some time.

While the allure of the American Dream remained strong, the reality of navigating a new country, culture, and academic system unfolded in unique ways for each student.

Experiences in Finding Accommodation

Most international students reported encountering housing-related difficulties during their transitional phase. Securing housing from their home country was a significant barrier they faced due to a lack of credit history and the need for guarantors. Adrian shared that he was unable to rent because he did not have a renter’s history or a guarantor in the U.S.

Since students could not easily secure housing before their arrival, they had to resort to temporary accommodations, which created distress and fear. For example, Adrian stayed in the basement of a stranger he met via a social media group, and Balal shared a two-bedroom apartment with eight other students, which hindered his academic focus and sleep even now. Similarly, Heidi felt a sense of fear throughout her initial days, mainly when she stayed with a stranger; she also made friends through social media. She scanned the room with fear in her eyes and shared a sense of distrust:

As a lady, I always have a fear that someone is recording, someone is going to break in, if this washroom has a camera. I am still scared.

Since Heidi felt unsafe and helpless during her initial days, she contemplated returning home. Sheldon was able to book an apartment before arriving in the U.S. through online sites. However, he experienced heightened anxiety after seeing this apartment for the first time. He feared that he was being scammed and described the unit as “dingy”, with dim lights and thin walls. This triggered an “enormous nervous breakdown,” which led him to call his doctor back home.

Bloom, Moh, and Chandler had relatively smooth experiences, which contrasted with those of other international students. Bloom extensively utilized the off-campus housing listings provided by the international office and successfully secured a lease from a graduating international student. Moh and Chandler shared that it was not difficult for them to find because of their family and friends.

Navigating Food Options

Many participants described the food scene in the United States as overwhelming, as they were surprised by the size of the supermarkets upon their arrival. Tom gets excited, raises her voice, and recalls her visit to a popular store:

This feeling was amazing. Because in my life I first time I have seen this large shopping mall. It is different thing from my country. Here, we find all products, such as meat, chicken, fish, eggs, vegetables, clothes, and shoes, in one place.

Alongside the initial excitement came practical difficulties. The cost of food in the United States was a recurring concern among international students, especially compared to their home countries. Students such as Balal, Adam, and Moh, who followed a halal diet, faced specific challenges in accessing culturally appropriate food. Moh recalls attending a college event where he had to spend an entire day without eating due to the limited food options available. Similarly, Adam thought for a while and reflected on the difficulty of adapting his eating habits:

It took us some time to find the places where we can find that food... either you skip the restriction, and you start eating... or you become a vegetarian.

After these experiences, international students found support within their community. Heidi was supported by an Indian peer during her transition who shared her kitchen space and groceries. Adrian, AP, Tom, and SS found community-specific grocery stores that offered food choices from their home countries. Chandler enjoyed the food from his aunt’s Vietnamese restaurant, which helped him adjust more easily to the new place. Bloom, who was already familiar with international food, shared that it was easy to adapt to American food culture.

Conditional Respect, Selective Belonging, and Experiences of Marginalization

The participants revealed an intersection of respect, belonging, and marginalization as international students in the U.S. Many students felt confident in their academic abilities, although this confidence often developed slowly. They also expressed disappointment at how their expertise was overlooked. For example, Tom, Sheldon, and SS mentioned that they gained respect after demonstrating their abilities in class and research and academic competency. The conditional nature of respect is evident in Balal's experiences, where he angrily shares:

The people who work at the university give direct, proper respect; however, there are also people who do not give equal respect. Because it is written on my face that I am not from this culture.

International students often experienced comfort and a sense of belonging in spaces tied to specific interests or relationships. They experienced inclusion only in particular spaces rather than throughout the campus community. Adam and Sheldon felt like they mainly belonged in their research laboratories, while Heidi thought that she only belonged in the math tutoring center. SS, AP, and Moh do not feel any sense of belonging on campus. SS's voice breaks and eyes fill with tears as she shares:

I didn't feel like I belonged here. Till now, I do not feel I belong here. I want to finish it (the degree program) and go back.

Chandler similarly noted that he feels silenced when he is excluded from social interactions due to his identity as an international student. Many participants, such as AP, Heidi, and Bloom, shared that they face a pervasive sense of invisibility and disregard. For example, Heidi thought the university administration and faculty failed to empathize with the burden and adjustment faced by international students. Tears drop from her eyes as she shares:

No. I do not feel respected until now. I have heard professors saying, "If you do not want to follow this (American culture), then why are you here in the first place?" I used to think it was because of my accent I carry, but then I felt like if someone wanted to understand, they would try to understand.

International students also reflected on their identity and how the campus culture made them feel during their initial time. Chandler shared that coming to the university gave them the freedom to express their queer identity and have the freedom to be friends with people who accept them. However, he also had negative experiences: "Whenever I say I'm an international student, people comment on my accent...it lowers my self-esteem." He shared that he feels othered, and to avoid this, he chose to hide his international student status by telling people who he is from California instead, which led to more "normal" conversations about which part of California, rather than questions about his accent or origins.

Many international students, such as Bloom, Sheldon, and SS, noted the superficial approach to American conversation. Bloom noticed that casual greetings such as "How are you?" often did not lead to real conversations. As she

explained, "I feel like everybody here has a very superficial tone... It's like a greeting, you know." Students expected these questions to show genuine care, but instead, they realized they were a polite way of saying hello. This difference made some feel lonely, even when surrounded by people.

Peer Relationships on Campus

One common challenge among international students during their transition was the process of building friendships with domestic students. They faced difficulties forming meaningful relationships with American classmates. Moh reported unsuccessful attempts at engagement with American peers, explaining:

It is a bit tough, you know. Especially, the American people are not helpful. I tried to ask them for help sometimes, but no. I do not think it is about races or discrimination, but maybe their culture, or I do not know. However, they do not help. They are not helping. (I feel) A little bit sad.

Cultural barriers significantly impacted international students' ability to integrate into the American classroom during their transition to the United States. Bloom shared that classroom dynamics were impersonal, and Sheldon found the classroom culture to be "robotic." Balal, Adrian, and Moh identified differences in communication styles and social norms as obstacles to forming connections. Balal suggested that racial differences may also play a role, stating, "Maybe because of the color of my skin...they feel that this is a strange guy."

These challenges led some students, such as SS, to withdraw from social attempts. After facing difficulties connecting with domestic peers, students frequently turned to international students for social support. Tom reported positive experiences within international student communities, explaining that her international friends respected her cultural background, "All of my friends are from different countries... they respect my religion and my thoughts."

While most participants struggled with cross-cultural integration, a few exceptions emerged. Chandler, who described himself as a "social butterfly," reported that making friends came "truly easily". Sheldon also found success bonding with American classmates through structured academic collaborations such as group projects. He observed that beyond all the differences, all students shared everyday academic struggles:

I realized that even in the middle of all these, you know, rather political situations, students are just students. We have the same issues as getting up in the morning is the same issue we share. Submitting the assignment is the same issue we share, so we bonded over the common problems, and there were many things.

While international students had challenges in friendships, shared academic struggles could be addressed through the institutional support they received from staff and faculty.

Initial interactions: Staff and Professors

International students shared that their initial interactions with staff members and faculty varied. While many participants found staff members, professors, and facilities helpful, some described challenges in navigating available resources and a lack of clear, proactive communication from the university. Many students remember receiving positive and helpful support from university staff members across various departments. For example, Chandler's first meaningful support came from a tutor at the writing center. With a wide smile on his face, he shared:

A tutor at the writing center, he was truly nice. He is the nicest person ever. I worked with him throughout my freshman year and during my sophomore year. He was one of the people whom I was comfortable enough to tell that I'm an international student.

Supportive supervision from professors was a recurring theme among international students. Mainly PhD students were highly supported by their advisors to gain a deeper understanding of the educational system. AP's advisor positively impacted his overwhelming transition. Similarly, Balal expressed gratitude for his advisor, who guided him not only academically but also in bureaucratic tasks, such as securing a Social Security Number (SSN). Many participants also shared the empowering role that professors played in their academic transition to a new country. Bloom recalled an experience during her initial days when a professor allowed her to revise incomplete homework after the deadline. She described this gesture as an essential moment in building her academic confidence. Adam and Adrian noted that academic cultural adjustment was a learning process for them. Adam shared:

It was different from my country because I did not know how to approach them or what to expect from them or what's the right way. However, I remember one of them, he was truly nice and he made me feel comfortable and welcome. In addition, I ask him questions even though he's not teaching me anything.

Adrian also shared a similar experience where he received academic validation from his professor. He recalled being personally acknowledged as one of the best students in a class, which further boosted his confidence. However, not all experiences were positive. Heidi described a distressing experience with a professor who ignored 40 of her emails and avoided in-person meetings. Similarly, SS shared a troubling interaction where a professor responded dismissively to a kind gesture, reinforcing feelings of alienation and leading her to feel reluctant to engage freely with faculty: "It impacted me a lot because until now I'm not able to like talk freely with them." These experiences show that international students highly value positive behavior from their educators.

Importance of International Students

International students shared reasons that make them essential to the university, including financial contributions, cultural enrichment, and advancements in research. Adam emphasized the financial benefit and noted:

They pay more than an American, so that is a good income for the school. Additionally, they contribute because we have multiple events here. I learned about many countries simply because I met someone from Spain, India, and Brazil.

Beyond financial benefit, participants also highlighted cultural exchange as a critical value. Adrian stressed that diversity increases inclusivity and helps international students find “like-minded people who are going through similar things”. Heidi expanded on this, explaining that international students bring “out-of-the-box” perspectives, enhancing intellectual collaboration and cultural exposure. They also emphasized that American students learn from international students about different countries and cultures.

Balal and Sheldon underscored the role of international students in research. In Balal’s program, few domestic students pursued advanced research compared to their international peers. Sheldon echoed this, citing how international students’ unique problem-solving approaches, rooted in their diverse backgrounds, help advance research outcomes in universities.

Request for Additional Support

Participants provided several recommendations to enhance the experiences of international students, with a focus on prearrival guidance, institutional support, community building, and academic transition assistance. Chandler criticized the university for admitting international students without adequate support systems. Tom emphasized the need for more communication before their arrival about essential resources and detailed information on housing, transportation, and campus groups to ease the transition burden.

Bloom echoed this, proposing that emails be sent from international offices listing free campus services to mitigate financial strain. Request for transportation-related support during their initial days emerged as a critical issue, with Balal, SS, and Tom advocating for airport shuttles that would lessen logistical hurdles on the first day in the U.S. Balal highlighted the need for academic transition support, citing an overwhelming experience for him that resulted in poor first-semester grades due to unfamiliarity with coursework and research demands.

Students also requested better healthcare facilities and support in navigating the complex U.S. healthcare system. Adrian added that the university should provide healthcare alternatives early to prevent financial stress. Balal also recommended a free wellness center for international students in their first year to address the physical and mental health challenges they face during the transition. Bloom and Heidi emphasized the need for mental health services, noting that international students often feel fearful or lonely. Heidi pointed out that some support does not require a larger investment but rather a good intention.

Sheldon and Tom challenged the assumption that the transition ends after the first month. Sheldon described transition as a multiyear process, urging universities to provide long-term resources. Finally, SS appealed for nothing more than empathy toward international students and requested that staff, faculty

members, and the university, “Please be kind to us. Being away from family is not easy.” This request emphasized the importance of relational support more than any financial support from the university.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study extend the literature on international student transitions by indicating that experiences of marginality and lack of mattering for international students are not linear but contextual. While previous studies have reported that international students experience social isolation during transition (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007), this study’s data reveal a more complex reality that has led me to describe the initial phase as a “critical transitional phase,” which can be further understood by applying Schlossberg’s dimensions of mattering: attention, importance, ego-extension, and dependence.

First, students faced logistical hurdles during the “moving in” stage, including finding accommodations, navigating transportation, and making bureaucratic adjustments, which complicated their adjustment to the U.S. While this finding aligns with previous studies by Andrade (2006) and Poyrazli and Grahame (2007), this study uniquely finds that structural dependence is evident, with international students’ sense of mattering tied to the university’s ability to meet their initial logistical needs. Moreover, when these needs were unmet, they experienced heightened marginality.

Second, international students experienced mattering only in specific contexts, such as research labs or tutoring centers. During the “moving through” phase, students faced challenges in both academic and sociocultural recognition. However, they felt most confident in spaces where they could excel. Their desire to remain in these spaces shows their need for attention and ego-extension. They also express a desire to adjust in the classroom and assimilate more with their American peers, indicating a wish to receive attention for their unique cultural background and academic potential. This also shows how institutional environments create microclimates of inclusion amidst broader climates of marginalization.

Third, the feeling of being mattered, particularly to staff and educators, significantly enhances students’ sense of value. The findings also indicate that support from staff and educators played a pivotal role in making students feel important during their transitional phase. When students such as Adrian and Bloom received validation from their professors, they coped better with stress, just as Flett (2018) predicted. This further proves Rosenberg and McCullough’s (1981) point that mattering fosters self-worth. Conversely, those who felt ignored and dismissed, such as Heidi and SS, experienced the marginalization that Schlossberg warned about, leading them to feel invisible and disrespected.

Hence, transitional experiences are often influenced by context and resources (Goodman et al., 2006), and the lack of these can create isolation and vulnerability (Lee & Rice, 2007). The study’s findings show that this lack of personal connection reinforces a situation of being “on the periphery,” a core tenet of marginality. With a stronger sense of mattering, some international students,

despite initial challenges, develop resilience, whereas others tend to isolate themselves. Additionally, the strong emphasis on students' desire for support from university professionals and friends shows that relational support is pivotal in fostering resilience more than transactional services.

Implications

The persistent reports of isolation within the university reveal that institutions often fail to operationalize Schlossberg's (1989) call for communities where individuals feel "depended on and cared about." Therefore, universities must support international students during this *critical transitional phase*. The findings challenge universities to reconceptualize support through Schlossberg's (1981) "4 S" model, which addresses the situational, self, support, and strategy dimensions of transition. Drawing on Schlossberg's theory of transition (1981) and participants' recommendations, this study offers universities suggestions for better supporting international students through the "4 S" model. The findings of the study show that international students have unique challenges; therefore, uniquely tailored prearrival guidance for them can be provided before their arrival to ease the transitional challenges (situational). They also emphasized varied marginalized experiences that could be minimized through established free mental health services by professionals trained to help international students (self), international students' shared desire to form friendships that could be initiated by universities through mentorship programs by domestic students (support), and finally, educators' behavior played an important role in international students' confidence (and lack of it if ignored), which can be further enhanced through cultural competency training for faculty (strategy), which could collectively mitigate marginalization. The findings also critique neoliberal narratives that frame transition struggles as individual shortcomings (Witkowsky, 2024). As Sheldon noted, transition is a "multiyear process," yet institutional support often vanishes after orientation, which is a misalignment with higher education's emphasis on sustained adaptation (Goodman et al., 2006).

A troubling consistency emerged between this study's findings and the literature spanning two decades. Although there have been studies since the early 2000s (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005) documenting international students' needs, the participants still faced similar academic (Andrade, 2006), logistical (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007), financial (Olatunji et al., 2023), healthcare-related (Jang, 2023), and ongoing transition support (Witkowsky, 2024) in 2025. This suggests that higher education institutions have been slow to implement known solutions to support international students' transitions and adjustments. The literature in the field has long noted these challenges, yet meaningful institutional change remains inadequate.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that international students experience marginalization and diminished value during their transition. Their perception of mattering is situational, and their adjustment is nonlinear. It is actually a constant navigation between spaces (different locations on campus) and relationships (with peers, faculty, and staff). While universities implement traditional support services, they often further marginalize international students by failing to address the unique circumstances of their experiences. Hence, it shows that daily cultural mismatches cumulatively diminish students' sense of mattering over time. While challenges during transitions are inevitable, this study demonstrates that small human gestures of recognition and care can profoundly shape the experiences of international students navigating the complex journey of transnational education.

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- None
- Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- Some sections, with extensive editing
- Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- Entire work, with extensive editing

This article incorporates content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools. AI tools were employed throughout the document for editing assistance, structural feedback, and stylistic support. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

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