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## Facilitating Sense of Belonging for Collectivist International Students: Intervention Strategy Utilizing Peer Support

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Facilitating Sense of Belonging for Collectivist  
International Students: Intervention Strategy Utilizing Peer  
Support  
by  
Taylor Wieringa  
April 2023

Master's Project  
Submitted to the College of Education  
and Community Innovation  
At Grand Valley State University  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Degree of Master of Education



The signature of the individual below indicates that the individual has read and approved the project of Taylor Wieringa in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of M.Ed. in Higher Education, College Student Affairs Leadership.

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April 27, 2023

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Taylor Wieringa (they/them)

## Abstract

International student populations have persisted in higher education with limited support. Research regarding international student experiences from collectivist home countries have found that mentorship programs could be helpful in assisting with transition and overcoming culture shock, yet few current intervention strategies go beyond international student orientation. This project explores relevant literature regarding barriers unique to students from collectivist home countries as they adjust to the individualist culture of American colleges and universities. With these barriers in mind, this project also explores peer mentorship as an intervention strategy to engage international collectivist students and assist in feeling that they belong on campus and can navigate new cultural differences with some comfort and support.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Problem Statement**

International students have become lucrative to the financial success of higher education institutions, predominantly four-year, public institutions. However, intervention strategies to support and engage these populations rarely stem beyond initial orientation or school sanctioned pre-arrival procedures (Arthur, 2017). Often this leads to international students fending for themselves for the remainder of their time at an institution. International students face a unique set of circumstances regarding the enrollment process, experience with retention, and personal experiences navigating American higher education spaces. Unique barriers for international students include financial burdens of pursuing higher education abroad. International student populations are exempt from federal aid for tuition and must pay out of pocket for all charges associated with college, on top any travel and relocation fees. Regardless of origin, many global learners enter higher education institutions in the United States because of a near universal understanding that education in the United States is the best in the world (Adewale et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2017). Receiving this education will then open doors for students in their careers regardless of if they pursue a career abroad or in their home country (Adewale et al., 2018).

The pursuit of education in the United States for international students often reflects a cultural obligation to work and focus on obtaining knowledge (McLachlan & Justice, 2009) rather than be trained as a democratic citizen, which may be the intention for some domestic students. As global learners have their own path and goals with education in the United States, they have expressed unique frustrations regarding their experiences with higher education in the United States. These complaints include struggling with culture shock (Adewale et al., 2018), coping with being perceived through the lens of negative stereotypes (Ma et al., 2022), and

feeling a lack of connection with American students (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Issues and barriers regarding being perceived through the lenses of stereotypes and struggling to make connections with peers appears prominently among students from collectivist countries (Heng, 2017), presumably due to the different ideals prioritized in individualist countries compared to their collectivist roots.

New student orientations for international students have been implemented across most universities to help support these populations in their transition to American culture and education. Engaging in this form of early interventional is helpful for putting global learners on the right footing as the first six to twelve months can be the most impactful on student wellbeing (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). However, following orientation, international students have reported lacking any supplementary programming that intentionally targets them and their struggles with sense of belonging (Adewale et al, 2018; Wu et al., 2015) and that would interrupt bias toward international students presented by their domestic peers (Dovidio & Gaerthner, 2010). As global learners are a diverse group, even when categorized down to country of origin, methods to follow-up with these students, especially within the first year, to support their transition into American college culture. Particularly, assisting with this transition could help cultivate their experiences academically, socially, physically, and psychologically (Heng, 2017).

### **Importance and Rationale of the Project**

International students are a crucial element of higher education in the United States for the academic and social engagement of an institution (Arthur, 2017). Institutions also benefit from international students from a financial standpoint (Adewale et al., 2018; McLachlan & Justice, 2009). As the United States is entering its post-COVID period, a great shift has been noted regarding domestic students attending institutions. As a result, enrollment and retention

initiatives have shifted and international students are more sought after as a means of generating revenue.

Aside from financial benefits, international students are often noted as major contributors to the cultural diversity of college campuses (Wu et al., 2015). Students from collectivist cultures bring a different pool of knowledge regarding world view, societal understanding, and structural assumptions regarding social interaction. These perspectives may challenge domestic student and faculty perspectives and understanding of the world and engage them with global perspectives within the classroom. Alternatively, international students can take in perspectives from individualist and American ideologies and have that challenge their world view in return (Wu et al., 2015). Both populations benefit from the other's presence on campus through social engagement inside and outside of the classroom.

International students are not supplementary to higher education in the United States, they have been a consistent a large part of it. However, their concerns and possible interventions have gone under researched for years. Connections for international undergraduate students, their peers, and institution are all essential to the wellbeing of American higher education. As such, attention is warranted regarding supports and additional resources that may benefit this student population.

### **Background of the Project**

According to Open Doors' 2022 report on international students and their place of origin, about 62.8% of international students originate from countries with predominantly collectivist cultures. This showcases a large population that experiences a major culture shift regarding social priorities and norms upon relocating to the United States for education. This percentage

predominantly accounts for students from China and India, with other East Asian countries following close behind in numbers.

Students from collectivist cultures enter American higher education spaces with perspectives and lifestyles that differ from the normalized individualistic ideals and perspectives among domestic students. Collectivist cultures emphasize value in established social order and collective responsibility, whereas individualism in the United States values personal autonomy and places greater responsibility on individual action. International students from collectivist cultures often recognize the importance of social integration with groups and are used to welcoming unfamiliar folk in their home country (Heng, 2017). These students are then faced with starkly different norms and expectations within individualist American culture that does not so openly value social order and instead relies on an individual's sense of autonomy.

As previously mentioned, the international chaos brought by COVID-19 has had a large impact on international and domestic student enrollment and retention. Particularly, many international students addressed that during the initial shut down of COVID-19, which left many students from Asia without a means to go home, they had been left to fend for themselves as employment and funds were prioritized toward domestic students (Mbous et al., 2022). As American higher education attempts to recover to normalcy these issues may persist in international student experiences and feelings of being an outsider at their campuses (Lanford, 2019). Recent research has addressed that obtaining a H1-B visas has become more complex for student students to obtain and allow them to work with employers in the United States (Mbous et al., 2022). New barriers are surfacing on college campuses for international students that are presenting new challenges and exacerbating previously explored challenges. Many institutions are struggling to balance funds, time, labor, and upkeep of programming for all student

populations, but international students and their struggles regarding acculturation and sense of belonging have gone under addressed for years.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore peer orientated intervention that aims to assist in sense of belonging for international students engaging in major cultural shifts from collectivist home cultures to the United States' individualist norms. This project will focus on strengthening sense of belonging for international students from collectivist backgrounds at their four-year institution. This project regards academic and social support as both necessary for student success and will explore initiatives within peer support programming that can support overcoming barriers from both sides for international students. First, this project will explore relevant background information regarding the context of international students relocating to the United States from collectivist cultures for education. Following, the project will describe the theoretical frameworks of Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1984) and sense of belonging that will be used as the basis for understanding student experiences. Next, the project will review and analyze relevant literature exploring themes in the barriers international student experiences. Finally, the project will offer programming possibilities for standards and engagement through peer support and connections for long-term intervention.

### **Objective of the Project**

This project seeks to fulfill two major objectives. The first objective is to identify impactful practice that can be facilitated by international student offices at four-year institutions that assist in relationship building between international students from collectivist backgrounds and their peers, campus staff, and faculty to facilitate sense of belonging among the general domestic population of the institution. Ideally, the sense of belonging cultivated for international students

from collectivist backgrounds could assist them in gaining personal coping capacities that are swayed by personal attachments and relationships they hold (Greene, 2002). The supports and autonomy they gain through these interventions aim to help cultivate a sense of independence when navigating American college experiences. While this project still generalizes the identity of collectivist, while customs and norms differ between regions, it aims to create a starting place for student affairs professionals to utilize and reflect the needs of their institution and international student populations.

The secondary objective is to utilize programming that assists in minimize bias and xenophobia that may be experienced by international students at the hands of their domestic peers. Ideally, relationship building between domestic and international student will increase international student presence among domestic students and assist in challenging assumptions and stereotypes held regarding their culture or self. Alternatively, this programming can assist student affairs professionals in recognizing bias and stereotypes about collectivist norms and behaviors, helping international students feel more welcome and understood.

### **Definition of Terms**

A variety of terms will be utilized in this project to categorize individuals and cultures. These terms function as generalizations for the populations focused on in this project and provide parameters of groups and their overlapping experiences. These terms have been defined below and presented in alphabetical order.

***Collectivism:*** Collectivism is a cultural category that reflects philosophy, ideals, and societal culture that emphasizes the needs and desires of a group over the individual. Collectivist ideals often value clear hierarchy, collaboration, and conformity to established norms and

expectations. Often the rationale behind social hierarchy or conformity relies upon the value of family and wisdom of older generations.

***Culture Shock:*** Culture shock was defined by Oberg (1960) as “the anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (pp. 177). This definition will be used as the basis to categorize disorientation experienced by undergraduate students subjected to unfamiliar culture, attitudes, or expectation of behaviors. These unfamiliar ideas and experiences may even contradict with the norms of their home culture. The use of culture shock within this paper is also intended to recognize occurrences of shock as lived experiences and fluid feelings within an individual’s acculturation process that may ebb and flow as a student navigates a new setting.

***Domestic Learner:*** Domestic learners in this project are defined as any student attending a university or college that does not need to hold a visa status to enroll in their current education. This group of students most often are individuals who are natural born citizens or who have obtained legal, full-time citizenship in the United States.

***Global Learner:*** In this project, the categorization of global learner refers to a student that does not live permanently in the United States and requires a visa to be enrolled in a higher education institution. These students are also individuals who require international relocation to attend their institution of enrollment.

***Individualism:*** Individualism is a cultural category that reflects philosophy, ideals, and societal culture that emphasize the worth and wants of the individual. This perspective places great value on ideas of social mobility and individual freedom. The United States is regarded as a heavily individualistic country, as such individualism permeates into higher education campus cultures.

***International Student:*** International student serves the same function as the term global learner in this project and the two terms may be used interchangeably.

***Sense of Belonging:*** Sense of belonging exists as a framework that helps conceptualize how students feel in relation to being regarded as part of a larger group (Hoffman et al., 2002). This project ties feelings of connection and comfort of socializing with others to sense of belonging as these qualities are often related to creating bonds with others (Washington & Mondisa, 2021).

***Transition Shock:*** Transition shock builds off the definition of culture shock established by Oberg (1960). Transition shock, however, reflects more upon the experience of transition rather than the discomfort experienced with unfamiliar attitudes or behaviors. Bennet (1998) described transition shock as a state of disorientation brought on unexpectedly by a change in one's environment that requires adjustment. This more specifically focuses on the stress experienced with the act of relocation and changes in physical environment. This can relate to stress can be related to experiencing time change, extensive means of travel, and adjusting to a region's weather.

### **Scope of the Project**

This project will focus on the barriers regarding first time transition for international students who originate from countries with collectivist backgrounds. This project will attempt to analyze sense of belonging for international students from collectivist backgrounds among their domestic peers at four-year institutions in the United States. Sense of belonging for international students from collectivist backgrounds in relation to faculty at their host institution will also be addressed. Finally, this project also seeks to engage with accessibility and comfort for



international students from collectivist backgrounds in relation to utilizing student and campus services at their institution.

This project will be limited in scope as it will not account for experiences of international students from non-collectivist backgrounds. Due to the overall lack of research regarding long term intervention strategies with international students, this project will also be limited in how it addresses student experiences for students who have had previous transitions regarding relocation or American education experiences. Despite the undeniable impact COVID-19 shutdowns and political hysteria had on perception of international students, this project will not directly address the impact of these events on international student experiences.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Introduction

International students at American institutions exist across majors and represent an ever-present initiative regarding the internationalization of American higher education institutions (Arthur, 2017). The term of international student functions an overarching identifier that attempts to categorize individuals together regarding their immigration status, but this term does not encompass a social identity (Shaheen, 2019). Thus, international students range in ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and stages of understanding regarding American regional and academic culture (Adewale et al., 2018; Li & Middlemiss, 2022; Mbous et al., 2022). With these possible areas of variance in mind, it is difficult for student affairs administration to pin generalizations to international student populations as they may attempt to do with other student populations.

The United States has seen a consistent admission of international students since the 1940s to higher education spaces (Li & Middlemiss, 2022), giving this population a historical and consistent presence in four-year undergraduate institutions. When their presence in American higher education is addressed by institutions, international students are often regarded as “cash cows” due to the revenue they guarantee the college and surrounding area (Adewale et al., 2018; McLachlan & Justice, 2019). International students are unable to receive federal aid to cover tuition or board, thus these students must provide for themselves and utilize family wealth when studying in the United States (Wu et al., 2015). Stewardship of international students at an institution offers not only monetary benefit but also engagement with cultural intelligence and diversity to campus life (Adewale et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2015). This investment in cultural wealth can be lucrative to institutions that wish to promote or engage with global learning for domestic students as well.

Current trends of enrollment are shifting as higher education institutions and many institutions may become more reliant on international student interest for revenue. Thus, it is important for higher education institutions to consider the variety of challenges and barriers these students may experience in their time abroad. International students often experience barriers or challenges that resemble their domestic counterparts; however, these challenges are often compounded with added difficulty due to the outside identity of being an international student. This culture shift can be particularly difficult for students originating from collectivist cultures, considering the often-opposing priorities of their home and current cultural settings. Seeing as American universities often embody ideologies and curriculum of individualism, there may be deeper issues to assess when attempting to welcome and integrate students of collectivist backgrounds to a campus. It is important to consider these nuances of the experience of international students as this project explores intervention strategies to strengthen their experience and development on college campuses.

The next portion of the project will begin by setting theoretical frameworks that will be utilized as starting grounds to interpret international student experience and what concepts are prioritized in the analysis of student transition. The next section of this project will address the general context of international students in American higher education. The following section will address experiences of entering higher education as an international student with collectivist values. Student challenges will then be explored in greater detail. The final section of literature explored will regard previous research on mentorship in higher education spaces and the benefits it offers to student populations. This chapter will end with an acknowledgement regarding the lack of research catering specifically toward mentorship with international students and the importance of expanding upon these understandings.

## **Theoretical/Rationale**

### **Sense of Belonging**

Given the position international students are placed in when they decide to uproot their lives and come study abroad in the United States, it is pertinent to consider the concept of “sense of belonging” when reflecting upon their transition. Sense of belonging has been regarded as important for minoritized students among campus populations, especially when assessing connectedness with others on campus (Washington & Mondisa, 2021). The framework for sense of belonging relies heavily on theories regarding persistence and withdrawal (Hoffman et al., 2002). Theoretically, the feeling that one belongs will allow them to persist while sense of isolation or lacking connection will cause them to withdraw from social and academic settings.

As sense of belonging is believed to reflect how college students feel they fit into a system (Hoffman et al., 2002). A student’s sense of belonging may also be reflected in their ability to overcome adversity, tragedy, or turmoil during their transition (Greene et al., 2003). Sense of belonging often supports strategies such as freshman seminar courses and learning communities to facilitate more positive experiences for students. These interventions assist in helping incoming students cultivate a sense of community and feel more within a group, or like they belong. This concept also takes care to consider relationship between students, students and campus, and students and faculty (Hoffman et al., 2002). With these aspects in mind, there are grounds to analyze and assess international student experiences from the perspective of self-reflected positionality, social connectedness, and feeling like a fit within their institution.

### **Transition Theory**

Within this project, Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory will also be utilized for analysis of student experiences and challenges in navigating life changes. Expanding on ideas

from Schlossberg by synthesizing concepts with the relation between acculturation and transition shock will also be addressed. Transition shock is a term borrowed from Bennet (1998) to categorize the vast experiences of transition when moving from one place to another. This term reference disorientation experienced by a loss of one's familiar setting and norms, going in hand with Schlossberg's (1984) theory regarding acculturation to changes and transitions an individual experiences. These two concepts are synthesized in analysis of the literature as international students from collectivists backgrounds have the compounding impact of physical relocation and loss of familiar customs and surroundings. As such their transition is not just a matter of becoming adjusted to their new state of being, but also overcoming discomfort and feelings of confusion as they navigate unfamiliar social territory (Hunter-Johnson, 2022).

Transitions overall are identified as an event or occurrence that results in changed relationships, behaviors and routines, or roles (Goodman et al., 2006). The transition defined by Schlossberg (1984) aims for a transition to end in integration, in this case many would consider this acculturation to the dominant host culture (Adewale et al., 2018). There are a variety of coping strategies that have been proposed in literature to correspond with the paradigm of transition theory, but for the sake of this paper concepts will focus on how situation, self, and support can play into assist with personal coping. As it is not guaranteed that all international students will stay in the United States post-graduation (Heng, 2017), it would be unwise to consider the end phase of transition to be integration into American culture. Instead, focus will be shifted the process of transitioning through phrases and overcoming experiences of transition and culture shock that negatively impact an international student's wellbeing. Adequate transition in American higher education would then relate to comfort in new setting, confidence in social engagement, and feeling of being included among peers and community.

## Research/Evaluation

As previously mentioned in this project introduction, the United States has seen a steady stream of international students on university and college campuses for nearly a century (Li & Middlemiss, 2022). Motivations for seeking degrees in the United States varies from country to country, although most theories point to countries valuing the power of an American college degree and accompanying capital gained from education in the United States (Adewale et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2022). International students often succeed well in American academia and obtain high grade point averages during their studies (Heng, 2017) making them sought after contributors to college and university learning. As a result, both the institution and student benefit from this partnership, international students often regarded as beneficial contributors to academia and research at an institution.

Data presented in the Open Doors (2022) report of international exchange for 2021/2022 showcased the most recent distribution of international students and their origin countries. The largest population of international students was found to have originated in China at about 31% of the whole sample, following in second was India at 21% (Open Doors, 2022). This distribution is relatively unsurprising given the historical trends for countries of origin among international students. China has consistently maintained its spot as one of the largest contributors of international students to American institutions across the country. It is important to recognize within the data recorded by Open Doors (2022) that majority of international students originate from collectivist cultures, such as China, South Korea, Taiwan, India, and Brazil. The cultural shift when attempting to integrate oneself into campus or community culture in America may pose a significant threat to student's sense of belonging as they try to

navigate new norms of self and relationships within the new host culture (McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

### **Context of International Students**

International students exist within a unique context between their home culture and the social and academic cultures of the United States. Because of the global perspective that the United States is the best option for higher education (Adewale et al., 2018) pressure is often placed on international students to do well and follow through with degree attainment because of financial sacrifices and relocation (Arthur, 2017; McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Academic success, however, does not eliminate the need for additional supports, many international students have reported wishes for greater support outside of academics. Many students from collectivist grounds struggle to feel fully assimilated within American culture and they focus on coping with loss of their home routines and focus on their work (Adewale et al., 2018; McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

Heng (2017) found that Chinese international students struggled with engaging with social events and branching into unfamiliar territory without support from domestic peers. The interviews with these students also illustrated feelings of disconnect with peers and campus relating to social norms of which Chinese students felt differed significantly from their home norms. Language barriers are often reported as factors of stress for international students in both academic and social settings, at times contributing to reported feelings of isolation (Hunter-Johnson, 2022; Kelley, 2022; McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

While there is no universal experience for an international student from a collectivist home country (Shaheen, 2019) there is still a growing need to consider overlap in challenges that may be described by these students. Especially as higher education institutions adjust their

services to become internationalized, pools of thought that do not neatly align with American individualism must be considered (Arthur, 2017).

### **Collectivist Students on Campus**

While institutions aim to create a sense of community across their population of students, these ideas of community often reflect Western, individualistic perceptions of community and connection. International students struggle to engage with their local host communities on campus and in surrounding communities, usually related to sense of isolation or anxiety about fitting in (Kusek, 2015). Cultural dynamics within an area of campus may also reflect greater individualist ideals as international students from collectivists backgrounds observe how interactions with strangers, service workers, and peers differ from their home (Heng, 2017). For collectivist international students, many have grown within cultures that possess established, clear rules and boundaries that guide social interaction. As a result, international students may enter situations anticipating relations or manners that reflect their collectivist assumptions and be caught off guard with the cultural differences, causing an instance of culture shock. Often, American norms for social rules to not align with collectivist standards and may cause students to feel displaced and unsure of how to engage with others (Kusek, 2015). This lends to a sense of embarrassment and dissonance as students struggle to comprehend their awareness of their host country's culture, which is crucial for engagement in with confidence (Trimpe, 2022).

International students with collectivist upbringings fear offending others or exposing themselves as different (Shaheen, 2019), both experiences being heavily frowned upon in their home contexts. At home, many international students witness and engage with welcoming overseas guests and inviting them to engage with their culture (Heng, 2017). These valued as an opportunity to teach and learn, facilitating unfamiliar guests through the rules and expectations



of an unfamiliar setting. In experiences of international students after relocating to American colleges, however, many students from collectivist cultures have felt unwelcome and as their domestic peers have no interest in engaging with them (Glass et al., 2014). This aloofness and ambivalence toward international students are often a reflection of American individualism and contributes fear of misunderstanding cultural norms for international students (Heng, 2017).

### **Challenges**

***Culture shock.*** Regardless of intervention or support provided by institutions, it is an inevitable reality that international students will experience some form of culture shock (Adewale, 2018; McLachlan & Justice, 2009) or transition shock (Bennet, 1998). Non-academic factors such as weather, food, access to cultural artifacts of a student's home country, and proximity to others within their ethnic group can strengthen and assist in coping with change (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Often, however, access to these comforts is not accessible to international students. International students may enter the United States with some level of cultural intelligence or regional knowledge of their campus as their domestic peers do.

New student orientations for international students have been designed with the intention of assisting in integration and understanding of cultural norms. These are designed with best intentions as contextual awareness of host country culture and academic culture have been linked to minimizing the negative impact of culture shock (Trimpe, 2022). However, an orientation cannot encompass all experiences that an international student may encounter while navigating life abroad, so there will still be experiences that causes shock to their system. As acknowledged with Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory, students likely experience disorientation when they enter a new phase of life. International students take on new sense of independence and responsibility as they leave their families and navigate new obligations.

American norms are often difficult to rationalize or understand from students that have collectivist upbringings (Heng, 2017), so an experience that emphasizes the difference in culture may shock an international student. As this project is addressed, international students do not often feel welcomed and are fearful of making mistakes and causing discomfort (Kelley, 2022; Hunter-Johnson, 2022), so there is little to no support in learning. Thus, students are not only regarded as outsiders but are also unable to ever overcome the disorientation within their transition. If they are unable to learn how to navigate norms, they are always placed in uncertainty of what is acceptable and will accumulate stress and worry.

***Outsiderness.*** Across cultures, people are socialized to value connection with others (Washington & Mondisa, 2021) and place great value on feelings of belonging or being welcomed into a community. Lanford (2019) analyzed the impact of student deficit frameworks on non-traditional students within community college and conceptualized the idea of “outsiderness”. This term describes the social disposition experienced by non-traditional college students when reflecting upon their presence in higher education in comparison to their peers that are considered traditional college students. Feeling of being an outsider contributes to a student’s discomfort with social engagement and feeling of helplessness in joining a community (Heng, 2017). Because of this position or feeling of being an outsider, non-traditional students experience, there is a tendency to view college campus as impersonal, especially if the school environment is dominant culture of the institution differs from a student’s own (Lanford, 2019).

International students already report struggles with the cultural context of American school, often struggling with aspects of academic expectations such as focus on in-class discussion (Kelley, 2022; Hunter-Johnson, 2022) that attempt to connect students through utilizing the classroom as a forum. International students from collectivist backgrounds also

struggle to utilize methods for connecting with domestic peers outside of the classroom (Shalka et al., 2019). Academically and socially, international students feel lost or hopeless in navigating new American norms (Heng, 2017) and worry about further judgement based off their inability to perform within American norms (Hunter-Johnson, 2022).

The prevalence of this feeling or identity of being an “outsider” is complex and relates to a variety of overlapping variables international students possess. As a result, it is natural these students would seek out resources to help alleviate their anxiety and confusion. One of the most referenced resources for international students is their institution’s international student services, which often is treated as a hub for international student concerns. Many institutions feel that adequate resources are not given to international student service offices to properly connect and facilitate growth and learning for international students (García et al., 2021) despite being referenced as the primary resource for international students. These offices primarily address academic, visa, and legal assistance for international students. However, social and transition support is sparse for international students within these departments, but many incoming students lack the understanding of American higher education departments and offices to know where else to go (Adewale et al. 2018).

***Negative Stereotypes.*** Many international students report feeling that domestic students do not understand international students. The two groups may clash philosophically or international students may experience microaggressions when subjected to being perceived through negative and racial stereotypes (Adewale et al., 2018; Kelley, 2022; Hunter-Johnson, 2022). These tensions may lead to further isolation of international students. English language proficiency is often affiliated as a contributor to these negative stereotypes (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Stereotypes and negative perceptions of students regarding English proficiency

manifests with professors and peers. Particularly, international students who did not primarily utilize English in their upbringing may require more time on assignments as work through translating their thoughts to English (Heng, 2017). Students may receive underhanded comments regarding their TOEFL or TOEIC scores being inaccurate or implying they are not cut out for American higher education (Hunter-Johnson, 2022; Kelley, 2022; Shaheen, 2019). Accents are also associated with the contribution of negative stereotypes as students may be subject to questioning or ridicule about their origin based on the association with their accent (Shaheen, 2019).

These stereotypes further marginalize international students, especially those from collectivist backgrounds that may have distinct accents that stand out from regional dialects in the United States. Due to their position as a student overseas, many international students feel pressured to speak on behalf of their culture especially when already perceived as an outsider (Hunter-Johnson, 2022). These peer and faculty perceptions create additional fear in international students being perceived or making mistakes.

### **Mentoring Programs**

Peer mentorship programs are often regarded as effective interventions for undergraduate students in their early college experiences. Outcomes of these mentorship programs have been linked to improved academic success in college (Dixon et al., 2023). Generally, international students regard faculty members as their main contact in college spaces (McLachlan & Justice, 2009) which can be beneficial for the circumstances of their academic journey. Shalka et al. (2019) surveyed over 2,000 international students to gather data on who international students regarded as their mentors. The study identified four different categories of mentor relationships. Notably 50.7% of international students identified a faculty member as their primary mentor at

their institution. Other students were the next most prevalent mentor for students in the survey, but this proportion decreased as year standings increased.

Mentoring is best designed around transferring information related to academic and non-academic topics (Retallick, 2009). Students generally respond well to mentors that engage them in formal and informal contexts (Retallick, 2009), making the experience of meeting with a mentor less daunting. First year students have responded well to peer mentorship programs, especially among underrepresented students (Graham et al., 2022). This may be related to peer-to-peer contact allowing for more flexibility in meeting formally or informally. Peer mentorship has also been linked to greater sense of belonging for mentee students (Tsang, 2020) and improvement in academic success (Dixon et al., 2023). Peer mentorship is also sought after among international students as they crave greater opportunities to understand the cultural context of campus and connect with American students (Heng, 2017).

### **Scarcity of Research**

While there is an ample amount of literature analyzing and identifying the issues that international students face there is research lacking in the realm of impact and outcomes of proposed programs and initiatives of higher education institutions and their international student services (Shalka et al., 2019). Possible solutions have been identified, but implementation of these ideas has remained scarce. Many studies on the experiences of international students are often gathered from small samples, many not encompassing more than a dozen or so students. This is a limitation of pre-existing literature that must be kept in mind as challenges are identified. Higher education also tends to regarding international students as a monolith (Adewale et al., 2018; Heng, 2017) and rarely accounts for the different contexts of cultural origin as this project aims to. Our perceptions of international student identities are still

relatively shallow and assumes a monocultural background (Adewale et al., 2018) which may overlook the nuances of cultural context.

### **Summary**

International students face a variety of challenges and concerns that are unique to their positionality, as visa holders, secondary English speakers, and individuals engaging in cross-cultural development and transition. These issues persist in both academic and social contexts that can cause harm or engage students in great success (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Within the context of higher education student services, there are a variety of ways to assess student transition and engage with these student communities to support their transition. It is essential to maintain connection and awareness to these issues as higher education in the United States continues to internationalize itself (Arthur, 2017).

The relationship between institutions and international students is tricky but essential to preserving student and institution identity. International students are a student population that are beneficial to the institution and domestic student body for academic and cultural expansion. These students cultivate unique campus environments as they diversify thought, cultural intelligence, and facilitate economic growth. Currently, research lack reflection and analysis addressing complex nuances of these identities and their experiences on campus. Thus, institutions may be susceptible to overlooking the needs and challenges of this international student populations from collectivist backgrounds.

### **Conclusion**

Given the variety of documented, hypothesized, and analyzed struggles that international students face in their transition to American colleges, institutions are now left to consider solutions. Across literature, similar ideas have been proposed for engagement between student

offices, namely the international student services, and undergraduate international students. Connection with peers has been noted as a large issue that halts student sense of belonging and comfort in settling in their transition to American college campuses. This methodology may be most beneficial to institutions to begin implementing and bridging cultural gaps between international students and domestic students. This project aims to consider the intricacies of student experiences in regard to their transition between the different cultural backgrounds of their home and host institution, collectivist and individualistic. The following chapter will describe and explore peer support as an intervention strategy to facilitate smooth cultural transitions, greater sense of connectedness to peers, and sense of belonging on campuses for international students from collectivist backgrounds.

## **Chapter Three: Project Description**

### **Introduction**

As indicated through the first two chapters, international students from collectivist backgrounds face major challenges in their transition to American college cultures. These challenges reflect struggles adjusting to unfamiliar culture and expectations that encompass the academic and social culture of American higher education. While the stress of transition to these higher education spaces is experienced by undergraduate students widely, international students often find this stress exacerbated when they lack past experiences that mirror American culture they are confronted with (Adewale et al., 2018). This lack of familiarity makes overcoming barriers of cultural difference difficult, understanding of rationale of American norms inaccessible, and contributes to overall feelings of alienation for international students. This mirrors international college students generally describe challenges related to connecting to campus and to their domestic peers at their host college (Kelley, 2022). With the frameworks of sense of belongingness and Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory in mind, this chapter aims to articulate and rationalize the utilization of a peer mentorship and connection program that can be organized and implemented at American 4-year undergraduate public institutions.

To begin, the following section will describe the groundwork components of a peer-to-peer mentorship program between domestic students and international students from collectivist backgrounds. This section will give an overview to the program's expectations for peer mentors, professional staff, and international students, as well as how the program should be implemented over an academic year. Next will be a description of ways to best evaluate peer mentorship or peer contact accounting for short term and long-term success. Following the evaluation will be a description of conclusions that can be drawn from this proposed program in relation to the initial



problem described in Chapter One. Finally, this chapter will end with suggestions for practice and implementation in institutional contexts that service undergraduates in four-year programs.

### **Project Components**

The purpose of this peer mentorship proposal is to engage with international student in the immediate and long-term. This section will address the parameters for peer contacts, expectations for peer mentors, and the curriculum professional staff can utilize to design and implement the program. While many scholars have published work regarding international student experiences and possible intervention strategies, there is limited literature on peer mentorship programs. The program proposed here considers a variety of literature to establish its foundation. However, these programs may benefit from revision following feedback of students and should evolve based on relevant student feedback. The nationalities of students from collectivist countries may differ from institution to institution and may seek different resources related to their needs as a result. Alternatively, the community and institution resources that are affiliated with these students' nationalities may differ in accessibility depending upon community and institution history. Initial proposed curriculum, expectations, and learning outcomes for peer mentors and international student mentees can be found in the Appendixes.

### **Mentor Selection**

To begin, the labels of mentee and mentor in this program are not intended to reflect a hierarchal idea of mentorship wherein one side possesses greater knowledge than the other. While mentorship as a term that often signifies a transaction of guidance to someone less experienced, this hierarchical paradigm may be problematic when the mentor position in this context is meant to reflect a more fluid and informal relationship. Mentors and professional staff

who act as advisors possess separate roles in their relationship to international student mentees. While professional staff should collaborate with mentors to gauge efficiency of support, the two positions should be separate resources. To best support international student's sense of belonging, it is important that their mentors engage actively with mentees, inviting them to events or meals (Heng, 2017), and getting to know them beyond their academics (Retallick, 2009). Offering international students with collectivist backgrounds someone who they can consistently reference and meet with can assist in creating connections and gaining social capital to assist with adjusting to individualist norms (Washington, 2021).

Engagement with this program would be voluntary and peer mentors would be chosen through a hiring process, but it is still important to facilitate this program with a paradigm that looks at both student parties as equals to one another in power, knowledge, and autonomy. Hiring processes should include interviews with at least two professional staff members associated with the facilitation of the mentorship program. Peer mentors that are hired for this program should be above sophomore standing, that way those hired have had at least one year of experience regarding campus life and academic experience in an American college setting. These students can be domestic or international students as there is no indication in research that there is a meaningful difference in support by nationality (Heng, 2017).

The emphasis of eligibility should be the ability to communicate reliable and accurate information regarding campus resources and culture. Peer mentors should also be personable, enthusiastic, and ready to help welcome their international peer mentees to the institution. Ideally peer mentors would also be aware of the communities surrounding campus and any international resources that are within reasonable distance, although this can be explored more intentionally during initial training.

## **Mentor Training**

Training for peer mentors should be facilitated before they connect with their international student peers to ensure they are engaging with the best and most accurate knowledge. The training for peer mentors should address both academic and social supports that assist student well-being. Professionals training mentors should engage in conversations around campus and housing policy, campus resources for academic and personal support, and relevant off campus resources. Regarding campus supports, general overviews of information should be given for Title IX, tutoring centers, cultural identity centered offices, on campus transportation, and institution covered medical services. Off campus supports may include cultural centers, medical services that could be utilized with international student insurances, public transportation options, or shops for international food and supplies. The content of the training will depend upon what is available to each institution and their surrounding area. In cases where accessibility to off campus resources that may be helpful with combatting culture or transition shock is limited, professionals should consider online resources that may help international students feel supported and seen. Appendix A illustrates an example of learning outcomes peer mentors should be able to meet following their initial training, pre-arrival of their international student contacts.

Training for peer mentors should also engage with communication and empathy training. Empathy and intentional expressions of care can help improve student motivation, self-esteem, and sense of wellbeing among international students from collectivist backgrounds (Heng, 2017). Mentors may also need to pass along knowledge regarding problem-solving and critical thinking skills to their international mentees (Dixon et al., 2023) so it would be beneficial to introduce general strategies for problem-solving in college and university contexts. This may include best

practices for communicating issues with professors, how to reach out to relevant offices when experiencing a dilemma, or how to navigate institution software for making appointments with various offices.

### **Expectations of Program**

Student affairs professionals affiliated with facilitating this program should keep in mind that the program overview in this project is intentionally general. Customization of the project's foundation is encouraged to reflect their institution's policies, history, and relationship with the community. These students should have the support of professional staff within the institution's respective International Student Services office for supervision and receive guidance if concerns arise. Peer mentors should be matched with no more than two international mentees and engage in intentional interaction on at least one hour a week. Intentional interaction can include digital communication (texting, Facebook messenger, SMS, etc.), attending events on campus, or getting a meal together. Peer mentors should also be held to an expectation to communicate with their mentee within a reasonable timespan. These expectations should be made clear during mentor hiring and training.

Mentees should be asked to express patience with their peer mentors in respect to the obligations and responsibilities they may have outside of the peer mentorship relationship. Mentees should also engage actively with their mentor and not avoid communication with them. Interactions should be documented generally in communication with International Student Services professional staff. Professional staff should not pry for details to retain privacy between pairs of contacts. Instead, professional staff should maintain individual communication with international students from collectivist backgrounds to encourage and foster connection with staff on campus.

The pairing of international students from collectivist backgrounds with a peer mentor should not be random. During the hiring process, personalities and majors should be documented and considered when pairing groups together after acceptance of the position. For example, students in biology programs should be intentionally paired with students from other science related programs as the pairs will likely have overlapping academic experiences. However, these pairs may not all work to facilitate comfortable and easy transition. As collectivist cultures often discourage individuals from expressing complaints out of fear of causing harm or offense (Shaheen, 2019), both parties should be encouraged to communicate with a professional staff in the program regarding any issues or concerns they have about the partner they have been paired up with.

### **Professional Development**

Peer mentors and international student mentees should have opportunities throughout the semesters to attend programming for professional development. These workshops may be open to the general student body to encourage as much participation as possible. It would be ideal to have these professional development opportunities co-hosted or collaborated with by the institution's International Student Services staff. The workshops offered should not repeat within the same academic year. Examples of possible workshops, as planned in Appendix A and Appendix B, could have the fall semester focus on cross-cultural competency and avoiding burnout. This would be valuable to both international and domestic students as the topics relate to an immediate skill set of the program, cross-cultural competency, and a general skill set relevant to academics, avoiding academic burnout. As any student, regardless of international identity, can benefit from these workshops there is no sense of servicing only one population and viewing them as in a deficient compared to their peers (Lanford, 2019). An example of winter

semester workshops includes a workshop focused on resume building, something that may be beneficial to those searching for summer or on campus employment, and a workshop that relates to suggestions given by those partaking in the program. At the discretion of professional staff, this final workshop could be social or academic. This can allow student affairs professionals involved with the program to gauge what knowledge international students from collectivist backgrounds could benefit from after nearly a year of transition. Regardless of the workshops chosen by professionals and staff, the content should not be so specific that it poses one of the student groups as less informed on a subject than the other.

### **Project Evaluation**

To gauge accurate success for the program, peer mentors and international students should be offered a survey to give feedback regarding their experiences at the end of each semester. Examples of these surveys are illustrated in Appendix C and Appendix D. These surveys offer questions utilizing responses on a predetermined scale for ease of communication, especially as students from collectivist upbringings may be apprehensive to directly express displeasure (Shaheen, 2019). Open question prompts are also offered to allow students a place to share thoughts or concerns that they think would benefit being shared with professional staff. These evaluations offer questions seeking information about experiences with campus and with peer contacts, allowing intervention if necessary for unsatisfactory peer contact matches.

Ideally, professional staff should seek out feedback at the end of the first semester as well as the end of the academic year and adapt programming accordingly to feedback. The information provided through the feedback surveys should be evaluated alongside individual communication with international students and professional staff. Both formal and informal feedback will be necessary for an office to assess victories and shortcomings over the semester

and academic year. Summer months can then be utilized to update or revise training, workshops, or interaction strategies for engaging international students from collectivist backgrounds before the next group of incoming students arrive. As years culminate in feedback from students, it will also be essential to analyze long-term trends and responses across cohorts that go through the mentorship program.

To gauge success of the program overall, professional staff should focus their analysis of data on feedback received from international students and if their surveys meet majority of the learning outcomes outlined in the initial outline of the program, for example learning objectives given in Appendix B. If learning outcomes are not being met reasonably for international students from collectivist backgrounds, revision will be necessary to address the disconnect. Evaluation forms for international students in the program should have additional space to address their feelings related to belonging on campus and within their academic programs. Additionally, questions in the survey should address if a student feel comfortable and knowledgeable on American cultural norms. There should also be space to describe details that may relate to feelings of dissatisfaction. There should be follow up with professional staff for relevant concerns or questions from either student group.

### **Project Conclusions**

Prioritizing possible intervention and programming for international students in American university and college settings would be beneficial in cultivating spaces of belonging and welcome for international students. Many institutions currently focus on pre-arrival and orientation related programs to help prepare international students for their experiences in higher education (Arthur, 2017). These interventions being solely utilized at institutions can leave international students with a semester or year trying to stay afloat on their own. Currently, little

effort is being set forth to address experiences or concerns of international students by professional staff at American colleges and universities. This becomes a greater concern when we consider the cultural shift and transition shock that may be manifested in different ways for students from collectivist backgrounds. Given the history and prevalence for international students from China alone, this is a set of student identity institutions should take more care into considering long term engagement with.

The proposed strategy in this project set begins to address frameworks and common problems that international students share, such as creating connections with domestic students, finding cultural resources in the local community, and feeling accomplished in their academics. International students should feel supported both by professional staff and by their peers who have, conceptually, experienced some of the fundamental transitions of college as they have already attended for a year.

International contexts are continuously shifting, and higher education institutions may see changes in the nationalities of international student populations in the future. It is important for institutions and their students to exhibit cross-cultural communication and understanding to best engage with international students from collectivist backgrounds. It is with best intentions that connection opportunities, like the peer mentorship program in this project, may help facilitate more positive experiences for international students when their domestic peers have more opportunities to learn from and engage with each other. Alternatively, placing some responsibility on professional staff to teach students cultural competency can shift the burden of educating others off international students. Allowing international students to no longer hold responsibility as spokespersons for their ethnicity, nationality, and home country. The



centralized education from professional college staff would then allow students, domestic and international, to flourish in their college journey.

### **Plans for Implementation**

When implementing this program, institutions must consider the size and workload of their International Student Services. Would it be beneficial to collaborate with another office to provide supervision to both peer contacts and international peer contacts? Can the office provide support for all first year, incoming international students from collectivist backgrounds? Should the program be mandatory for international students or voluntary? How should peer mentors be compensated for their time? These are questions that may rely on the context of the institution, academically and socially. There is no universal answer to all situations regardless of the regional context of an institution. The context of an institution impacts how institutions should approach international students from collectivist backgrounds and their experiences regarding their transition into higher education, homesickness, and sense of belonging. These efforts may also be changed by how international students reflect upon the efficiency of the program, as they are the core of the initiative.

Institutions that solely utilize international student orientation and pre-arrival procedures could benefit the most from year-round peer mentorship. As previously addressed, the context of the institution may determine if this peer mentorship program is voluntary or if it is treated as a zero-credit mandatory course as part of a freshman experience. Regardless, if an institution has the means and interest from domestic students to provide additional support to international students from collectivist cultures, it would be beneficial to initiate this program with its student body.

Given the limited pool of research assessing these programs, it would be beneficial to have research published regarding the implementation of these programs. Ideally, research should look at the longitudinal impact of these interventions on international student experiences and transition, despite the time commitment. On a smaller scale, International Student Services may want to report findings within their institution to assist in bringing these concerns to the attention of potential partners within the institution and justify greater funding.

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## Appendix A

### Program Overview for Peer Mentors

#### Training/Orientation for Peer Mentors

Training for host peer mentors should encompass the following learning outcomes

Peer mentors can name, locate, and contact at least 5 academic resources on campus.	Peer mentors can identify and communicate concerning behaviors to professional staff within International Student Services.	Peer mentors can explain campus policies regarding housing and campus life for those living on campus.
Peer mentors can understand and explain the campus Code of Conduct.	Peer mentors can name, locate, and contact at least 3 cultural resources available off campus.	

#### Peer Mentor Professional Development Opportunities (Identical to international student opportunities)

##### Fall Semester

- Cross-Cultural Understanding and Competency
  - Focus on international diversity
  - How to engage in conversations around diversity and cultural difference
- Avoiding Burnout
  - Engaging in healthy self-care
  - Setting boundaries with peers, coworkers, and supervisors

##### Winter/Spring Semester

- Resume Building
  - Creating effective resumes and cover letters
  - How to integrate experiences as a peer contact into employment
- International Peer/Peer Contact Choice

##### Semester Expectations

Peer mentors will be expected to:

- Engage with international student mentees at least 1 hour per week. There are no specific requirements for how these hours look, but they must be documented and reviewed as adequate and intentional interactions.
- Document and submit interactions with international peer contacts every week to allocated professional staff.
- Meet with International Student Services professional staff 2-3 times per semester.
- Communicate any concerns regarding international mentee as soon as possible to International Student Services professional staff. Refer mentee to campus services relevant to what they are experiencing.
- Attend peer mentor professional development workshops and programs hosted by International Students Services when possible.

## Appendix B

### Program Overview for International Student Mentees

**These are the learning outcomes intended for international student mentees to meet by the end of the academic year.**

International student mentees can name, locate, and contact at least 5 academic resources on campus.	International student mentees can name, locate, and contact 2 cultural resources that are relevant to them in the community.	International student mentees can explain campus policies regarding housing and campus life for those living on campus.
International student mentees can understand and explain the campus Code of Conduct.	International student mentees can identify personal idea of belonging in American university/college setting.	

### **International Student Professional Development Opportunities (Identical to peer mentor opportunities)**

#### **Fall Semester**

- Cross-Cultural Understanding and Competency
  - Focus on international diversity
  - How to engage in conversations around diversity and cultural difference
- Avoiding Burnout
  - Engaging in healthy self-care
  - Setting boundaries with peers, coworkers, and supervisors

#### **Winter/Spring Semester**

- Resume Building
  - Creating effective resumes and cover letters
  - How to integrate experiences as a peer contact into employment
- International Peer/Peer Contact Choice

#### Semester Expectations

Throughout the semester, international peer contacts will be encouraged to:

- Respond to and engage with peer mentor.
- Communicate with International Student Services professional staff regarding concerns with their peer contact.
- Meet with International Student Service professional staff 2-3 times per semester.
- Attend peer mentor professional development workshops and programs hosted by International Students Services when possible.



### Appendix C

**Name:**

**Credit standing:** Freshman / Sophomore / Junior / Senior

**Major:**

Name any campus resources or offices that have been helpful for your academic experience.

Name any campus resources or offices that have been helpful for your personal experience.

Name any programs you attended through the International Student Services office.

Name any off campus businesses, offices, centers, or websites that you found helpful with adjusting to college.

In the table below, answer the questions by circling the answer that best fits your experience.

<b>On average, how many hours have you had contact with your peer mentor per week?</b>	More than 2 hours	Between 1-2 hours	Less than an hour
<b>How comfortable and connected do you feel to your peer mentor?</b>	Very comfortable. I consider my peer contact a good friend.	Relatively comfortable. I feel connected to my peer contact.	Uncomfortable. I do not feel connected to my peer contact.
<b>How satisfied are you with your experiences on campus?</b>	Very satisfied.	Relatively satisfied.	Unsatisfied.
<b>How satisfied are you with experiences with your peer contact?</b>	Very satisfied.	Relatively satisfied.	Unsatisfied.
<b>How satisfied are you with the assistance you have received from International Student Services?</b>	Very satisfied.	Relatively satisfied.	Unsatisfied.

<b>What best describes your feelings of homesickness since you arrived on campus?</b>	My homesickness is noticeable and hard to manage.	My homesickness is noticeable, but manageable.	My homesickness is not very noticeable.
<b>What best describes your sense of belonging as a student and member of campus?</b>	I feel I belong on campus, and I am part of my community. (i.e., residence halls, clubs, campus job)	I feel that I do belong on campus, but I am still finding my community.	I feel that I do not belong on campus, and I am struggling to connect with community.
<b>What best describes your identity as a scholar and member of your program?</b>	I feel I belong to my program as a student and scholar.	I feel I am growing into my program as a student and scholar.	I do not feel I belong in my program.

If you answered any questions with the rightmost box and feel comfortable, describe any details relating to why you selected that answer here.

How could we improve this program for future peer contact partnerships?

### Appendix D

**Name:**

**Credit standing:** Sophomore / Junior / Senior

**Major:**

Name any campus resources or offices that have been helpful for your academic experience.

Name any campus resources or offices that have been helpful for your personal experience.

In the table below, answer the questions by circling the answer that best fits your experience.

<b>On average, how many hours have you had contact with your international student mentee per week?</b>	More than 5 hours	Between 3-5 hours	Less than 3 hours
<b>How comfortable and connected do you feel to your mentee(s)?</b>	Very comfortable. I consider my peer contact a good friend.	Relatively comfortable. I feel connected to my peer contact.	Uncomfortable. I do not feel connected to my peer contact.
<b>How satisfied are you with the guidance you were given by staff in International Student Services?</b>	Very satisfied.	Relatively satisfied.	Unsatisfied.
<b>How satisfied are you with your experiences as a peer mentor?</b>	Very satisfied.	Relatively satisfied.	Unsatisfied.
<b>How did this experience as a peer contact impact you in your professional development?</b>	I feel this experience strengthened my professional skills.	I do not feel I experienced a change in my professional ability because of this experience.	I feel this experience negatively impacted my professional skills.

How did you engage with your mentee over the semester?

Did your peer mentee approach you for specific questions or issues? What were they?

How could we improve this program for future peer contact partnerships?