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## Improving the Mental Health of International Students in Higher Education with Holistic Self-Improvement Practices

Layth Almallah  
*Grand Valley State University*

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Improving the Mental Health of International Students in Higher Education with Holistic  
Self-Improvement Practices

by

Layth Almallah

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## **Abstract**

International students make up a large portion of students in the U.S. on an annual basis. Research has shown that international students face acculturative stress at high rates and struggle with mental health. International students have high rates of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, while also feeling homesick when away from home. This project provides intervention group-based strategies that are focused on individual self-improvement. The research shows that meditation, journaling, exercise, sleep, and understanding one's spirituality all have a positive impact on mental health. In focusing on these different self-improvement habits, international students may be able to use them in their free time to better their mental health.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Problem Statement**

Emerging as a serious, yet under-discussed problem in higher education, international students are experiencing a rise in acculturative stress and mental health problems (Gebregergis et al., 2020). Acculturative stress is the increase of stress factors for people adjusting to different cultural and environmental factors. Emotional intelligence has been seen as one of the key predicting factors in how international students manage their depression and anxiety (Gebregergis et al., 2020). Emotional intelligence is the ability of someone to manage and understand their emotions and control them. Majjd (2014) found that 43.3% of international students admitted to facing homesickness, while 33.8% of them suffer from depression.

International students are also statistically more likely to experience loneliness, depression, and anxiety during times of stress (Majjd, 2014). A study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that international students were more vulnerable to experiencing mental health issues during the lockdown (Firang, 2020). Domestic students are regularly advised on how to improve their mental health through social media platforms and university website pages, which helps them connect with peers on campus and combat loneliness (Vornholt & Choudhury, 2021). Many of the common recommendations such as visiting the counseling center or going home may not be as accessible for international students. It is imperative that we find new, practical, and accessible strategies for international students to improve their mental health, as well as understand the research, acknowledge the mental health struggles of these students, and provide a sense of community to combat loneliness.

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

The Institute of International Education (2022) found that since 2016, there have been almost 1 million international students attending college in the U.S. annually. Out of all the students in higher education, international students make up a large portion of people in the U.S. economy, which allows the economy to do well and thrive (Hegarty, 2014). This shows that international students have a significant place in higher education and the U.S. economy. This is why it is important to improve the mental health of international students in order to enable them to enjoy their experiences while in another country. In helping sustain universities, international students make up a large portion of majors that are not chosen by other students and account for important rates of the revenue made by the university, which helps universities do well (Hegarty, 2014). Given that international students have this positive impact, keeping them on campus and keeping them happy is important. Universities should put more emphasis on bettering the mental health of their international student community. Dovchin (2020) interviewed and collected data on international students showing they face linguistic racism, ethnic accent bullying, and linguistic, all of which cause psychological stress and mental health problems.

Mental health struggles that international students face come with a multitude of issues that affect their well-being. In addition to struggling with mental health and having high suicide rates among international students (Dovchin, 2020), there is also a lack of mental health resources and support available to these students that meet their unique needs (Smith & Khawaja, 2014). It is important universities to identify the ways in which they can better support the mental health and well-being of international students.

## **Background of the Project**

Hirai and Clum (2000) used a Beliefs toward Mental Illness (BMI) model to understand the differences in how mental health is perceived by domestic and international college students. The BMI was used to track cross-cultural differences between the groups and to better understand how each group views mental health. The use of this model is not to compare international students to domestic students, but to set the context for how international students may use different strategies to handle their own mental health. International students were more likely to have views that mental health is incurable, that it can lead to making a person more physically violent, and to struggles in basic social interactions (Hirai & Clum, 2000). Touching on how acculturative stress may play a role in the higher rates of mental health struggles in international students (Gebregergis et al., 2020), Hirai and Clum (2000) found that Asian international students prefer using culturally appropriate forms of mental health treatment like religion, folk medicine, and religious healing.

With this in mind, international students have been shown to be less likely to seek out help for mental health concerns (Raunic & Xenos, 2008), which could insinuate that international students may have different perceptions of how to manage their mental health, not that they do not want to seek out help. If institutions are able to better understand cultural discrepancies that international students face in handling their own mental well-being, universities may be able to get a better grasp on how to help international students improve their mental health.



### **Statement of Purpose**

The main purpose of this project is to identify mental health barriers for international students in higher education and self-improvement habits to help ease symptoms of these barriers. While emphasizing the different habits such as meditation, gratitude journaling, different forms of exercise, healthy sleeping habits, and being in touch with one's own spirituality, this project will aim to help international students establish their own outlets that they can use to maintain wellness mentally and spiritually. The project will be implemented with monthly group meetings that international students can attend to learn about self-improvement. The monthly group meetings will be hosted by advisors and peer mentors to guide the international students who attend. International students will be placed into groups with other international student peer mentors who will teach them about self-improvement habits, and guide them through practice sessions to learn how to implement these habits into their daily lives. The literature has been reviewed to find the best practices that will aim to help international students better their mental health through a different approach, that of a practical approach with self-improvement.

### **Objective of the Project**

The main objective of this project is to improve the mental health of international students. To do this, students will be taught mental health strategies that are centered around self-improvement to help them better their mental health. The project will have international students be placed into groups where they learn about either meditation, journaling, and spirituality, or they will be placed in a group that focuses on learning about exercise and healthy sleeping habits. A university's international center will choose a faculty or staff member to run these monthly group sessions.

The project will include three guides: one with steps on how to learn a meditation practice (see Appendix A), one with different forms of journaling with instructions (see Appendix B), and one with different types of exercises (see Appendix C). There will also be international student mentors who are committed to the monthly meetings and will serve as an aid to the main faculty or staff member who runs the program. Each session will also be guided by a specific book depending on what the topic is for the meet-up sessions. This project will have a direct focus on attempting to help better the mental health of international students by guiding them through how to incorporate self-improvement habits into their lives. A unique approach centered around hands-on learning and conversation will be provided to help this specific group of students attempt to better their mental health.

To accomplish these objectives, international students will need to commit themselves to regularly attending the monthly group meetings, keeping an open mind to new information around self-improvement, and take time to themselves to practice these strategies in their own spare time.

### **Definition of Terms**

- *Acculturative Stress*: Stress that is caused when someone from a different culture is attempting to adapt to a different culture other than their own.
- *Default Mode Network (DMN)*: Regions of the brain that are active and awake when someone is in a passive state of mind or random thoughts that appear without notice.
- *Self-Improvement*: Improving one's self either physically, mentally, spiritually, or emotionally through learning, exercising, meditating, and taking care of one's health.
- *Meditation*: The act of breathing and observing the mind in order to calm the brain and body down.

### **Scope of the Project**

This project will address mental health concerns for international students and target intervention strategies to improve their mental health. The project will create mentorship groups for international students to learn more about meditation, spirituality, exercise, sleeping habits, and journaling. The incorporation of these habits will attempt to address mental health struggles that international students face, and with an assessment process, will seek to improve their mental health with these methods. This project will not address other possible methods for improving mental health like using a counseling center, medications, and academic coaching strategies for organization. The sole focus of this project will be self-improvement strategies that international students can use and apply to their own lives.

Factors that may hinder the effectiveness of this project may include incentives to attend the monthly group sessions, the lack of knowledge or trust in self-improvement tactics, and possible stigmas surrounding improving one's mental health, especially with other people around. It is also important to acknowledge that international students are not all the same. They come from different backgrounds, different cultures, and different countries, and have different perspectives on higher education, dependent on their background. The strategy of incorporating self-improvement is a small intervention strategy with its own limitations. It is not certain that encouraging international students to try self-improvement will work for all international students, so it will be experimental at first to see if this project is effective at improving the mental health of international students.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

International students in higher education face mental health barriers and high levels of acculturative stress (Gebregergis et al., 2020). More specifically, depression and anxiety are some of the most common symptoms faced by international students (Majjd, 2014). It has been documented that international students deal with debilitating levels of depression, high rates of anxiety, and high amounts of stress, all of which may be due to their transition into a new country and culture (Kim, 2012). Upon Reviewing literature that supports and agrees with these claims, it will be helpful to demonstrate where these mental health barriers come from internally, as well as how they can be alleviated.

Creating intervention strategies related to holistic self-improvement, and emphasizing a high locus of control model for international students may provide them with a path to tackle their mental health struggles. Someone's locus of control is their perception of how internal and external factors impact their life holistically (Sterian & Nicoara, 2022). For example, a college student with a high locus of control would believe that getting a good grade in their class is fully dependent on them, not their professor. On the other hand, a student with a low locus of control would believe that their grade is fully dependent on their professor, therefore blaming their professors for whatever grade they received. After this comprehensive look at how holistic improvement can improve one's life, practices will be recommended to allow international students to improve their quality of life. This research of literature will focus on all the holistic self-improvement practices and how they can benefit international students.

## **Theory/Rationale**

Two theories will be used to explore the experiences of international students regarding their mental health journey. First, phases from Kim's (2012) International Student Identity (ISI) Model and Baxter Magolda's (2001) four-phase path to self-authorship. Both theories provide insight as to how international students grow through the process of leaving home and going to college, and how self-authorship and self-discovery can elicit positive mental health and growth.

### **International Student Identity Model**

The ISI Model has specific components that touch on the identity development of college students. The ISI Model provides an understanding of the identity development path for international students, which is not paid enough attention to (Kim, 2012). The ISI Model is composed of six phases that international students go through during their time in college: pre-exposure, exposure, enclosure, emergence, integration, and internationalization (Kim, 2012). Understanding these phases gives insight into where international students are coming from before they enter college. There are a couple important phases of this model that give insight into the experience that international students have before leaving their homes. The pre-exposure phase describes the experience that international students go through upon entering a new country. Isolation from their peers due to making a drastic life decision, arguments and disputes amongst family members, a struggle to develop independence, and the pressure from competitiveness amongst peers (Kim, 2012). The second phase, the exposure phase, is when international students open themselves up to the campus and create connections (Kim, 2012). One part of this model that stood out was the fifth phase, which focuses on full integration into the campus and with ones self internally (Kim, 2012). Kim (2012) states that this part of the

model is where international students feel comfortable in their own skin, do not feel fully reliant on family and friends from home, and have established their “new” selves.

### **Baxter Magolda’s Self-Authorship**

The four phases of Baxter Magolda’s (2001) self-authorship theory go as follows: following formulas, crossroads, becoming the author of one's life, and internal foundation. In examining how this relates to international students and their mental health, this model shows a path to improvement through discipline and hardship. Phase one, following formulas, and phase two, crossroads, are the most applicable to international students. To follow a formula means to give someone hope and a vision of wellness, and to give that person hope and wellness starts through a blueprint. Since this project will be based on holistic self-improvement practices, it is important to have the formula to follow. In the second phase, the crossroads, people experience a change in plans they did not expect (Baxter Magolda, 2001, as cited in Patton et al., 2016). Becoming the author of one's life is about figuring out who you are, which relates back to the sense of having purpose and identity, while the internal foundation is almost like “reaching the goal”, making it the fourth phase of this theory (Baxter Magolda, 2001, as cited in Patton et al., 2016). If international students have some assistance with the first two phases, this may help propel them to achieve better mental health, and ultimately propel them to feel more comfortable.

## **Research/Evaluation**

### **International Students' Mental Health**

To set the context for this chapter, the following recommendations: meditation and mindfulness, gratitude journaling, exercise, spirituality and religion, and sleep, will all be discussed in a manner in showing how they are impactful in solving the problem, which is the

rise in depression and anxiety rates amongst international students (Majjd, 2014). Compared to their domestic counterparts, international students score predominantly lower in their ability to recognize depression and have the awareness to find resources to help them (LaMontagne et al., 2023).

Research also shows that self-critical perfectionism and acculturative stress in Chinese and Asian Indian international students led to increased rates of depression (Rice et al., 2012). An underlying problem here, which goes back to possible stigmas in relation to counseling centers (Raunic & Xenos, 2008), is that a portion of these international students refused to get help or use resources to combat their mental struggles (Saravanan et al., 2019). It is possible that self-improvement strategies may be helpful in solving the problem, which is the rise in acculturative stress in international students (Gebregergis et al., 2020) and increased rates of depression and suicidal thoughts in international students in comparison to domestic students (Ibrayeva et al., 2018).

### **Meditation and Mindfulness**

Yi et al. (2003) studied a group of international students attending counseling, and of that group, it was identified that depression and anxiety were among the top issues this group faces. Meditation is a practice that has been shown to reduce feelings of depression in adults (Lopez-Maya, 2019). Considering that international students are so far away from home, their connection to their culture, friends, family, and hometowns is challenged in the pre-exposure and exposure phases of the ISI Model (Kim, 2012). Creating a habit of mindfulness and meditation may allow international students to calm their thinking minds, which is also referred to as the “Default Mode Network” DMN” (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). As stated before, the locus of

control is an important factor in all the recommended habits, and this will be the basis for the implementation of these habits (Sterian & Nicoara, 2022).

In discussing meditation, it is important to mention the amygdala. The amygdala is an essential part of the brain that is responsible for emotional stimuli and emotional regulation (Gallagher & Chiba, 1996). The brain is important for understanding mental health because the brain manages stress and depression through neurochemical responses that either regulate or increase depression (Herbert, 1997). Research shows that through functional magnetic resonance imaging scans (fMRI), that meditation decreases the activity in the region we call the amygdala (Desbordes et al., 2012). The fMRI scan stands for “functional magnetic resonance imaging”, which scans brain data and tracks blood flow to test changes in emotional regulation patterns. Seeing that the data shows meditation changes the brain (Desbordes et al., 2012), it seems as though using meditation in some fashion would be effective for international students’ mental health.

Furthermore, looking at other components of the brain and its functions can give us more practical insight into improving mental health. Though it may not be commonly talked about in a scientific fashion, it is widely agreed upon that our brains jump from thought to thought. Some common slang we use for discussing the mental state of the brain includes “silencing the brain” or “shutting our brain off”. These are both regarded as internal or spiritual, however, there are more scientific terms used to describe these states.

These terms are referred to as a monkey mind or mind wandering, which are self-reflective states rooted in harping over the past in a negative light (Vago & Zeidan, 2016). Touching more on the “wandering mind”, the brain’s function that regulates this is the default mode network, better known as the “DMN” (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). The DMN consists



of the thoughts running through our brain, and it is responsible for 50% of our thoughts while we are awake, which leads to lower levels of happiness (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). If international students incorporate meditation and mindfulness into their daily lives, it may assist in reducing the activity in their DMN.

Adding to this, Brewer et al. (2011) found that consistent meditators had much lower levels of activity in their DMN, in comparison to people who do not meditate consistently. The DMN, which is clearly a large player in the role of the brain and mental health, is prevalent during any activity that someone is doing. This can include trying to sleep, focusing on schoolwork, or simply going for a relaxing walk, which are all things that college students do on a regular basis. Having fewer thoughts running through their brain, along with greater focus, may have a very positive impact on international students.

There is evidence that meditation can help manage depression and anxiety (Lopez-Maya, 2019). Along with changing the amygdala, there is evidence that shows that meditation affects more than one region of the brain (Hölzel et al., 2011). Meditation influences multiple parts of the brain; it grows the left hippocampus, the temporal parietal junction, and the pons (Hölzel et al., 2011). Hölzel et al. (2011) found that these neurological changes in the brain can have a significant impact on mental health and well-being. Each of the brain regions that are increased by meditation can improve mental health. The left hippocampus improves emotional regulation, learning, and memory, the temporal parietal junction helps with decision-making and choices, and the pons helps improve willpower and self-control (Hölzel et al., 2011).

Altinyelken (2018) looked at stress, anxiety, anger, sadness, loneliness, and insecurity among international students and found that mindfulness meditation improved all of these symptoms. All of these were seen as the most difficult emotions that international students face

(Altinyelken, 2018). There is also research linking mindfulness and meditation to improving mental health in many different areas (Altinyelken, 2018). It is interesting to consider how a possible intervention strategy could impact this group of students, along with surveys and data to continuously track the progress that students are making in improving their mental health. A study found that after eight weeks of having experimental groups practice mindfulness meditation, there were improvements in emotional control (Desbordes et al., 2012).

### **Gratitude Journaling**

The next habit that international students may benefit from is gratitude journaling. Journaling has been shown to help ease mental distress, anxiety, and improve well-being (Smyth et al., 2018). In relation to counselors using it with their patients, journaling has been used to improve self-awareness and the ability to be reflective on ones thinking (Woodbridge & O'Beirne, 2017). Both the skills of self-awareness and reflective thinking can help people understand where they need to grow in their lives (Woodbridge & O'Beirne, 2017). Since people are generally aware that journaling is widely used in the world of counseling, it may be important to add more intention to the practice itself. To do this, incorporating detailed and practical methods for journaling may give international students a clear path to better their mental health. Firstly, it is also important to see the direct benefits of gratitude and the relationship it has with happiness. Mental health and well-being are correlated with happiness, and it is shown that high levels of gratitude correlate with happiness levels among college students (Kausar, 2018).

The problem or barrier with this is that gratitude journaling is not widely discussed in the space of higher education. Considering that resources like counseling are less sought after by international students (Raunic & Xenos, 2008), it could be hypothesized that there may be a

stigma behind using mental health resources. They experience culture shock, transition shock, acculturative stress, and battles with social integration, which can push them away from being a part of the campus community (Lértora et al., 2017). Since they may feel less a part of their community on college campuses (Lértora et al., 2017), the locus of control principles may help with centering focus on other aspects of life (Sterian & Nicoara, 2022).

To change the locus of control, as well as reduce acculturative stress (Gebregergis et al., 2020), it may be beneficial to recommend a gratitude journaling practice. In this practice, international students can do it for free, at home, and with no need for external factors or circumstances to guide them in this process. This practice can be done at the start or the end of the day. Despite the research being limited, there are still studies that look into the benefits of gratitude practice specifically for international students (Xia et al., 2021). Xia et al. (2021) studied the correlation between acculturative stress and feelings of gratitude, and they concluded that gratitude has a negative impact on acculturative stress, meaning it is lowered. The significance of these findings relates to helping solve the main problem, which lies in the mental health battles that international students face due to new cultural environments (Gebregergis et al., 2020).

The evidence of direct gratitude practice has been shown to have positive psychological benefits (Xia et al., 2021), but it also helps to examine to benefits of direct gratitude journaling on college students. A study on gratitude journaling looked at first-year students in Turkey and assessed their adjustment to college life, satisfaction in life, and overall feelings of positivity (Işık & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2017). Though this was in Turkey, it was not an assessment of international students, but it still has relevance due to the beneficial research on gratitude journaling. Furthermore, after the three weeks that the study was conducted, it was shown that

gratitude journaling may have a positive impact on the well-being of students (Işık & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2017). The study did have limitations due to the university being large, the sample group being rather small, and the study being so short-term (Işık & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2017). It still may have positive implications for trying out more gratitude practices in the future and seeing their effectiveness. Though there is not any research on pairing gratitude journaling with the other habits in this literature review, it may be possible that combining many habits will contribute to the “holistic” piece of self-improvement and well-being.

### **Sleep**

International students may also benefit from putting their energy into healthy sleeping habits. Sleep seems to be a very common recommendation for anyone of any age, however, its importance is not taught and emphasized as much as it should be (Orzech et al., 2011). It is also shown that poor sleep has a significant impact on academics and mental health (Orzech et al., 2011), both of which seem to be intertwined. Orzech’s et al. (2011) study looked at sleep quality and the state of sleep in larger higher education institutions. A survey was conducted with questions and an analysis of sleep quality for a group of 4500 college students who were 18 years or older. After conducting the research, it was found that the students who tested higher in the scores relating to poor sleep had higher rates of depression, anxiety, and stress (Orzech et al., 2011).

Not only did the study look at mental health for students internally, but it also found that students who scored lower in sleep scores had more relationship conflicts with friends and family (Orzech et al., 2011). Sleep is not something that is sought out as an area that students want help with (Zochil & Thorsteinsson, 2018). This is where it may become more difficult to intervene with students. Sleep is very personal and done on someone’s own accord, but if it is not getting

sought out, it could be an option to have more of a discussion around sleep. Orzech et al. (2011) showed examples of posters and flyers put around campus to encourage sleep.

### **Spirituality and Religion**

Spirituality and religion are commonly known to be important pieces of campus life, whether the campus is private or public, there are usually clubs and organizations that bring students together through these activities. One study looking at African American college students found that spirituality and religion were very important for their academic performance (Walker & Dixon, 2002). Religion and spirituality have their place because they are very personal and intrinsic means to wellness. Nobody needs someone else to connect to their religion; it is internal and close to home no matter what the scenario.

A small study with 12 international students found positive benefits to religion in spirituality in psychological improvements, cognitive benefits, and academic performance (Philip et al., 2019). Philip et al. (2019) recommend that to make international students feel more included, it is important to honor different religious backgrounds, reduce the marginalization and discrimination of people's beliefs, and incorporate these findings into counseling strategies for counselors on campus. Although this research is positive in helping find solutions for international students, there are still barriers that exist, especially in the case of religion. A participant from this study reported that they felt religious discrimination when they were in the classroom (Philip et al., 2019). Racism and bigotry towards people from different backgrounds and religions are prevalent, and that was shown to be very real and alive after 9/11 towards Arabs who identify with Islam (Shammas, 2009). Not only do these spiritual and religious practices need to be accepted and validated more by international students, but there must be a no-tolerance policy for the discrimination they face in classrooms and the hostility they

encounter on campus (Philip et al., 2019). These racist and bigoted attacks cause international students to pull away from their spirituality or religion (Philip et al., 2019), further pushing them away from something so close to home.

### **Exercise and Workouts**

As it has been stated in the problem statement, mental health and stress rates are higher among international students (Gebregergis et al., 2020). From a practical standpoint, finding habits and activities that are easily accessible to international students can help them reduce these feelings of stress. One of those habits that can be accessed daily is exercise. Many college campuses across America have accessible gyms that their students can use daily, those of which are used very frequently by their students.

A cross-sectional study that did research on 1.2 million individuals was able to collect strong data that backs the benefits of exercise, and more specifically, the amount of needed exercise for mental health benefits (Chekroud et al., 2018). Exercise is commonly recommended as a booster of mental and physical well-being (Stănescu & Vasile, 2014). The literature shows that daily exercises like strength training, aerobic exercises, and stretching all have health benefits (Miller et al., 2016). However, it is important to give details as to how many workouts people should do, how many times they should do intense exercise, and the forms of exercise they should do. In doing that, Chekroud et al. (2018) found the most optimal amount of workouts per week stood at three to five times per week, for around forty-five minutes per session. Anything below this range or anything above the range was found to have worsening impacts on mental well-being (Chekroud et al., 2018). This recommendation may give specific guidelines and program construction ideas for international students who are trying to get into exercise to boost their mental health. Since most universities have recreational centers and trainers in their

facilities, this data could be shared and utilized to benefit students who need it. Seeing that there is a rise in social media fitness influencers (Duruva et al., 2022), it may be helpful to reach international students through more creative avenues.

Out of all the forms of exercise that can be done, recommending specific types of exercise could give international students more intention as to what they should do. Students may be able to be more versatile with the types of strength training they choose to do, which makes it easy to use and access, as long as it is done safely. One randomized control study on strength training was able to find many benefits that all relate to improving mental health and well-being, and most importantly, depression and anxiety (O'Connor et al., 2010). More specifically, the study found many benefits that strength training can provide. Those include improvements in sleep in depressed adults, reductions in depression among clinically depressed adults, better self-esteem, lower rates of fatigue, and better cognitive function (O'Connor et al., 2010).

Another practical form of exercise that international students could do would be an aerobic exercise. Walking is one of the easiest and simple forms of exercise that almost anyone can do. Pedometer-based walking, which is tracking walking with step counts, has been shown to have positive mental health benefits for depression, anxiety, and insomnia (Abedi et al., 2015). International students could see reductions in their depression and anxiety by using strength training (O'Connor et al., 2010) and increasing the number of steps they get per day with a pedometer (Abedi et al., 2015).

### **Summary/Conclusion**

International students have high rates of acculturative stress which creates mental health barriers for them (Gebregergis et al., 2020). Of the symptoms of mental health that international students may face, depression and anxiety are amongst the leading symptoms they encounter (Majjd, 2014). It has been shown that self-improvement habits help reduce the rate of depression and loneliness that international students face (Saravanan et al., 2019). To understand context for where international students are at with their mental health, it is important to note that international students score predominantly lower on tests that measure depression and awareness of mental health struggles compared to domestic students (LaMontagne et al., 2023). Using self-improvement methods such as meditation, journaling, exercise, connecting with one's spirituality, and sleep have all been shown through the research to have a positive impact on mental health. The research outlined for the self-improvement habits will help guide the intervention strategies that will be discussed in Chapter Three.



## **Chapter Three: Project Description**

### **Introduction**

As stated in the first chapter, there has been a rise in acculturative stress and mental health problems among international students (Gebregergis et al., 2020). Since domestic students are regularly encouraged to improve their mental health with social media platforms and university web pages (Vornholt & Choudhury, 2021), it would be helpful to provide international students with practical recommendations they can use on their own time. From the literature, the following have been shown: meditation improves mental health by reducing activity in the Default Mode Network (DMN) (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010), gratitude journaling improves the mental well-being of international students (Işık & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2017), sleep has an important effect on mental health (Orzech et al., 2011), spirituality and religion have positive effects on psychological well-being (Philip et al., 2019), and three to five workouts per week can improve mental health (Chekroud et al., 2018).

Taking in all the information and data from Chapter Two, this project will focus more attention on these habits. It will present the creation of intervention strategies so that international students implement these practices in their daily life. The programming of this project will be designed to start within the summer orientation process. As the program gains traction and success, it will be easier to implement these strategies and possibly have international students familiar with these strategies teach these practices to new students. This will not only provide a space for these students to create social bonds, but it will also provide learning opportunities about new habits that they can incorporate into their lives.

## **Project Components**

### **Mentoring and Pairing Process**

The mentoring and pairing process will be the main component that allows this project to work. This mentoring process will be set up through the university's international center. A staff member from the university international center will seek out either a staff or faculty member who is interested in self-improvement, then have them be the leader of the group meet-ups that will happen monthly. The training and preparation for this project will begin the summer. The staff member from the international center will seek out the right staff or faculty member in the summer to lead these groups, then the international center staff member will hire other international students who want to help with leading the monthly group sessions. During the fall, the staff or faculty member will train the international student “leader” or “helper” to be comfortable in leading the group sessions.

If the international center staff member is interested in self-improvement and experienced in the topics of meditation, journaling, good sleep habits, exercise, and spirituality, they can be the leading staff member of the group session, if they want to, but in the case they want someone else to lead, they will simply reach out to a staff or faculty member to lead. There will be two distinct groups that international students are placed in randomly. The “grouping” will be the specific sessions that the students will attend monthly. There will be two meetings each month, one meeting for the meditation, spirituality, and journaling group, and a separate meeting for the exercise and sleep group. For this section, there will be books and discussions about the handout sheets to further implement these habits into the lives of international students. Throughout the semester, there will be a strong focus on beginner meditation lessons, and conversations about the process of meditation and how it works for people. Talking about the

studies and the research may not be the most practical method during these sessions. Rather than talking about literature and making it feel like a class, this will be an open conversation to see how people are progressing, and a strong focus on the books that will be recommended.

The second section will be the fitness and sleep section, which will emphasize sleep and different forms of fitness for mental clarity. Upon coming to a university, this mentoring/paring process will divide groups of students into the two groups discussed above. Then, once the semester is completed, people in section one will be placed in section two, and vice versa for those in section two for the first semester.

The staff or faculty member will lead these group sessions, and they will be accompanied by an international student who feels comfortable being a peer mentor. This student will be like an orientation leader. They will guide other international students during the group sessions, provide insight, and help with the lead staff member or faculty member leading the session. These international student helpers will be paid by the international center for helping with this program. International students will also have the option of being peer leaders/mentors the next year if they feel comfortable and have the time to fit this into their life. A volunteer program like this could allow students to take leadership roles and improve their own lives through self-improvement.

### **Orientation Handout Sheets**

The first introduction to this project will be through orientation. International students who are going through orientation will be given a handout sheet from their orientation leader. The staff member from the international center will ensure that international student orientation leaders have these handouts during the fall. In doing this, the creation of this program will be centered around teaching the students about each habit and ways to lead the sessions during the

year. The international student mentors will be a paid position. An advisor who works within this project and who is knowledgeable about self-improvement will guide the international mentor students on how to lead the sessions during the year. To begin, each international student goes through an international student orientation process upon coming to college.

Normally, these are done during the summer, so there is ample time for students to integrate themselves with campus life and familiarize themselves with available resources. Encouraging these practical habits that were laid out in Chapter Two will need a summary or simple paper with explanations on them for each habit. The students will be handed a stapled sheet of three papers containing guides and content on how to do the habits on their own.

The first page will consist of meditation guidelines and how to go about doing a simple five-minute meditation practice (see Appendix A). Students will now have a clear idea of how to start their own mediation journey, as well as clear and simple guidelines from the sheet. Second, the students will be given a simple guide on how to practice gratitude journaling and deep journaling (see Appendix B). The gratitude journaling practice will be rooted in writing some simple pieces of gratitude, and the deep journaling practice will encourage journaling about thoughts and feelings. Finally, the third paper will outline a few workout programs and strategies for attending to physical wellbeing (see Appendix C). It will consist of challenges to accomplish step counts, weightlifting workouts, cardio workouts like jump rope, and some templates for a workout program they could create on their own.

## **Project Overview**

### **Meditation, Journaling, and Spirituality**

International students who are placed in meditation, journaling, and spirituality (MJS) groups will be encouraged to attend monthly sessions with discussions. Over the course of the

semester, the lead staff member and international student helper will host monthly meet-up sessions. Considering that depression and anxiety are the leading issues that international students face (Yi et al., 2003), and since the research shows that depression and anxiety can be reduced through meditation (Lopez-Maya, 2019), it may be good to begin with teaching the students how to meditate. During the first few weeks of the meditation introduction, each session will begin with a five-minute meditation breathing session. Prior to any of these sessions, the students will be heavily encouraged to not bring or use any electronic devices. The focus will be heavily placed on being in nature, staying in the moment, and avoiding distractions like technology. If weather conditions are adequate enough to be outside, the sessions can be held outside if the mentor-student would like to change scenery.

Mediation, journaling, and spirituality will slowly be taught and incorporated into the sessions over the course of the semester. The key point of this semester is to highlight MJS, but to begin, students will focus on a mediation practice since that will help improve their learning and memory skills (Hölzel et al., 2011). After the meditation session is completed, the session will follow into a conversation with the students, discussing questions on how MJS is helping them, and conversations about consistently tracking MJS habits. Since meditation has been shown to reduce negative emotions such as stress, sadness, and loneliness (Altinyelken, 2018), meditation sessions may be a positive practice to start learning at the start of the group sessions.

The foundation of these groups will be centered around conversations around specific books related to the specific group that students are in. Meditation and journaling conversations will be guided around the book *Psycho-Cybernetics: Updated and Expanded*. (Maltz, 2015b). Maltz (2015b) describes how powerful self-image and self-identity can be in helping someone change their habits. The concept is centered around the concept of seeing oneself in a positive

light, therefore changing their habits more to their liking. The book would be discussed in relation to helping students find consistency and motivation in their meditation and journaling activities, while also gaining more insight into ways to improve their self-identity through the teachings of Maltz (2015b). Smyth et al. (2018) showed that journaling eases mental distress and reduces levels of anxiety, so it will be beneficial to have many different journaling sessions. Since practicing gratitude reduces acculturative stress (Xia et al., 2021), starting a gratitude journaling during the group sessions could help international students improve feelings of gratitude.

Touching more on the side of spirituality, the students will be encouraged to find themselves in a spiritual manner on their own personal time. Spirituality and religion are important to international students because when practiced, they provide psychological, cognitive, and academic benefits (Philip et al., 2019). There will be a book reading that touches on spirituality in a way that is not controversial or dogmatic. The book is called *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. (Tolle, 2010). Tolle (2010) touches on a nondogmatic idea of “Being” and the “Now”, which are both rooted in staying in the present moment and detaching oneself from the past and future. These spiritual teachings allow for an understanding of what emotions mean and how people regulate them. Every session will be guided by reading a chapter of these books, having discussion questions for the chapters, and talking about ways that the students can apply the teachings to their own lives. There will be an emphasis on creating a high locus of control (Sterian & Nicoara, 2022), building sustainable habits, and learning more about the different methods of meditation, journaling, and non-dogmatic spiritual teachings.

### **Workouts and Sleep**

The second mentorship group will have an emphasis on exercise, fitness, and sleeping habits. During this semester, the staff or faculty advisor and the international student helper will be pairing up with university recreational services centers to create workout and exercise programs for these students. Exercise helps in improving mental and physical well-being (Stănescu & Vasile, 2014), so it may be beneficial to have international students be more exposed to exercise. They should be promoted to do workouts three to five times per week, since the literature shows this number of weekly workouts is the best for optimizing mental health (Chekroud et al., 2018). To diversify the types of exercise, these meetups will be focused on weight training, cycling, dance, and jump rope exercises, as well as other exercise classes upon request. The difference between this section and the MJS section is the location and style of the workshops. Unlike MJS, this is less conversation based, and more action based with health and lifestyle changes. After these sessions are completed, and after the international students finish their semester with this group, they will be encouraged by their mentors to continue with these lifestyle changes. It should also be noted that students have the choice to stay in a specific group for all semesters, in case they are doing very well in one area.

Before the exercise courses, the students should have been given a workout guide sheet (see Appendix C) to give them an idea of the types of workouts that are encouraged. Recreational use and physical activity are very common aspects of university life, so pairing that with a social gathering with like-minded students may make international students feel like they are a part of the community. There will also be conversations around healthy sleep habits. The importance of sleep is not discussed enough (Orzech et al., 2011), and to add to this, students are also very unlikely to reach out for support resources or help to improve their sleep (Zochil & Thorsteinsson, 2018). Sleep should be talked about and highlighted as an important component

in mental health, especially because lower amounts of sleep are linked with higher rates of depression (Orzech et al., 2011). *Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams* (Walker, 2017) is written by Matthew Walker, the director of the Center for Human Sleep Science and a professor at the University of California Berkley who teaches neuroscience and psychology. Walker (2017) gives insight into ways people can improve their sleep, the importance of high-quality sleep, and the dangers of not getting enough sleep. This may motivate the students to learn more about the importance of getting sleep.

### **Project Evaluation**

There will be two separate components to the evaluation of this project. First, students will be encouraged to take the National Health Care System England (NHS) self-assessment test that gives a depression and anxiety score. This will be a system that international students can use to track their depression and anxiety and see where they have improved. The self-assessment test is eighteen questions and can be taken at any time. To give the students a recommendation, they will be encouraged that they take this test a couple of times over the course of the semester. For their own privacy, nobody outside of themselves will have access to it, however, they will be welcome to give their results and show improvement anonymously to see how the program is working for them.

The other side of the evaluation will be practical for tracking the consistency of their habits. Regardless of what group they are in, international students will be encouraged to download a habit-tracking app on any of their available devices. These apps can give daily, weekly, and monthly data to hold yourself accountable in the process of learning a new skill or habit. For example, the students could see that over the course of a month, they have mediated every single day with the help of their tracking app. The lead staff member or faculty member



will encourage the international students in their groups to take the NHS self-assessment at the start of the year and at the end of the year, and to use the habit-tracking app throughout the year.

### **Project Conclusion**

Paths to give international students a way to grow and build social bonds can be done through a mentoring program. After understanding the mental health barriers that international students face, such as elevated rates of depression and anxiety (Majjd, 2014), it has been shown that self-improvement strategies have been shown to help international students overcome depression and homesickness (Saravanan et al., 2019). To give international students a path to getting comfortable with self-improvement strategies, habits like meditation, sleeping, exercise, spirituality, and journaling will all be encouraged and taught in a mentor program. Mentor international students with experience will be given the opportunity to teach other international students strategies to help them face their mental health struggles. Each semester will have a different focus on what the students will be learning. International students will be put into groups that focus on specific habits for that semester.

### **Plans for Implementation**

The program that was outlined in this chapter can be implemented through the international center at a university. A staff member from the international center will recruit another university staff member or faculty member who is interested in self-improvement. The chosen staff or faculty member will be asked to lead monthly group sessions with another international student helper who is interested in working with their peer international students. Over the course of a semester, both the international student helper and the staff or faculty member will lead the self-improvement group sessions for the international students who attend.

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## Appendix A

### Meditation Guide: A simple meditation guide.

Step 1: Close your eyes, lay down, or sit straight up in a comfortable position

Step 2: Interlace your fingers and relax your hand in your lap

Step 3: Take a four second breath in through your stomach

Step 4: Hold your breath for four seconds

Step 5: Exhale your breath for four seconds

Step 6: Continuously repeat steps 3-5 and keep your focus on your breath

#### Practice Pointers:

-Start this off with a three minute session once per day

-Each week, add one minute to your sessions

-Work up to longer (20 minutes plus) sessions, but do it slowly

## Appendix B

### Gratitude Journaling and Deep Journaling: Guides to doing both

#### *Gratitude Journaling:*

This is journaling about things that you are grateful for in your life. To do this, simply journal three to five things you are grateful for every night or morning.

Ex. “I am grateful for trying a strawberry milkshake with my friends”, “I am grateful for the new lamp I bought from Target”, “I am grateful for talking to my brother on the phone today”

With gratitude journaling, the focus should be the highlight positive things that happened during your day. Be as positive as you can be and write these every single day

#### *Deep Journaling:*

This is journaling about your feelings, thoughts, and emotions on a piece of paper. This can be used if you are having a bad day, feeling sad about something, or processing certain emotions that you are going through. To do deep journaling, simply set a timer for 10 minutes, get a pen and paper, and write whatever thoughts come to your mind on that piece of paper. You can also use a computer if it is easier to type. Do not hold back and get all of your thoughts and emotions out on the piece of paper.

## Appendix C

### Exercises and Workouts

#### Resistance Training Workout:

-3 sets of push-ups

-3 sets of pull-ups

-3 sets of squats

-3 sets of hip thrusts

-3 sets of dumbbell curls

#### Jump Rope Workout:

-4 minutes of stand in place jumping

-4 minutes of side-to-side jumps

-4 minutes of running on the spot while jump roping

#### Walking Cool Down:

-10-15 minutes of brisk walking on the track or outdoors

-Aim to get 5000-10,000 steps per day