



# Fostering the Sense of Belonging: Cultivating Educational Values through a Cultural Association

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## ABSTRACT

*The study delves into the influence of an on-campus, student-led Cultural Association on the experiences of minority students within a predominantly White institution (PWI). This research employed qualitative methods. It primarily utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gather data from five international students attending a comprehensive public research university on the West Coast of Canada. The findings revealed that the Cultural Association significantly contributed to the social and academic integration of the participants within their new institutional and social milieu. By cultivating a sense of belonging, the Association aided the participants in overcoming initial hurdles, such as isolation and acknowledging their status as minorities in the PWI setting. The Association and its members played a crucial role in providing spaces for cultural affirmation, championing diversity, facilitating social inclusion, and nurturing a sense of belonging.*

## INTRODUCTION

Often promoted as a friendly and multicultural country, Canada attracts significant numbers of international students, especially from the Asian Pacific region. In 2021, the number of international students studying in Canadian institutions increased to 621,600. International students bring significant economic benefits to Canada - they contribute nearly \$22 billion annually and support 200,000 jobs. Many international students come from the same seven countries: South Korea, China, Japan, the United States, France, Mexico and India ([Government of Canada, 2019](#)). Research on international student experience shows that college and university students from Asian countries, generally regarded as the “model minority,” consistently receive insufficient institutional support and resources in predominantly White Canadian institutions (PWI) ([Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2019](#); [Houshmand et al., 2014](#); [Maramba & Palmer, 2014](#)). Furthermore, this group of students regularly encounter microaggressions, described as a transaction where a person of color is, consciously or unconsciously, treated in a hostile or rude manner based on their race. Microaggression is a small act of racism ([Delgado & Stefancic, 2017](#)).

Macroaggressions and other overt and hidden signs of discrimination may prevent minority students from full participation in campus and community life. Because perpetrators tend to be unaware of the impact of their behavior and, as the term micro implies, microaggressions refer to the individual or private aspects of racism and aggressions ([Sue et al., 2007](#)), folks from dominant cultures may deny that such microaggressions are happening around them or may engage in racist attitude unintentionally ([Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2019](#)). However, racial/ethnic minority students experience microaggressions daily on campus, in class, and in social interactions with their White peers and instructors ([Lewis et al., 2000](#); [Kim & Kim, 2010](#); [Sue et al., 2007](#); [Houshmand et al., 2014](#)). Microaggressions are based on cultural ignorance, invalidation, and insensitivity exhibited by the

representatives of the dominant culture or population, whether on campus or in the community ([Lewis et al., 2000](#); [Kim & Kim, 2010](#); [Houshmand et al., 2014](#); [Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2019](#)). Even with the adoption of equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racist policies in most post-secondary institutions across Canada, Asian populations, both domestic and international, report anti-Asian rhetoric, sentiments, and outright anti-Asian racism, which became even more blatant during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Museus, 2008](#)). It is not surprising that negative experiences and reported lack of institutional support adversely affect mental health, quality of life and overall well-being of Asian minority students.

In addition, international students have to cope with academic demands and navigate unfamiliar social norms and cultural expectations. Previous research has shown that racial and ethnic minority students often experience difficulties in academic and socio-cultural domains ([Mesidor & Sly, 2016](#); [Smith & Khawaja, 2011](#)), which can result in psychological problems such as anxiety, loneliness, and depression ([Smith & Khawaja, 2011](#); [Wei et al., 2007](#); [Wu et al., 2015](#); [Qie et al., 2019](#)). A crucial factor in helping students thrive in their host university is creating a welcoming campus environment. When universities actively foster a sense of inclusion and provide the necessary support, it can significantly contribute to the student's academic achievements, personal satisfaction, and the decision to stay in Canada. Participation in academic and extra-curricular events is also essential. By engaging in such activities, minority students can develop a sense of belonging and connect with their peers, faculty, and the larger community. This involvement can lead to better integration and a more positive overall experience.

Recently, many researchers have explored the experiences of international and minority students using the concept of a sense of belonging. They acknowledged the close relationship between an individual's sense of belonging and their social and academic success in a new cultural environment ([Cena et al., 2021](#); [Cureton & Gravestock, 2010](#); [Hausmann et al., 2009](#); [García et al., 2019](#); [Rivas et al., 2019](#)). One of the many definitions of a sense of belonging describes it as the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences; it is considered "a fundamental human need that predicts numerous mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioral outcomes" ([Allen et al., 2021](#)). The literature indicates that in a new, unfamiliar environment, away from their original intimate support network, students, especially minority students, are directly affected by campus climate and available resources. Researchers examining a sense of belonging highlighted its three key important characteristics: subjectivity, connectedness, and dynamism. From a human development perspective, individuals are influenced by those surrounding them, including family, schools, and neighbors ([Bronfenbrenner, 2009](#)). Individuals perceive a sense of belonging subjectively, depending on their personal feeling of being valued, secure, respected, or engaged ([Sedgwick & Yonge, 2008](#); [Mahar et al., 2012](#); [Zumbrunn et al., 2014](#); [Strayhorn, 2018](#)). Since individual experience occurs and improves to a certain extent based on such personal feelings, research indicates that an individual's sense of belonging is context-oriented, unique, and deeply personal ([Sedgwick & Yonge, 2008](#); [Strayhorn, 2018](#)). Because experiencing a sense of belonging is a greatly subjective process, it is necessary to differentiate this concept from individuals' official membership or physical participation with a referent group ([Hoffman et al., 2005](#); [Mahar et al., 2012](#)). A referent group is an external entity anchoring an individual's feelings and holistic experience and learning ([Cooper, 2009](#); [Mahar et al., 2012](#)). Therefore, individuals may feel a sense of belonging to multiple referent groups at the same time as long as they find their feelings and experiences positive and supportive in a series of particular reciprocal contexts related to identity, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and citizenship in each referent group ([Mahar et al., 2012](#)). In an institutional setting, students interact with various referent groups: institutions themselves, classrooms with instructors and peers, and cohort groups in a program are examples of referent groups. Students can also participate in athletic groups and cultural and student government organizations, all representing different referent groups ([Peltier et al., 2000](#)).

Connectedness is another essential characteristic of a sense of belonging ([Mahar et al., 2012](#); [Zumbrunn et al., 2014](#)). Being connected is important to individuals because this makes them feel valued and respected while interacting and engaging with their referent group(s) ([Sedgwick & Yonge, 2008](#); [Mahar et al., 2012](#); [Zumbrunn et al., 2014](#)). Through meaningful interactions, individuals discover commonality or similarity, share feelings, experiences, or understandings with other people within their referent group(s) ([Mahar et al., 2012](#)) and feel supported and recognized ([Cooper, 2019](#)). Feeling

connected is foundational for an individual because it ultimately fosters belonging to their referent group(s). Commonality refers to having similar visible or physical characteristics, including race, nationality, ethnicity, and culture ([Mahar et al., 2012](#); [Mwangi, 2016](#)). Shared values, feelings, experiences, and understandings also contribute to an individual's sense of connectedness and belonging ([Mahar et al., 2012](#)). Frequent involvement in campus activities, both academic and social, participation in campus clubs, organizations, and committees, and meaningful relationships with international and domestic students also promote a sense of belonging ([Mwangi, 2016](#); [Strayhorn, 2018](#)). Dynamism is another notable characteristic of a sense of belonging discussed in the literature ([Cureton & Gravestock, 2010](#)). Many physical and social factors determine an individual's sense of belonging; it is unstable and can change depending on positive and negative encounters ([Cureton & Gravestock, 2010](#); [Sedgwick et al., 2014](#); [Walseth, 2006](#)).

Based on the three characteristics of a sense of belonging described in the literature, which include subjectivity, connectedness, and dynamism, a sense of belonging can be defined as an individual's sensory/ psychological web constructed by a series of personal interactions in a certain group of people and the corresponding feelings, such as a feeling of connection, trust, and being attached to a place ([Cena et al., 2021](#)). Different personal experiences and feelings correlate with and affect each other, contributing to the dynamic and changeable nature of an individual's sense of belonging. This study examined the impact of a student organization (Cultural Association) on minority students' experience and their sense of belonging in a predominantly White institution (PWI).

Researchers agree that a sense of belonging, community, social interactions, and student organizations contribute to overall success and satisfaction among minority international students in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) ([Nadal et al., 2014](#); [Lewis et al., 2000](#); [Museus, 2008](#)). According to [Harper and Hurtado \(2007\)](#), cultural/ethnic organizations offer minority students not only academic and social counter spaces to cope with subtle racial microaggressions, but they can also provide support and a sense of belonging ([Guiffrida, 2003](#); [Harper & Quaye, 2007](#); [Houshmand et al., 2014](#)). These types of organizations help students develop their cultural identity and achieve greater success in their academic performance ([Baker, 2008](#); [Barajas & Pierce, 2001](#); [Guiffrida, 2003](#)). It is particularly important on predominantly White campuses where minority students may experience cultural starvation, which can be as detrimental to human well-being as physical starvation. Ethnic and cultural student organizations provide minority students with a sense of community and a "home away from home" ([Museus, 2008](#)) and are reported to have a positive impact on minority students' overall experiences, adjustment, and academic achievements ([Nadal et al., 2014](#); [Guiffrida, 2003](#); [Harper & Quaye, 2007](#); [Kuh & Love, 2000](#)). These organizations offer students opportunities to experience cultural familiarity, express their cultural identity, and advocate for cultural diversity and inclusivity on campus. In addition, they encourage cultural validation and foster a sense of belonging ([Bowman & Denson, 2015](#); [Bowman & Park, 2014](#); [Maramba & Palmer, 2014](#); [Museus, 2008](#)).

## METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the personal experiences of minority international students with a Cultural Association and to gain a deeper insight into the role of a Cultural Association in fostering a sense of belonging among minority students in a predominantly White institution (PWI). This approach is appropriate when researchers seek an in-depth understanding of an intrinsically bounded single unit, such as one particular program or group of people ([Creswell & Creswell, 2018](#); [Merriam & Tisdell, 2016](#)). This case study was conducted realistically, with data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents ([Merriam & Tisdell, 2016](#)). Guided by social constructivist assumptions, the study relied on the participants' views of the world and their unique perceptions of their experiences ([Creswell & Creswell, 2018](#)). Before data collection, the study was reviewed and approved by the XXX University Human Research Ethics Board.

### *Setting and Participants*

The study participants were five international students enrolled in a comprehensive public research university on the West Coast of Canada. The university offers undergraduate and graduate degrees. International students account for 15 percent of the university's total enrolment; most international students are from the Asia-Pacific region. 75% of international undergraduate students

come from China (68 %), Korea (2 %), Hong Kong (2 %), Taiwan (1 %), and Japan (2 %). The university's internationalization plan states its commitment "to ensure that the international student experience encompasses the educational goals, developmental levels, and the social, emotional, and cultural needs of individual international students and specific populations" (West Coast University).

Five participants were recruited via purposeful sampling ([Marshall & Rossman, 2016](#); [Merriam & Tisdell, 2016](#)). Each participant had to meet the following criteria: (1) to participate in the Cultural Association for at least six months and (2) to identify as a visible minority international student. At the time of the interviews, three participants were in their second and third year of undergraduate studies, one was in their last term of an undergraduate program, and one had just completed an undergraduate degree. The participants were between twenty and twenty-five years of age, and their membership in the Cultural Association varied from six months to five years. The participants varied by gender and year of study. Two of the participants held leadership positions in the Cultural Association. All participants were actively involved with the Association and provided insightful information about their experience with the CA and its role on campus.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The main data for this study were collected using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the participants. Each student participated in a Zoom interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. A pilot interview was performed before the interviews, and some initial interview questions were revised. It ensured that the interview questions were not confusing and clearer to participants for whom English was an additional language ([Merriam & Tisdell, 2016](#)). Before each interview, consent forms and written invitations that included the study's purpose and the interview process's description were sent to the participants. Based on the literature on international student experiences and sense of belonging, the researchers developed open-ended questions to capture the unique experiences of the minority students in a predominantly White campus (PWI). One of the main focal issues of the study was the impact of student participation in a cultural student organization. Therefore, participants were asked about the organization's role in their adjustment to a new educational and social environment. For example, we asked the participants how and why they got involved in the Cultural Association and what role this Association played in their academic and social experience on campus and beyond.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were shared with the study participants to ensure the accuracy of participants' accounts and researchers' interpretations and completeness of the data. We added new information based on participants' feedback and clarified some points before the data analysis. A six-stage thematic analysis suggested by [Braun and Clarke \(2008\)](#) was used to identify themes and capture the participants' unique experiences. This approach offered flexibility and generated unanticipated insights about participants' experiences with the Cultural Association.

Additional data from the Cultural Association's Facebook page provided pertinent information about the CA's specific activities and communications with its members ([Franz et al., 2019](#)). The CA has been using Facebook as its main social media platform to communicate with its members and other students on campus since 2007. According to the Association's Facebook page, it is a registered non-profit student-run organization. Established in 2004, the Association has 655 members, which includes current university students and alums. It comprises four departments: Events, Public Relationships (PR), Internal Relationships (IR), and Treasury. Executive members and the head of the Events department organize major events such as ice-breaker events, camping and ski trips, and end-of-the-year parties. The PR department communicates with various sponsors and promotes the Association to the public. The IR department handles personal inquiries and internal communications with members of the Association. The Treasury department deals with the Association's budget and finances.

In comparison, the Association's primary purpose is to share its culture and to support minority students. The majority of its members are minority students from the Asia-Pacific region. Besides organizing extra-curricular events for its members, the Association provides them with peer support. It also welcomes all university students. The Association's application form does not include ethnicity or nationality as a qualification to join the Association.

In the following paragraphs, the researchers share the findings from the personal stories of minority international students who chose to participate in the Cultural Association in search of

community. The study findings and subsequent discussion are meant to promote positive and inclusive campus culture and genuine campus diversity. This study is especially timely because the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes across the United States and Canada.

## **FINDINGS**

All the participants of this study described their personal experience with the Association positively. Based on the participants' narratives, joining the Association made them feel "at home," where they felt they belonged. The participants considered other members as their family, referring to them as brothers and sisters. Jordan and Blake described the Associations as a "comfort zone" where one can be "carefree." For Kyle, the Association was a "second home," which was a "confidence booster" and a "stepping stone" in pursuing a better life in Canada. Through the data analysis of the participants' narratives, the following three main themes were identified: the Association fostered a sense of belonging, its senior (more experienced) members acted as cultural brokers, and the Association helped the participants overcome various challenges associated with studying in a predominantly White institution.

### ***Fostering a Sense of Belonging***

The Cultural Association offered the participants multiple benefits, including cultural familiarity and spaces where minority students could connect with peers from similar cultural backgrounds. When describing their experiences with the Association, the participants referred to feeling safe, valued, and connected to others. The participants shared cultural/national commonalities with other members, and through repeated reciprocal social interactions, they developed relationships with other members of the Association. For example, Alex described the Association as "an easy way to start a relationship with people," especially with those who speak the same language and could understand you, people who share similar interests and culture. Jordan described having "the same vibe or frequency" with other members. All participants felt comfortable and "at home" during the events organized by the Association. Jordan was extremely lonely before joining the Association. Despite making friends on campus, Jordan did not feel "very deeply connected" to them because of not being able to understand local culture, jokes, and humor. The inability to fully understand the language and culture and interact with locals was especially stressful for the participants.

The Association encouraged the participants to participate in various events throughout the academic year. Alex, a former executive member of the Association, revealed that the Association created monthly events with the expectation that its members could consistently socialize with each other, share common interests, and become friends. The events included camping and ski trips, sports competitions, and Canadian and specific cultural celebrations. These events were organized to allow participants to enjoy themselves and meet other students. Blake said, "On the camping trip, the Association seniors were just giving us chances to learn about each other but not in an awkward way, playing small games by the campfire or something." Such events or simple meet-ups in between provided a much-needed break from academic work. "Since everyone is in the same school, we have the same schedule. As soon as [the] finals are done, we'll all celebrate together, and it's just bringing everyone together." Blake felt that when people shared the same interests, they could bond with each other, and these bonds would stay strong and last longer. Kyle was "really thankful" for being invited to the Association's camping trip; it helped him meet other students for the first time.

Sharing the same cultural and national background with other members of the Association allowed the participants to be who they were without any misunderstanding or judgment. Most importantly, they felt included and secure. For the participants, the Association was a "comfort zone." Regarding Jordan's statement as follows:

"...when I talk to them [other members of the Association]), I don't need to be careful [about] what I'm saying...sometimes when I talk to some friends from [a different country], I need to pay attention to what I'm saying, like the word I'm using. I need to say the terms that they know, and I cannot say something that can be offensive to them."

Interacting with students from similar backgrounds also raised participants' confidence. They felt carefree because nobody would judge them. Moreover, the participants stressed that interacting with co-national peers enabled them to be authentic and honest; they could express their thoughts and

cultural identity without fear of political or cultural misunderstanding. The Association was “like a family” because everyone cared about each other, and its members did not want to leave anyone out. Regarding Blake's statement as follows:

“When I was passing by [the Association] booth, they were welcoming and, then, they're like, asking me many questions and telling me I should come to their ice-breaker, and then I'll make many friends, and then if I'm too shy or too afraid to talk to people, they can help me out as well.”

The participants also praised the Association for allowing them to make friends with students who shared similar interests. Regarding Blake's statement as follows:

“... [The Association] was just giving us a chance to learn about each other but not in such an awkward way, playing small games by the campfire or something...I feel all the staff wanted everyone to fit in and then find their group of friends with the same interests or share the same experience or culture with you so you can have people to talk to and friends to hang out with when you need it. Yeah, and I also met many of my friends there.”

Building long-lasting personal relationships on campus was mentioned as another important outcome of the Association's activities. Alex explained that the Association's priority was to “connect” students through “meaningful” experiences so that the members could build long-term relationships with each other. Blake and Alex met most of their friends through the Association.

### ***Cultural Brokering and “a Senior-Junior” Relationship***

The second important outcome of the participant's involvement in the Cultural Association was the involvement of senior students, whom the participants described as knowledgeable and fluent in two cultures similar to “cultural brokers.” Cultural brokering is bridging or mediating between groups or individuals of different cultural backgrounds to reduce conflict and facilitate communication and relationships (Jezewski & Sotnik, 2001; Yohani, 2013). In participants' accounts, a cultural broker merged with the Asian concept of a “senior” as in “senior-junior relations.” In East Asian cultures, the concept of “a senior” is expressed very similarly in Korean, Traditional Chinese and Japanese, 선배, 前辈 or 先輩 or せんぱい respectively. Within organizational structures, such as schools and companies, seniors join an organization first and have greater wisdom and experience to share with newcomers or juniors. In a healthy and genuine relationship, seniors become role models and take social responsibility for supporting juniors, helping them to adjust and settle down in a new setting. In return, juniors also take social responsibility to show respect to their seniors and continue the positive cycle when they become seniors. The Association's synergy between cultural brokering and senior-junior relations created an inclusive and supportive internal culture.

All the participants described the importance of the senior-junior relationship promoted by the Association. For example, Kyle conveyed that academically and culturally experienced senior students helped others overcome many personal and academic challenges. According to Kyle and Blake, senior students were provided practical advice about academic programs, encouraged to seek institutional support, and helped them develop confidence and strong psychological bonds. The senior students were described as “a stepping stone” in participants' adjustment to and better understanding of the host culture. Regarding Blake's statement as follows:

“[The Association] has made [the city] not just a city that I study in, but actually [the] city that I would explore and enjoy my time in ...Without [the Association], I don't think I would have gone to so many places ... and probably wouldn't have explored [the city] that much. Seniors really [liked] bringing me around town when I was new.”

The participants stressed the important role “senior” members played in the Association. They used terms such as “a senior” and “stepping stone” to express their appreciation of experienced members who offered guidance and support. The seniors in the Association acted as safe bridges between the study participants and the university, city, and host country. It was also expected that those with the Association for some time would one day become seniors to other new members. For example, participant Taylor was invited to join the Association staff. In Taylor's words, working in the Association's leadership role was a great responsibility and honor.

Similarly, Blake and Alex became involved in leading the Association because they, too, felt a sense of duty to help their community and keep up the “good work.” Being active in the Association and joining

its leadership meant that all events would run smoothly and important work would be completed. It was Alex's responsibility to "bring the [name] Association to the next level" and build it as a well-known student club on campus rather than a small cultural student club for Asian students only.

The study participants described their experience with the Association as meaningful and positive, particularly due to the presence of the experienced senior students. The participants valued their senior peers' assistance because they could understand and bridge their own and Canadian cultures. As cultural brokers, senior peers were essential in supporting the participants who had to deal with cultural, emotional, and academic challenges as first-year, international and minority students. When the participants of this study gained more experience on campus, they were able to assist new members of the Association, thus also acting as cultural brokers and continuing a positive cycle of care and support.

### ***Overcoming Challenges***

Before joining the Association, Jordan and Taylor felt "lonely" and "shy." Kyle's description was even more dramatic, and he was "super lost and pessimistic" and "miserable." Being away from a familiar environment and a reliable social network, culture shock and living in a predominantly White campus caused the participants to feel lonely and isolated. While the extent of feeling lonely and isolated varied among the participants, some described it as "being quarantined." The isolation lasted much longer for the study participants until they could find new trustworthy friends and a family-like community on and outside the university campus. In addition to experiencing loneliness and isolation, some participants acknowledged that for the first time in their lives, they had recognized what it meant to be a visible minority and to experience discrimination, ignorance, and microaggression. According to [Kubota \(2009\)](#), the Association's goal was to support its members because they represented a "minority" group on campus. Also, [Kubota \(2009\)](#) was aware of the important role the Association played on campus in supporting minority students; he later became personally involved in managing the Association. All participants shared an understanding that the campus culture was not truly diverse because, at some point, they all felt isolated, lonely, and invisible in the predominantly White institution.

Another concern described by the participants was incidents of microaggression on and off the university campus in verbal and behavioral humiliation, intentional or unintentional. Researchers agree that minority students experience microaggressions daily on campus, in class, and during social interactions with their majority culture peers and instructors ([Houshmand et al., 2014](#); [Kim & Kim, 2010](#); [Lewis et al., 2000](#); [Sue et al., 2007](#)). Microaggressions are based on cultural ignorance, invalidation, and insensitivity exhibited by the dominant group members ([Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2019](#)). The examples offered by the participants included a refusal by some Canadian peers to acknowledge intra-ethnic differences, being asked to speak for other Asian ethnic groups, and being ignored by fellow students or instructors during class activities and discussions. Although this study's participants did not share any instances of overt discrimination or racism during their interviews, they were aware of their minority status in the PWI. Research demonstrates that self-recognition as a visible minority prevents individuals from developing a sense of belonging to a dominant group ([De Araujo, 2011](#); [Mahar et al., 2012](#); [Strayhorn, 2018](#)). The participants reiterated the need to promote their Cultural Association and minority culture among other university students because they observed little interest in and respect for their and other Asian cultures on campus.

Overall, the participants agreed that involvement in the Association's activities and relationship with their peers were essential in overcoming these negative experiences and building confidence and a sense of belonging. Membership in the Association benefited the participants: it changed their initially negative outlook and significantly improved their lives. Encouraging relationships with their peers, shared experiences and values, and emotional and academic support provided by other members in a family-like atmosphere fostered by the Association helped the participants overcome many challenges associated with their visible minority status on an occasionally unwelcoming campus. The participants gained personal confidence and became active Association and campus community members. In participants' words, the Association was "a confidence booster," "a stepping stone," and "the best thing" that happened in their student life. According to the participants, the Association helped them form meaningful relationships, adjust to the campus environment, and succeed in their academic programs.

The Cultural Association provided the participants with critical academic, social, and emotional support sources.

## DISCUSSION

This study highlights the importance of developing a sense of belonging for international minority students in a predominantly White institution. The findings add to the existing literature on international students' sense of belonging and the factors contributing to it ([Cena et al., 2021](#); [García et al., 2019](#); [Rivas et al., 2019](#)). Our study indicates that cultural organizations play a significant role in creating opportunities for international students to form friendships with co-national peers and to develop connectedness to both on and off-campus communities. Connectedness, one of the most significant aspects of a sense of belonging, was often referred to by the study participants when they described their experience in the Cultural Association. The Association fostered a sense of inclusion, security and shared commonality and allowed them to maintain reciprocal interactions with their fellow students, contributing to their feeling of connectedness. Previous research suggested that cultural organizations offer academic and social counter spaces to minority students as well as opportunities for meaningful social interactions due to the shared cultural background ([Guiffrida, 2003](#); [Harper & Hurtado, 2007](#); [Houshmand et al., 2014](#); [Museus, 2008](#); [Rivas et al., 2019](#)). Such organizations are particularly helpful to students from Asia-Pacific regions who experience more social and academic difficulties than international students from other countries. The participants of this study felt comfortable and connected to the Association and its members due to existing cultural commonalities. Forming friendships with co-nationals was easy in the Association, and these friendships offered support and a sense of connectedness precisely due to shared language, culture, and experience ([Rivas et al., 2019](#)). Sharing cultural backgrounds and identity with other Asian students and understanding each other's experiences and difficulties let the participants of this study feel good about their cultural identity and their home culture ([Acevedo, 2019](#); [Maramba & Palmer, 2014](#); [Museus, 2008](#)).

Moreover, this experience empowered them culturally and eased the pressure associated with adjustment to the dominant Canadian culture. Reciprocal interactions with other members of the Association were meaningful because students could be active in creating their social networks and feel equal rather than culturally deficient ([Leask, 2009](#)). Participants' narratives in this study highlight the critical role of cultural organizations in offering venues for cultural validation. They bring together students from specific cultural backgrounds and help them maintain strong ties with their cultural heritages while facilitating their socialization into the campus culture ([Museus, 2008](#)). Previous studies indicated a positive relationship between reciprocal interactions and long-lasting relationships among students ([Leask, 2009](#)). Frequent participation in campus activities also helps students develop their sense of belonging in the university setting ([Strayhorn, 2018](#)). Additionally, a sense of belonging can be generated to multiple groups simultaneously so that individuals feel supported and included in continuous reciprocal interactions with each group ([Mahar et al., 2012](#)).

On and off-campus interactions shape a sense of belonging and social adjustment. Asian students often report instances of microaggression and anti-Asian racism, which have significantly increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic ([Chen, 1999](#)). These negative encounters add to the existing challenges experienced by Asian students, thus diminishing their sense of belonging. Authentic cross-cultural interactions and comfortable and familiar spaces offered by cultural organizations not only promote a student's sense of belonging during university years they also equip students with cross-cultural skills and understanding that can be applied when students transition into their professional careers and engage with a broader society ([Bowman & Park, 2014](#); [Bowman et al., 2015](#); [Maramba & Palmer, 2014](#)).

## CONCLUSION

This study delved into the impact of the Cultural Association on minority student experiences within a predominantly White institution (PWI). The results demonstrated that participants, due to their involvement in the Association, successfully overcame initial adaptation challenges like loneliness and isolation. They formed meaningful relationships, developed positive feelings towards the campus community, and described their experiences as encouraging and meaningful. The Association significantly enhanced their sense of belonging, making them feel "connected," "at home," and "among



family.” Interacting with peers from similar cultural backgrounds reaffirmed their cultural identity, boosted self-confidence, and eased the pressure associated with academic and cultural adjustment. Joining the Association improved their academic and student life, confirming the link between a sense of belonging and academic success.

Furthermore, the Association contributed to well-being by validating cultural identity, preserving traditions, aiding integration, and fostering lasting relationships. Institutions should support such organizations as they play a pivotal role in fostering inclusivity, aiding cultural preservation, and enabling cross-cultural interactions. Proactive steps by educational institutions and campus communities are crucial to address challenges faced by racial and ethnic minority international students. Tailored support programs and awareness about cultural organizations are essential for creating an inclusive and supportive environment that benefits all students. This support is imperative for the well-being and success of international students, contributing significantly to Canada's economy and social development.

### **Funding and Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no funding and conflicts of interest for this research.

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