

International Student Needs: A Snapshot in Time

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Abstract

Using a survey of international students from three different IHEs across the United States and follow-up focus groups, we gathered feedback directly from current international students studying in the United States on the practices and policies they have found most and least helpful in terms of supporting them in their studies and their suggestions for additional ways IHEs might better support their international students. Our findings suggest that international students are generally satisfied with the support provided by their international student offices at their institutes of higher education, although they also identified several areas for improvement. In both the surveys and the focus groups, participants emphasized the need for practical assistance with finding housing in the United States and navigating the complexities of attaining a social security number so they can open bank accounts, buy cell phones, and apply for leases on apartments. They also discussed the need to foster the development of meaningful friendships with other international students as well as students from the United States and for ensuring that the mental/emotional health of students, as well as their academic progress, are looked after. Suggestions for ways IHEs might address these identified needs are discussed.

Definitions

IHE – Institutes of Higher Education

J1 - U.S. Visa granted for international visiting scholars in American educational institutions.

F1 - U.S. Visa granted for international students accepted and enrolled in American educational institutions.

International Student Needs: A Snapshot in Time

Although travel restrictions imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic reduced the number of international students studying in the United States from a historic high of 1,095,299 in SY2018-19 to a more modest 914,045 in SY2020-21 (Duffin, 2021), the fact remains that a vast number of students travel from their home countries to pursue higher education in the United States each year. Acknowledging the financial windfall that international students often bring, many U.S. institutions of higher education actively recruit students from abroad to study on their campuses. Recruiting international students is only part of the story, however. To maintain steady enrollment of scholars from other countries, U.S. colleges and universities must find ways to ensure that the students are successful once they arrive. Meeting international student needs involves a variety of supports: from orientation upon first arrival to providing assistance in forming supportive social networks, to providing guidance in understanding the expectations for what it means to be a college student in the U.S.

A number of challenges experienced by international students have been studied. Li and Gasser (2005), Alazzi and Al-Jarrah (2016), and Kiroğlu, Kesten, and Elma (2010) examined the challenges related to how international students integrated into United States society and culture. Zhang and Goodson (2011) investigated international students' psychological integration into the United States. Similarly, using Bronfenbrenner's socioecological theory, researchers assessed university environments and international student interaction within these environments and its influence on the mental well-being of international students. Specifically, researchers found that the most effective route to enhance mental well-being of international students is through improvements of course experiences, including student-teacher interactions and promoting a sense of belonging within and outside of classrooms (Marangell & Baik, 2022). Alazzi and Al-

Jarrah, (2016), Chen and Razek (2016), Eze and Inegbedion, (2015); Kılıçlar, Sarı, and Seçilmiş (2012), and Shafaei, Nejati, Quazi, and von der Heidt (2016) focused their studies on the academic challenges international students face in U.S. Institutions of Higher Education. The transition to a new culture can result in international students feeling stressed (Esentürk-Ercan, 2010).

The move to a new country requires international students to become familiar with new customs and expectations for behavior and interpersonal interactions, both inside the classroom and in social spaces. In addition, for students who speak a language other than English in their home countries, studying in the United States brings with it the added hurdle of learning how to communicate in English. Institutions of Higher Education in the United States that admit international students provide a variety of supports.

Orientation: Establishing a Base

Most IHEs with a robust population of international students host orientations each year specifically for their incoming international students. These international student orientations are held to provide students from other countries guidance as they make academic, personal, and social adjustments to college life. A well-organized orientation helps international students construct a positive first impression of university education while simultaneously helping them navigate the myriad of challenges associated with settling into a new culture (Güvendir, 2018).

Many types of activities are held to orient and welcome international students, and different institutions use different names for their orientation events. In general, there are three aspects involved in orientations for international students (Güvendir, 2018). The first focuses on helping students learn to navigate life and school in the United States. During this part of the orientation, students may be provided information on finding housing and how to use public

transportation. The people leading these orientation sessions might provide public transportation schedules and information about the hours of operation for local grocery stores. This part of orientation might also include tours of the campus and information about how to register for classes, buy course materials, and access the library (Coleman & Carsky, 1994; Gvendir, 2018).

The second focus of international student orientation is related to helping international students understand and prepare for the new experiences they might have as they are becoming acculturated to the United States. Berry (1997) explains that although such experiences can be easy and unproblematic for some students, they pose potential problems if students are not aware of key differences in expectations between their home culture and the culture where they are attending school in the United States. For instance, if students are unfamiliar with the expectations for purchasing food from a U.S. supermarket or the amount of personal space those in their new community expect people to maintain, they might experience negative reactions when they behave in a manner that would be completely acceptable in their home country yet violates cultural mores in their new community.

The third focus of some orientations for international students focuses on students' emotional well-being. Interacting with a new culture can result in culture shock, which can lead to unhappiness, loneliness, or disappointment. For instance, if students are accustomed to lots of close physical contact between same-sex friends, they might find themselves feeling awkward in social situations where their new U.S. acquaintances might seem much more aloof. In many countries, it is common for college-age women to lock arms as they walk together in public. In many U.S. communities, such close physical contact might be met with less acceptance. Similarly, if international students come from a country where interactions between males and females who are not part of the same family are highly regulated or even prohibited, they might

find the U.S. practice of interacting freely with people of different sexes highly stressful. Orientations that focus on helping international students understand the differences and similarities between their home culture and the culture at the IHE where they are studying can provide vital support to ease the transition (Güvendir, 2018).

Moving Beyond Introductions to Cultural Acculturation

For many international students, *sociocultural adaptation*, or becoming familiar with and competent in the customs of the country where they are studying, is accomplished in a straightforward process. However, *psychological adaptation*, whereby they move to a place of well-being, with life satisfaction and good mental health, presents more challenges (Ward, 2001). It is important that those supporting international students understand that these two processes are independent of one another (Ryder et al., 2000) and thus might need specific and individualized attention.

Although international students might be taught the customs of their host country through lectures and support materials, helping them with psychological adaptation is a more complicated process. One way in which IHEs can promote international students' psychological adaptation is through finding ways for them to form friendships with students from the United States. Contact and social ties with the residents from the country where the international student is studying can facilitate and enhance international students' experience and adjustment (Jamaludin et al., 2016). When international students arrive in their host country, one way for them to adapt psychologically is for them to take part in meaningful experiences and activities with students from their host country. By actually participating in the typical activities of a local campus, community, or family, international students can begin to learn more about the nature of the society and form emotional bonds with people in their host country. Such bonds can help

support the international students' positive integration with U.S. culture, which may also strengthen their feelings of connection with their IHE (Jamaludin et al., 2016).

Social Assimilation: A Critical Safety Net

When international students leave home, they often experience feelings of loneliness that comes from a loss of social support. Forming new friendships in the community where they will be studying can provide an important source of social support that can aid in the reduction of stress. Forming friendships with people from the host country is correlated with higher levels of satisfaction and lower levels of homesickness (Poyrazli & Devonish, 2020), yet most international students form friendships with other students from the same or similar cultures (Poyrazli & Devonish, 2020). This finding is important because as Geeraert, Demoulin, and Demes (2014) report, depending on a close circle of friends who share their country of origin can actually cause stress for international students. Examining the degree to which IHEs encourage and nurture the development of friendships among their international students may provide important insights for IHEs.

For IHEs to better support their international students, they must first have a clear understanding of the areas in which they are already having success and those for which additional work is needed. Gaining insights into this area is the focus of this study.

Method

In this study, we used two sources of data (an online survey and focus groups) to gather information from international students studying in the United States about the supports provided by their IHEs that they find useful, as well as suggestions for ways to improve the support they are provided. Once IRB approval had been granted, we contacted the office responsible for supporting international students at each IHE to request their help in distributing the survey.

Setting

We surveyed a convenience sample of international students attending three different institutions of higher education (IHE) in the United States (see Table 1). The IHEs included the University of Oregon, Chemeketa Community College, and The Pennsylvania State University. The participating IHEs ranged in size, international student population, and population of the town where the IHE is located. These particular IHEs were selected because at least one member of the research team had a professional connection with the office providing international student support on campus.

Table 1
Institutions of Higher Education Included in the Study

	University of Oregon	Chemeketa Community College	Pennsylvania State University
# of Students	21,800	10,876	88,914
# (and %) of International Students	1,280 (5.9%)	174 (1.6%)	9,997 (11.2%)
# of Countries Represented	95	43	
Population of Town Where IHE is Located	176,654	175,535	40,501

Participants

To be included in this study, participants had to fit three criteria: currently (a) attending classes as an adult international student (inclusive of those pursuing associates, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees as well as non-degree seeking exchange students) at one of the participating IHEs, (b) residing in the United States (students enrolled exclusively in online courses and not living in the United States at the time the survey was distributed were excluded), and (c) holding an F-1 Student visa or a J-1 Exchange Visitor visa. There were no other limitations to be a participant in this study.

An invitation to participate in the study was distributed via email by the International Student Support office at each participating IHE. The email described the purpose of the study (to gather information about the effectiveness of the different supports offered to international students at their IHE as well as suggestions for improving the support provided), and included both the informed consent form and a link to an online survey. The final survey questions asked respondents interested in participating in a follow-up focus group to provide their contact information. Those who provided their contact information were contacted via email with an invitation to participate in a focus group.

Sources of Data

Data for this study came from two sources: an online survey and focus groups. The survey was created using the Qualtrics survey program and included a total of 33 questions: 24 selected responses and 7 constructed responses. Three questions gathered demographic information. Five questions gathered information about the participants' visa, university, academic school year, and the frequency of their visits to the international student office. The next seven questions gathered information about student interactions with the international student office and advisors, followed by seven focused on orientation. The final eight questions gathered insights into the students' thoughts on how best to support international students' integration into the U.S. Surveys were open for responses for a three-week period from the middle of March to the start of April 2022.

Three focus groups were conducted using Zoom, an online videoconferencing program that enables all participants to both hear and see one another while engaged in discussion. Focus groups were facilitated by one member of the research team, while one to two other members of the research team observed and took notes. At the start of each focus group, the facilitator

verbally reviewed the purpose of the study and read aloud the informed consent form. Verbal consent to participate in the study was collected from each participant at the start of each focus group. The three focus groups lasted slightly over one hour each. Focus groups were recorded, and the transcription feature available through the Zoom platform was used to transcribe participant responses. The recordings were used to verify accuracy of the transcriptions in the few areas where the transcription was unclear or appeared to be inaccurate. Following IRB protocol, the recordings were deleted once the accuracy of the transcriptions was established.

Results

More international students responded to the survey than participated in the focus groups. In this section, we present the results of the survey first, and then the focus groups.

Survey Results

In all, 93 international students responded to the survey. The majority of respondents (62%) were female. In all, 78% of respondents reported that they were attending school on F1 visas, 20% indicated that they were attending their IHE on J1 Exchange Visitor visas, and 2% selected “other” in response to this question. The majority of respondents (48%) were between the ages of 24 and 30, although 33% were between 18 and 23 years old. Respondents were about evenly split in terms of the number of years they had been studying in the United States, with 28% indicating they had been studying in the U.S. for less than one year, 24% indicating they had been studying in the U.S. between one and two years, 26% between three and four years, and 23% five or more years.

When asked what type of program they were currently enrolled in, slightly more than a third of the respondents (39%) reported being enrolled in a doctoral program, another third (32%) indicated a bachelor’s program, 14% a master’s program, 6% associate program, 2%

indicated they were exchange students, and 6% selected “Other.” Slightly less than half of the respondents self-reported their ethnicity as Asian (49%), with 20% indicating they were European / Caucasian, 14% Hispanic / Latino, 6% African, and 6% selected “other”. Table 2 presents additional demographic information about the sample population.

Table 2
Majors Represented in the Sample (# of Respondents if > 1)

STEM	Business/Professional	Humanities
Bioengineering (2)	Architecture (7)	Advertising (3)
Biology (4)	Business (8)	Anthropology (4)
Chemistry (3)	Communication Media	Art & Technology
Computer & Information Sciences (7)	Elementary Education	Comparative Literature
Earth Sciences	Journalism	East Asian Languages & Literature
Genetics	Landscape Architecture (2)	English (2)
Human Physiology (2)	Language Teaching Studies (3)	English as a Second Language
Material Science	Law (2)	Geography
Mathematics	Nonprofit Management	German Literature
Nuclear Engineering	Planning, Public Policy, & Management	Global Studies
Physics (4)	Public Administration	History
	Special Education	Humanities
	Sports Product Management	Music Performance
		Music Technology
		Political Science
		Psychology
		Romance Languages
		Sociology
		Social Science

When asked about the International Student Office on their campus, 18 respondents (19%) indicated they had never visited the office, 62 (67%) indicated they visited the office no

more than once per academic term, and 13 students (14%) indicated they visited two or more times per academic term. Respondents indicated that they visited the International Student Office for a variety of reasons, with the majority of visits ($n = 65$, 57%) related to required documentation, such as signatures for an I-20 visa. Additional reasons for visiting the office included academic issues ($n = 13$, 11%); information and workshops related to OPT/CPT ($n = 11$, 10%); for information about on-campus employment ($n = 8$, 7%); financial aid, funding, or scholarship opportunities ($n = 7$, 6%); to participate in tax workshops ($n = 6$, 5%), and help with finding community resources such as housing and food ($n = 3$, 3%).

The majority of respondents ($n = 62$, 89%) indicated that their IHEs held an orientation specifically for international students, but only 52 respondents (56%) reported that they had participated in the orientation. Of those who attended, the majority indicated that they thought the event was *moderately* ($n = 31$, 60%) or *extremely* ($n = 15$, 29%) well organized, while only 9 (17%) respondents indicated that it was *not very well* organized.

The majority of respondents indicated they were *somewhat* ($n = 39$, 43%) or *extremely satisfied* ($n = 31$, 34%) with the International Office Advising staff. Only 4 respondents (4%) indicated that they were *somewhat dissatisfied* with the international office advising staff, while 17 respondents (19%) indicated they were *neither satisfied nor dissatisfied*. None of the 93 respondents indicated that they were *extremely dissatisfied* with the international office advising staff.

When asked about whether they felt the International Office advisors understood their concerns, the majority of respondents *agreed* ($n = 43$, 47%) or *strongly agreed* ($n = 27$, 30%), while 18 respondents (20%) indicated they *neither agreed nor disagreed*, and three respondents (3%) indicated that they *disagreed*. A similar response pattern was found when students were

asked whether they believed advisors were knowledgeable about potential problems international students might face. The majority of respondents *agreed* ($n = 45, 49\%$) or *strongly agreed* ($n = 24, 26\%$), while 19 respondents (21%) indicated they *neither agreed nor disagreed*, two respondents (2%) indicated that they *disagreed*, and one respondent (1%) indicated that they *strongly disagreed*.

Students were asked whether they felt that advising staff in the international office were sensitive to their needs as international students. Again, the majority of respondents *agreed* ($n = 35, 49\%$) or *strongly agreed* ($n = 18, 25\%$), while 16 respondents (22%) indicated they *neither agreed nor disagreed*, and three respondents (4%) indicated that they *disagreed*. Students were less concerned about whether international office advisors spoke their language. The majority of respondents ($n = 30, 43\%$) indicated they *neither agreed nor disagreed*, while 14 (20%) indicated they *strongly agreed*, 11 (16%) indicated they *agreed*, 10 (14%) indicated they *disagreed*, and 5 (7%) indicated they *strongly disagreed*. However, respondents had much stronger opinions about the importance of international office advisors having studied abroad. Nearly all respondents indicated they *strongly agreed* ($n = 27, 39\%$) or *agreed* ($n = 36, 51\%$), while only 4 (6%) indicated they *neither agreed nor disagreed* and 3 (4%) indicated they *disagreed*.

Respondents were divided in their response to a question about whether their campus provides organized opportunities for them to connect with American students, with slightly more than half ($n = 37, 54\%$) responding in the affirmative while slightly less than half ($n = 32, 47\%$) responding in the negative. Another 24 students (26%) opted not to answer the question. The majority of students ($n = 48, 70\%$) indicated that their campus does not have people who explain

the expectations of an American classroom to international students, although a strong majority ($n = 43$, 63%) also felt that this would have been helpful.

Respondents identified having encountered a variety of barriers. When asked to identify the biggest barrier they had faced, respondents were about evenly split between financial ($n = 26$, 20%) and housing related issues ($n = 25$, 19%). Another 17% ($n = 22$) listed cultural barriers, 16% ($n = 21$) identified language barriers, 12% transportation ($n = 15$), and 10% academic ($n = 13$) barriers. Additional barriers listed by respondents included mental health issues, legal issues, and challenges finding courses to meet the requirements of their visas.

When asked about ways their IHE could improve the orientation for international students, survey respondents suggested more interactive activities so they could get to know one another better as well as finding ways to “spread the information out a little” so that students had more time to absorb it. Some respondents shared that they would have appreciated it if there had been an opportunity to hear from some international people at the orientation. Several students noted that they had been unable to attend the international student orientation because it was scheduled the same time as their departmental or program orientations. They emphasized the importance of having printed materials to share with students who were unable to attend orientation so they could receive the information that was conveyed at the orientation. One suggestion that was brought up repeatedly was that the information shared should provide more concrete and detailed information. For example, rather than simply provide a campus tour and tell students what the different buildings are, actually walk them into the library and teach them how students in the U.S. find and check out library materials.

When asked, more generally, for suggestions of ways the international student and scholar support office could improve its services, students provided numerous suggestions. One

respondent suggested that employees “Know or work to understand the gaps of knowledge between international and domestic students in terms of classroom/work/community expectations and try to provide support to close that gap.” Several others noted that the support needs to extend to emotional and psychological realms, not be limited to academics and legal documents. A number of respondents suggested that finding ways to help international students connect and build friendships with other international students as well as with American students would be an improvement. Repeatedly, respondents noted the need for assistance with housing. These same themes, as well as a few more specific suggestions, were shared in the follow-up focus groups.

Focus Group Results

We held three separate focus groups. A total of nine people participated in the focus groups, with four participating in the first, three in the second, and two in the third. Working together, all four members of the research team read and coded transcripts from all three focus groups in a single three-and-a-half-hour session. The coding took place over Zoom, enabling all four members of the research team to view the transcript simultaneously and reach consensus on each code before moving to the next section of the transcript. Starting with the transcript from the first focus group and continuing through the transcripts from the second and third group, the research team read through the participants’ responses and developed codes based on the themes that emerged while we were reading. The following themes emerged: *unexpected experiences*, *challenges faced*, *supports provided by the International Student & Scholar Support office*, and *recommendations to better support international students*. The team reached the point of data saturation by the end of the second focus group, and although already-identified themes were present, no additional themes emerged while analyzing the transcript from the third focus group.

Focus group participants' responses in many ways mirrored the responses of survey respondents. High on their list of challenges was housing. All nine of the participants shared their struggles with securing housing and their frustration with the lack of logistical support their IHE provided in this area. "I tried to reserve an apartment near campus on my own while I was still in Germany," one participant shared, "but when I arrived, it was not at all what I expected from the website. It was very dirty. I could not stay there." Others added stories of how they felt they had been taken advantage of by rental companies. "It seems like they only are interested in the application fees, not in helping people find a place to live," one participant remarked. Another voiced her frustration with the fact that although she had a good credit rating back in her home country, that information did not transfer to U.S. credit bureaus. "We tried to find accommodation on our own, and it was very hard, because here everything is related to credit score. So even getting an apartment was very, very challenging. They wanted our credit scores, but we [didn't] have U.S. credit scores, we [had] our credit history in our countries, but that's not applicable here. So, we had to pay a lot of money in advance, three and a half months' worth of rent payments to book our apartment here. And it wasn't ready until mid-September, whereas we arrived early in September, [so we had to stay] in a hotel... it was quite challenging." Even though she did, eventually, get housing, the delay cost her a lot of money and a great deal of stress.

In addition to housing, several participants reflected on how they struggled with some of the basic life tasks, such as getting groceries. One noted that there were no actual grocery stores close to campus, and because she didn't have access to a car or know how to use public transportation, she "would just walk to the nearest grocery store and then carry all the thing[s] back home, which took like two and a half or three hours." Another participant shared how

challenging she found it to get basic services started in the United States. “I was surprised at how difficult [it is to get] certain services to work here, how slow they are, for example, getting a phone, getting a bank account. These basic things lasted for days and weeks. I never thought that the service in the United States would be so slow.”

Another theme voiced by focus group participants was the struggle to form friendships with American students. “They are very friendly in class,” one explained, “but then when class ends, it’s like they forget who you are. They stopped responding to texts, and I realized that they were not really friends, but classmates.” Another agreed, “It feels like there is some kind of invisible barrier, and like sometimes I feel like when I’m with classmates they kind of have a boundary of ‘I want to think about you as a classmate and not as a friend.’” One participant commented on his loneliness in between terms. “Everyone goes away on break, and there is nobody to spend time with, nobody to talk to. It is a very sad and lonely time.”

Several of the participants shared how difficult it was for them to meet other international students as well, commenting on how they wished there were some ways to find one another. Students mentioned that having someone who speaks their language and can share their experience can make a very big difference in how connected and happy a student is. Several mentioned that they appreciated orientation and thought it had many good aspects, but they wished that there had been more activities to help the students get to know each other, with more ways to connect on a meaningful level. Another commented on how she wished orientation would have incorporated more interaction with other students.

One student, having listened to her colleagues share their frustrations about how difficult it had been for them when they first arrived, had a practical suggestion for something she would like to see IHEs offer their international students. “I feel a play-by-play welcome packet that

follows a narrative style to settle you in your first three months would be really nice. It could discuss banks, getting a phone, phone bills, maybe information about the closest stores or where you might be able to get a place to stay ... maybe even connecting you with the International Student Association, with information about where people are coming from, that would be really good. Or if you're somebody who is interested in faith-based organizations, how to connect with them because they basically smoothed out my transition as an international student being here." She added, "You know, that's really, really important, especially getting you to function in the system and getting your dailies sorted out, it's really, really very important. If you're someone who has special needs with medication or something like that, you know, where to get all of these things... I know it's hard for [the university] to put those kinds of things together in the sense that you are endorsing those brands...but there's definitely a way to craft something that can help [international students] work through those very, very necessary points."

Another member of the focus group pointed out that some of the information her peers were requesting was actually provided already on the university's website, but noted that finding it required that students "really look deep into the website, because some issues that were mentioned by my classmates, by my peers were addressed on the website. So, you did have some information about phones, from plans and companies, there was information about Social Security, it was written there that you cannot have a social security number unless you have a job on campus, that information was available there. But I think that maybe the university needs to provide that in a more explicit manner not to rely on students finding that on their own, just to send a package of links that, 'Hey, you have to check this out.' We have good information, but you have to dig to find it." Others in her focus group agreed, noting that navigating the website

was challenging and suggesting that it be redesigned to help make it easier to find the information.

Discussion

In our study, we set out to learn more about what international students studying in the United States in AY2021-2022 identified as their greatest challenges, as well as solicit their input on how the IHE where they were studying could better support their needs. We were interested in finding out if the same needs identified in earlier studies were still prevalent today. Although this study represents a snapshot in time, our findings suggest that some of the issues identified by earlier research persist. International students still experience challenges related to their psychological integration into United States society (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Students in our study reported feeling isolated at times, and many remarked on the stressors they felt (Esentürk-Ercan, 2010). Focus group participants, in particular, talked about wanting to have more meaningful experiences and activities with students from the United States. They seemed to be seeking the sort of experiences Jamaludin et al. (2018) identified as important for enhancing international students' experience and adjustment. It is worth noting that students in our study talked about being surprised by the emphasis their professors placed on discussion in their classes and remarked that they found it difficult to make friends with students from the United States, even though the students interacted with them in a friendly manner in class. Similar to the findings of Poyrazli and Devonish (2020), we found that students in our sample were interested in forming true friendships with American students, and were frustrated that their relationships seemed to remain at a more surface level, as classmates rather than actual friends.

A key difference between our findings and those of Alazzi and Al-Jarrah, (2016), Chen and Razek (2016), Eze and Inegbedion, (2015); Kılıçlar, Sarı, and Seçilmiş (2012), and Shafaei,

Nejati, Quazi, and von der Heide (2016), however, was that the international students in our study de-emphasized academic challenges. They noted that their campuses provided tutoring services, their instructors seemed eager to help them, and they felt well-supported academically. In fact, a number of our participants indicated that they were pleasantly surprised by how friendly their instructors were. They explained that they had not expected the faculty to be as warm and welcoming as they found them to be.

For the students in our study, struggles with day-to-day living, including finding housing, were identified as their greatest area of need. On both the survey and all three focus groups, students repeatedly shared stories of the challenges they faced finding a place to live in the United States, navigating the U.S. health care system, setting up bank accounts, establishing phone service, and even figuring out how to get to grocery stores. Although such topics had been introduced at the international student orientation, as Güvendir (2018) recommends, students in our study were nearly unanimous in their feeling that the assistance they were given by their IHE was insufficient to meet their needs in this area.

Interestingly, very few students in our sample indicated that they needed additional support with their paperwork and visa documentation. This need seems to be an area that the IHEs included in our study are addressing well. On the survey, the majority of students indicated that they visited the international student support office most often to seek assistance with their paperwork and student visas, and they reported they were satisfied with the help they received in this area.

Students in our study indicated that they appreciated the help they receive from the international student support office on their campus, and they were grateful for the activities, such as the orientation and tax workshops, that the office provides. At the same time, they had

some suggestions for ways their IHE could be more successful at meeting the needs of international students. One of the most important requests, shared by numerous survey respondents and focus group participants, was for the international student office to be more proactive in providing students with clearer expectations about what to expect in their first few months. Specifically, students wished that they had been provided with more clear, easy-to-follow guidance on how to get a social security number, how to set up a bank account, how to get a phone, how to get housing, and how to get groceries. They emphasized that going over such information verbally was not sufficient. Rather, they suggested that providing all the material in a paper format, so that students could bring it home to review, and so that students who were unable to attend the orientation might still have access to the information, was important.

Along these same lines, a repeated suggestion was that the IHEs find ways to make the orientation for international students more “hands on.” Several students suggested that the incorporation of more small group activities and more interaction with one another would be an improvement, in that such changes might help initiate more relationship building. They encouraged the IHEs to find ways to incorporate more international voices at orientation and other events, through the inclusion of international students and scholars as speakers. The suggestion to ensure that the information being conveyed was easily accessible extended beyond the orientation. Students in our sample emphasized the need to communicate clearly. They suggested that sending shorter, more frequent emails, using more conversational language, may be more effective than the very detailed and lengthy “list of instructions approach” they were accustomed to receiving from the international student office. During the focus group, a few students suggested the use of social media to connect with international students, suggesting that

moving toward multiple platforms to communicate, rather than relying so heavily on standard email formats, might be more effective.

Although they acknowledged that privacy concerns might prevent such an approach from being viable, several students suggested providing a directory of international students, with their contact information and country of origin noted, to make it easier for international students to find one another and connect. In the same vein, they recommended that the IHEs continue to find ways to connect international students with students from the United States, through sponsored activities, social gathering places, and opportunities for getting to know one another. Several students said that they wished that their professors would openly seek ways to incorporate more international perspectives into their classes, noting that they felt that sometimes classes focused narrowly on U.S. policies and practices when a more global focus might prove beneficial for all students, not just those from outside the U.S.

Limitations

It is important to note that this study took place in the second year of a global pandemic, and that many of the students who took part in the study had been impacted by changes in instructional modality as a direct result of the pandemic. Most of the students reported having attended the majority if not all of their classes remotely, using Zoom. For these students, the dream of attending an IHE in the United States, where they could interact closely with students from all over the world and have the opportunity to forge close friendships, did not quite match the reality of attending college from their computer screen. With remote instruction, students did not have as easy an opportunity to meet up with their classmates for lunch or coffee just before or after class as they might have had if they had been attending in person. The lack of such

informal meetings might have impacted their feelings of connection with other students, as well as their satisfaction with the experience of studying in the United States.

In addition, the self-report nature of our data, and the fact that the sample represents only a fraction of the students to whom the invitation to participate in the study was originally sent, is also a limitation. It is possible that the respondents differ in some substantive way from the international students who opted not to complete the survey or participate in the focus groups. To some extent, the diversity of the sample (in terms of major, length of time studying in the United States, degree program enrolled in, etc.) helps alleviate concerns in this area. In addition, the fact that the same themes kept appearing, to the point of data saturation, by the end of the second focus group, suggest that our data collection was sufficiently thorough to enable us to come to draw our conclusions.

Future Research

A replication study, with samples drawn from different IHEs, could provide additional information to help indicate the extent to which our findings may be generalized to other U.S. colleges and universities serving international students. In addition, it would be interesting to run analyses split by area of study, nationality of respondent, and type of degree program enrolled (associates, bachelors, masters, doctoral, etc.) to determine if the findings vary by such demographics.

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