



# IMPACTS OF MICROAGGRESSIONS AND NEO-RACISM ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING

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*This study explored international student sense of belonging within three state universities in New England and found a concurrent theme of microaggressions and neo-racism on their campuses that has affected their sense of belonging. Despite trends in the international higher education literature that have historically investigated ways to improve the academic experiences and engagement of international students, the findings indicate less attention has been paid to the sense of belonging felt by these students, particularly how microaggressions and neo-racism affect their sense of belonging. Microaggressions, or subtle verbal or nonverbal insults directed towards people of color, often unconsciously (Solorzano et al., 2000), were a common experience of international student participants and frequently mentioned in communications with faculty, domestic students, and staff participants. Suggestions for best practices in fostering international student sense of belonging for higher education professionals and practitioners are also discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

International students were first documented in the U.S. in 1868 as refugee militants or skill builders in agriculture and infrastructure, mostly from Latin American and European countries. Historically, students have sought educational opportunities in countries other than their own with the intention of getting advanced education capable of making them exceptional among their peers (Akanwa, p. 273). Unfortunately, bias and microaggressions towards the international student population can be seen throughout this history. For example, after World War I, most Asian citizens hoping to study in the U.S. faced biased barriers, such as the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which excluded Chinese laborers from studying in the U.S. post-war (Wolgin, 2011). This act, amongst others, is a relevant example of challenges and biases international students face due to their racial or cultural identity. It is assumed that microaggressions occurred then and were not reported in fear of deportation, which is still a problem today (Lee, 2007).

Scholars define microaggressions as brief, everyday exchanges such as gestures, tones or looks that unconsciously insult people of color based on their racial minority group (Franklin, 2004; Sue, 2004; Sue et al., 2007). Yeo et al. (2019) found examples of microaggressions in their study of Asian international and American students consisting of exchanges where the perpetrator gave what they considered a compliment saying, "You speak English so well" and "You talk just like us" but these were hurtful to the victim, insulting their intelligence with the assumption that they lack English skills based on their ethnicity or class. Another more blunt and extreme example of racial microaggressions includes sayings such as "fresh off the boat" or "go back to your country" that negatively influenced the international student experience and increase cultural borders and segregation among students (Yeo et al., 2019; Yeo et al., 2018).

International students' experiences with microaggressions have increasingly been on the minds of international students during their U.S. college search as well as after their arrival to the U.S. (Chirikov & Soria, 2020). From the ever-changing immigration climate, the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, and the current pandemic that began outside of the U.S., international students have had a history of feeling unwelcomed against based on their origin, race or religion associated with these historical events (Glass & Westmont, 2013; Lee & Jenny, Rice, 2007)

and ever-evolving issues of racism in the U.S. over time.

Neo-racism, or a type of modern microaggression towards foreigners seen in policymaking, unfair treatment based on accent, and other biased actions by the majority (Lee, 2007), is a newer type of bias international students are experiencing in the United States. While international students are adjusting to a new culture, language, and academic expectations, these students may be experiencing racism (or neo-racism) for the first time, as these are systemic constructs that have long existed in the U.S. more so than in other countries. This under-researched topic has become more relevant in recent years as neo-racism has presented additional boundaries for these students (xenophobic immigration policies, lack of employment opportunities) and the impacts on their sense of belonging, which this study explores.

This study consisted of focus groups, interviews, and an online survey distributed to international students at three universities in New England. The purpose of this study was to understand international students' sense of belonging on their campus, particularly upon arrival and currently during a pandemic, to help improve and foster a more inclusive community for these students.

### **Review of Related Literature**

A sense of belonging is defined as a “sense of personal involvement in a social system so that persons feel themselves to be an indispensable and integral part of the system” with an emphasis on recognition and acceptance of a member in school systems, social relationships, and mental health (Anant, p. 21). Baumeister and Leary (1995) found the importance of feeling a sense of belonging to overall well-being and social connectedness through ongoing social contact based on sentimental concern. Therefore, failure to form these relationships may result in feelings of loneliness and social isolation and, in this case, affect the international student experience.

Scholars have long written about the varying levels of microaggressions international students, or a student who has [legally] crossed a national or border for the purpose of education and are not enrolled outside their country of origin (UNESCO, 2021), have faced since the 1860s. The bodies of literature this has produced tend to fall into three main categories: cultural validation inside and outside the classroom, feeling valued by their university, and the effects of neo-racism (Kramer, 2009, Lee, 2007). This population consistently contributes diverse views inside and outside the classroom, economic growth, and increased globalization on campus (Hegarty, 2014, Ngyuen & Larson, 2017, McFaul, 2016, Lou, 2013, Lee & Rice, 2007, Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). While these contributions are noteworthy for their universities, the overall student experience may not be as obviously understood.

### **Microaggressions and Sense of Belonging**

Research suggests that experiences of microaggressions have a negative effect on underrepresented students' sense of belonging, particularly Black and Latina/o students (Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015) and increasingly within Asian international students (Lee, 2007; Houshmand, Spanierman & Tafarodi, 2014). When using sense of belonging to measure integration into a college community, positive links have formed with validation and faculty support and can vary by race and ethnicity (Strayhorn, 2012; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002). The analysis of data that Hurtado, Alvarado, and Guillerimo-Wann (2015) collected at 34 universities over a two-year period found that when a student witnesses or is a victim to acts of microaggressions or bias, such as hearing negative remarks from faculty, staff, or fellow students, “the less validated they are likely to feel, and consequently, the lower their sense of belonging on campus” (p. 72).

Lee and Rice (2003) found traces of biased acts such as denial of funding or job opportunities during the application process, on-campus interactions with staff and administration, and confrontations during off-campus interactions such as trips to the grocery store. Constantine et al. (2005) found that the Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international students in their study all experienced discriminatory treatment. While it is not possible to label such interactions as “microaggressions or exclusion based on foreign status, language, or race, and how much is misperception,” the experiences of White international students and those of color are not the same (Lee & Rice, p. 393), especially as racism evolves.

## Neo-racism and Sense of Belonging

Lee and Rice (2007) introduced the term “neo-racism” as discrimination based on cultural and national differences, finding varying experiences with biased treatment based on country of origin, particularly within international student populations. Balibar (2007) defined neo-racism as “racism without race” (p. 85), as this type of racism goes deeper than mistreatment based on skin color into more of a systemic barrier, such as targeted immigration policies. In their extensive study of 500 international students in the Southwest U.S., Lee and Rice (2007) found that students from Asia, India, Latin America, and the Middle East reported considerable microaggressions, while students from Europe, Canada, and New Zealand did not report any direct negative experiences related to their race or culture.

More recent studies found safety to be a top concern of international students (Suh, Flores & Wang, 2019; IIE, 2019; Redden, 2020), as well as for prospective students. According to the IIE annual 2019 Snapshot Survey (conducted by Sanger & Baer, 2019) of hundreds of prospective international students considering studying in the U.S., 64.8% did not feel welcome in the U.S. and cited the U.S. social and political climate as a potential deterrent.

At the time of this writing, the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the study of microaggressions faced by international students. Currently, research on this topic is sparse; however, some preliminary data collection has occurred. In July 2020, Chirikov and Soria (2020), members of the Student Experience Consortium, surveyed international students specifically and found staying healthy and maintaining status properly were the top two concerns, followed by being worried about instances of xenophobia, harassment, and microaggressions at both the graduate and undergraduate level. Additionally, 12% of international students reported personal experiences with hostile or offensive behavior based on their nation of origin, with the most common instances happening to students from Asia (i.e., China, South Korea, Japan, and Vietnam), noting it affected their mental health and has affected their interactions and friendships with their U.S. peers (Chirikov & Soria, 2020).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses the Symbolic Interactionist Theory (Blumer, 1969; Snow, 2001; Tran & Pham, 2016) to explore positive and negative perceptions regarding international students’ sense of belonging. This theory consists of three assumptions: First, individuals act towards things and each other on the basis of meanings they attach to these things. This assumption can be related to international students and their experiences with microaggressions as they first arrive on campus; their first conversations and initial experiences, whether positive or negative, may influence how they feel about that certain experience or person. Second, these meanings are derived from social interactions with others, formed in and through activities as people interact, and derived by the individual from that interaction. Social interactions that international students experience may influence their sense of belonging as they search for social support systems in the U.S. Third, these meanings are managed and transformed through an interpretive process that people use to make sense of and mediate the things that they encounter (Tran & Pham, 2016; Carter & Fuller, 2015). I will be drawing from all three of these assumptions as they all play an important role in the sense of belonging among international students and the role microaggressions and neo-racism can play in the interactions they have experienced.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

### Data, Instruments, and Sample

This study is an exploratory mixed-methods study from the perspective of international students, domestic students, faculty, and staff at four research universities in New England. These four universities were chosen because of their diverse number of international students, various types of campus locations (suburban vs. city), all are state universities, and their differing departmental structures in place to support international students. The study was submitted for IRB approval and was deemed not to be human subjects research. Therefore, IRB approval was not needed.

The quantitative data was collected through an online survey via Qualtrics administered to international students (n=370) attending three research universities in New England. The online survey was sent to a total of 3,900 international students. Three of the four staff members interviewed assisted in sending out this survey to their list of all international students (undergraduates, graduates, and scholars, regardless of visa category). One university's staff member was unable to send the survey to their international students so as not to overwhelm their inboxes during a busy period. International student participants were emailed the purpose of this study along with a definition of sense of belonging. This survey consisted of 23 questions, including multiple-choice questions, open-ended response questions, and subjective continuum scales. The survey took approximately 8 minutes to complete and consisted of 16 quantitative questions and seven qualitative questions. Questions explored international student sense of belonging upon arrival vs. current, relationships with domestic peers, and challenges experienced. This study did not specifically set out to find instances of microaggressions, but it was a common theme mentioned often by these students in the open-ended questions regarding challenges experienced.

The qualitative data methods consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus groups of faculty (n=3), staff (n=4), domestic students (n=3), and international students (n=14), all conducted via Zoom due to the current COVID-19 pandemic and video/audio recorded using Zoom's audio transcription feature and lasted no longer than 60 minutes each with 9-10 questions. The summary of the demographics of the focus group and interview participants is provided in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Demographics of Focus Group and Interview participants**

| Type of Participant    | # of Focus Groups | # of 1-1 Interviews | # of Participants        |
|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Domestic Students      | 1                 | -                   | 3 (all female)           |
| Faculty                | 1                 | -                   | 3 (2 females, 1 male)    |
| International Students | 4                 | -                   | 14 (10 females, 4 males) |
| Staff                  | -                 | 4                   | 4 (all female)           |

The domestic student focus group consisted of three domestic students from the same university obtaining degrees in finance and accounting, education, philosophy, and French. These participants were all female, all students of color, and all had participated in a buddy program where they were paired with international students to build multicultural friendships. Some interview questions for this focus group included “How was your experience on your campus with international students prior to the COVID-19 pandemic”, “How many international student friends do you have, and how often do you see them?”, and “What challenges or successes have you seen within these students outside the classroom?” Domestic student participants were obtained through a mentorship program conducted on their campus.

The faculty focus group consisted of three faculty members from the same university within the departments of engineering, public health, and education. The faculty participants consisted of two females and one male, who had been teaching at their university for at least five years and teach an average of ten or more international students per semester. Some interview questions for faculty included “What challenges have you witnessed international students experience,” “How have you contributed to international student sense of belonging, if at all?” and “What is your greatest area of need when teaching international students?” Faculty participants were obtained through contact with academic deans at the selected university, who agreed to send out a recruitment email asking faculty to participate in this study.

The international student focus groups consisted of 14 students from three different campuses in New England. Of these students, ten identified as female, and four identified as male. Some of the questions asked in these focus groups included “How does your university make you feel that you belong?”, “Tell me about a time you felt like you belonged with (1) faculty, (2) domestic students, and (3) other international students?” and “What do you recommend the university do to better support you and increase your sense of belonging on campus?”

Lastly, the individual interview participants consisted of staff members that worked closely with international

students within their university for at least five years. Some interview questions for this focus group included “How long have you worked with international students?”, “What is your understanding of their sense of belonging on your campus?” and “How do you think your office contributes to their sense of belonging?” Staff participants were identified through an organization that brought together state college and university staff who worked with international students.

Table 2 below provides a summary of the demographics of all the study participants, indicating gender identity, degree level (enrolled or teaching), and continent of origin. As seen below, there were 312 international student survey participants, of which 172 participants were female, 135 were male, one was transgender, one was non-binary, and three preferred not to say. The majority of these survey participants were graduate students (66%, or 209), while 33% (n=104) participants were undergraduate students. Again, this study was not specifically designed to understand their experiences with microaggressions, but it became a common theme mentioned by students.

**Table 2:** *Demographics of study participants (international & domestic students, faculty, staff)*

| <b>Participant Type</b>         | <b>Gender Identity</b> | <b>Continent of Origin</b> | <b>Degree Level</b> |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Survey respondents              | Female (172)           | Africa (25)                | Undergraduate (104) |
| (International Students)        | Male (136)             | Asia (241)                 | Graduate (209)      |
|                                 | Non-binary (1)         | Europe (20)                |                     |
|                                 |                        | North America (9)          |                     |
|                                 |                        | South America (21)         |                     |
| <b>Focus group participants</b> | Female (3)             | North America (3)          | Undergraduate (2)   |
| (Domestic students)             |                        |                            | Graduate (1)        |
| <b>Focus group participants</b> | Female (2)             | North America (3)          | Undergraduate (2)   |
| (Faculty members)               | Male (1)               |                            | Graduate (1)        |
| <b>Interview participants</b>   | Female (4)             | North America (4)          |                     |
| (ISSO Staff members)            |                        |                            |                     |

Overall, the international student survey respondents represented 63 countries and five continents, the majority from Asia followed by Africa, Europe, South America, and North America.

### **Analytical Procedures**

In analyzing the data, I used descriptive statistics, noting the frequency of responses to the survey questions around international students’ sense of belonging using Qualtrics analysis tools for helpful visuals such as bar graphs and pie charts. I also analyzed the data using SPSS and constructed graphs and figures. For some quantitative items, I provided bar graphs through Microsoft Word, as seen below. For the open-ended questions, I used NVivo to code themes such as relationships with faculty, relationships with domestic students, and other factors that may have contributed to their sense of belonging and the role of microaggressions within the qualitative items and data. I imported the answers from the qualitative questions into NVivo and identified themes as “relationships with faculty,” “domestic student relationships,” and “other” for other influences that contributed to the respondent’s sense of belonging on campus.

The qualitative data was analyzed in NVivo. All eleven focus groups and interviews were imported from my Zoom account (where the recordings were stored) into NVivo. I then created codes based on the participant list and noted major findings by theme or category as a memo. For the open-ended survey questions, I used NVivo to code themes (first by major finding, then a second, more in-depth analysis) such as relationships with faculty, relationships with domestic students, and other factors that may have contributed to their experiences with microaggressions and its effects on their sense of belonging.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

### Sense of Belonging Increased Overall Since Arrival

In analyzing the data, descriptive statistics were examined in terms of international student sense of belonging. Table 3 shows the participants' sense of belonging during their first semester at their university overall. Survey responses indicated they felt "Somewhat" of a sense of belonging (45%), followed by "Very Much" (27%), then "Not Much" (21%) and, "Not at all" (5%). Students reported key offices as contributors to their sense of belonging upon arrival, such as their International Students and Scholars Office, Career Services, Admissions, and academic departmental staff. Another contributor to their sense of belonging during their first semester was other I belonged when I got information from my own community such as student leaders in the Chinese Students and Scholars Association." As literature suggests (Tran & Pham, 2016; Carter & Fuller, 2015; Lee & Rice, 2007), international students tend to feel most comfortable and in community with those students from their home culture, or other international students who have experienced the transition to U.S. culture.

**Table 3:** *Sense of belonging during their first semester*

| Sense of Belonging During First Semester | # of Survey Respondents |
|--|-------------------------|
| Very much                                | 102                     |
| Somewhat                                 | 168                     |
| Not Much                                 | 80                      |
| Not at all                               | 18                      |

In terms of communicating with others on campus after arrival, particularly faculty members, the majority of international students spoke with them weekly (43%). The topic of most conversations was classwork (54%), followed by career or professional development (27%). Only 8% of international students talked about outside interests such as families or hobbies with their professors.

Over time, study participants reported contributing factors to their sense of belonging as positive interactions with students, faculty, and staff, getting more involved on campus through obtaining a campus job or joining a club or event such as a buddy or mentorship program to meet other students, developing relationships with roommates and lab mates, and even through conversations with unlikely community members. One undergraduate student from India, Tarrin, explained, "I really enjoyed little conversations with the university employees such as the janitors." Other students wrote about talking with dining hall workers and strangers they would meet in local restaurants.

When asked how students would rate their sense of belonging currently, the majority (59%) of students feel an increased sense of belonging since they arrived to their campus. However, as seen in Table 4, some international students disagreed. Over 30% of students feel their sense of belonging hadn't changed, and more than 9% of students feel a decreased sense of belonging at their university since they arrived. Claudia, an undergraduate survey participant from Southeast Asia, wrote

Even after being here for years, I've seen [American] people be more selective and do not accept international students into their groups due to high difference in lifestyles. This is why international students group up with other international students and try to separate from local people.

Claudia is describing negative interactions she has had with American people in feeling like the "other" when trying to make friends with natives. As international students are excluded from the host culture, they turn to each other for support, community, and a sense of belonging, yielding more positive interactions and comfortable relationships.

**Table 4:** *Sense of belonging currently since arriving to their campus*

| <b>Sense of belonging Since Arriving on Campus</b>     | <b># of Survey Respondents</b> |
|--|--------------------------------|
| I feel an increased sense of belonging since I arrived | 191                            |
| I feel my sense of belonging hasn't changed            | 98                             |
| I feel a decreased sense of belonging since I arrived  | 31                             |

### **Biases experienced based on country of origin**

In the open-ended questions and focus group data, a common theme mentioned by international students was their experiences with microaggressions and neo-racism and its effects on their sense of belonging. When asked about challenges they faced on campus that influenced their sense of belonging, 32 survey respondents mentioned some form of microaggressions or bias they had experienced. A graduate student from India, Shaima wrote,

It's always a challenge when people find out you're an international student. They said things like 'you don't look like you grew up in a third world country, you must be from the elite class so you made it out'. These notions of what an international student should be like or what backgrounds they are from has definitely made it hard for me to be myself.

As seen in this quote, the bias that all international students are either from third-world countries or from rich families can result in negative interactions with their domestic peers. This assumption can be hurtful to students such as Shaima as it implies that her admission to a U.S. university was due to family wealth or class instead of her hard work.

Another undergraduate student from India, Sahaj, shared the judgment they received for being Indian and, "being able to speak English fluently because most people think that in India, we are all uneducated and that people barely know English." Sahaj is another victim of microaggression because of the assumption being made by the perpetrator that he should not know English due to his cultural background, even though English is a primary language in India (Rukmini, 2019). Historically, assumptions have been made by members of that host culture that international students from certain countries are poor based on both class and race, stemming from the stereotype that only rich international students attend U.S. universities (Tran & Pham, 2016).

### **Race as a new construct**

Racism, and now neo-racism, is an integral part of the U.S. and its institutions, such as higher education. International students are feeling this sense of being the "other" because of the culture the U.S. has built around racism structurally catering to the majority, a part of the racial formation process (Omi & Winant, 1986) that may not be as common in other countries. Hout, a Cambodian student, had trouble understanding structural racism and its effects since it was not common for them in their home country.

It's been hard to understand some structural concerns such as racism. In my country, people aren't characterized by their "race." I had never been categorized in such a way before I came to the U.S. So, first, defining which race I belong to, and second, being empathetic with my colleagues' concerns has been puzzling.

Race and its complexities may be something many international students are unfamiliar with as this construct is not as common in their home countries, leaving them confused by the labels and biases they are experiencing, resulting in these microaggressions. For example, in Cambodia, inequalities are not based on race but by ethnic tribes and ethnicity (Kiernan, 1990). Just as the caste system determines treatment and opportunity in India, race is the determinant in the U.S. Opposition exists in other cultures, it is just experienced in other ways.

### **Neo-racist immigration policies influencing microaggressions**

One student mentioned religion saying, "I think most students don't know a lot about Muslims so they are just afraid to make contact with me." Recently, under the Trump administration, statements were made, and laws were enacted that did not allow international students from certain countries into the U.S. For example, the Muslim ban occurred when Trump was quoted as saying, "what we need is a travel ban from certain dangerous countries," which were Muslim-majority countries such as Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen

(Arafa, 2018). Others cite the Trump administration, particularly a Latin American student, noting, “I always felt like I’ve been seen as someone different, especially now with the new president [Trump] who is enhancing racism towards Latin American people.” When the Trump administration posed all Mexicans as, “drug dealers, criminals, rapists” (Mark, 2018), it negatively affected international students’ sense of belonging, and heightened their sense of fear. This rhetoric and neo-racist treatment, or modernized unfairness in policy and decision-making based on cultural background, of minorities by the Trump administration trickled down to U.S. citizens influencing exclusive behavior and negatively affecting the sense of belonging among all foreign students.

### **Non-verbal microaggressions between cultural affinity groups**

Additionally, unexpected mistreatment was mentioned between international students and domestic students from similar cultural backgrounds. For example, one Asian student participant wrote, “Being an Asian student, I didn’t necessarily feel always connected to Asian American students but rather with my group of international friends.” An African student mentioned, “I was always left out when forming a group. I believe there was one time where an African American friend formed a group without me.” This data point shows the impacts of neo-racism and its tendency to pit communities against each other. There is an assumption that affinity groups would form together, but that is not the case. Again, various levels of class, religion, family makeup, and understanding of race can cause disconnection and hesitation to interact as their beliefs do not coincide.

During the focus group discussions, microaggressions were mentioned indirectly and less frequently than in the survey responses. Karen, an undergraduate Middle Eastern student, noted their perceived disregard when in a class with majority domestic students. “As an international student, I come from a completely different background, and I may have different opinions sometimes. Sometimes I feel like my opinion isn’t as discussed or as heard by more domestic students, especially if it’s a majority domestic class.” This unequal treatment silences international students, contributing to thinking that their opinions do not matter and, therefore, should not be heard. This will negatively affect their willingness to participate in future discussions or interactions in the future. These observations of non-verbal microaggressions, whether minor or major, can have effects on international student sense of belonging.

## **DISCUSSION**

International students’ sense of belonging is imperative to a positive educational experience. The interactions these students encounter with the host culture influence their ability to feel accepted and a valued part of their U.S. campus community. The intersections of microaggressions and neo-racism and international students and scholars’ sense of belonging has been an under-researched area, particularly in the 21st century. In addition to challenges around language and cultural adaptation, this study has shown the lesser-known but equally impactful issues of microaggressions that this population faces. However, 72% of respondents reported high rates of sense of belonging, suggesting that overall experiences are positive. These experiences could include positive interactions with natives, other international students, and university programs. In addition to these overall experiences, evidence suggests that international students experience microaggressions and neo-racism, which have the potential to negatively affect their sense of belonging. This study examines those microaggressions and neo-racism most likely to detract from students’ sense of belonging.

The construct of neo-racism is rampant in the U.S., and international students, as shown in this study, are not exempt just because they are students. Neo-racism has impacted international students from certain countries (Muslim-majority most recently) from the onset of their application process. Through rigorous visa interviews, increased likelihood of being detained at airports upon arrival and mistreatment based on their accent or lifestyle choices (Lee, 2020). And again, most international students are experiencing this type of racism for the first time because they may be coming from countries where discrimination is based on ethnicity, class, or color lines, so bias occurs on multiple levels. Racism in the U.S. is a social construct around xenotype categories, and in India, for example, oppression exists from the caste system through a color-based societal structure (i.e., lighter vs. darker skin colors along the same color line).



Whether it be inside or outside the classroom, the interactions these students experience (particularly during their first semester) can make or break their attitudes toward their host university and its community. These host institutions should take responsibility for this by ensuring inclusion and implementing programs to connect domestic and international students through. Few studies consider how institutions and individuals may purposefully or inadvertently marginalize international students (Beoku-Betts, 2004; Lee, 2005). As seen in this study, this marginalization is felt by the international student community within their interactions.

## IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The unforeseen pandemic posed some challenges during data collection. The apparent campuses shut down due to Covid may have affected response rates to both the surveys and interview requests. Four universities were asked to send out this survey, and three agreed. Additionally, a substantial limitation is the lack of survey questions addressing microaggressions directly. The questions asked about international students' sense of belonging overall in terms of interactions, connections to their community, and challenges they face, not about experiences with microaggressions specifically; this is a potential area for further research.

There was possible sampling bias of the international students and university faculty due to access and proximity. For example, all the domestic student focus group members were all female, and all students of color, and the findings cannot be generalized to the larger international student population. Similarly, the three faculty members came from one institution, and their responses are not generalizable to all four university campuses.

Lastly, and most interestingly, the data from the international student focus groups tended to focus more on the positives of their experiences. The focus group participants may not feel comfortable talking honestly about all aspects of their experience at their university, perhaps in fear of repercussions or punishment since the conversation was recorded. Further research could suggest a more complex analysis that includes specifics regarding race and class while in their home countries compared to experiences based on those constructs while in the U.S.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR BEST PRACTICES

While universities are working to improve the student experience, a specialized focus should examine international students' sense of belonging and the impacts of microaggressions and neo-racism they are experiencing. Glass, Wongtrirat, and Buus (2015) explain the importance of education acting as an equalizer in the U.S. between insiders and outsiders, yet a lack of a deeper knowledge of the outsider student's experience will only further contribute to these inequalities and continue the reality that the international student experience is not equal. The findings in this study informed some best practices for higher education professionals and practitioners who interact with international students.

### **Inside the classroom: Spend time building trust and safety**

As Consoli et al. (2022) wrote, "a reoccurring recommendation to faculty interested in international mentoring was that they acquire a basic knowledge of the international mentees' home countries and cultural backgrounds" to deepen understanding and consideration of their students (p. 890). Simple notions from faculty, such as learning a few welcoming words in their language, or displaying their country's flag, could also strengthen a trusting relationship and improve the students' sense of belonging. If their home city information is available, find where in their country their home city is located and research some historical facts about their city and country that could build familiarity and understanding between practitioner and student.

### **Inside the classroom: Internationalize course learning outcomes**

Students feel a sense of belonging when they see themselves reflected in the readings, projects, or other work they are conducting throughout their program. Faculty working or teaching alongside international students should include articles in their course curriculum that are focused on issues outside the U.S. or are written by international authors. For example, if a professor is lecturing about the effects of COVID-19 on student mental health, they

should reference statistics that include students worldwide or cite a study conducted by an international scholar.

### **Outside the classroom: Understand the lived experience of international students**

Design and implement a comprehensive survey or individual interviews (or both) to identify improvements and successes of the international student experience on your campus. Constructed by university staff or upper administration who work closely with international students, and repeated annually, ask which resources and procedures that are in place are most or least welcoming, or which are the most and the least used, and why. Collecting data will not only help the students feel heard but will provide higher education professionals and practitioners the feedback they need to advocate for and enact change.

### **Outside the classroom: Host programs that merge domestic and international students**

While group projects in the classroom require a working relationship between international and domestic students, this study found that the majority of communications between these students end after the project is completed resulting in no lasting friendships or connections outside the classroom. Programs such as a buddy or matching program between domestic and international students encourage students to get to know each other on a more personal level outside of their studies. These informal volunteer programs are a low-cost way to begin to bridge the cultural gaps between these two groups, educate various groups about various cultures, ideally decrease occurrences of bias and microaggressions, and help build community. These types of programs can be implemented by Student Affairs staff in collaboration with other internationally focused departments on campus.

## CONCLUSION & POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

This study explored international students' sense of belonging and the impact of microaggressions at three research universities in New England. Sense of belonging is important for all college students but in particular for international students as they navigate cultural, procedural, and academic differences in addition to finding community and acceptance for the next two to four or more years. During the 2019-2020 academic year, the international student population declined by 1.8% (IIE, 2020). However, the full effects of the pandemic on enrollment and belonging are not yet entirely understood. Overall, international students are experiencing microaggressions at an alarming rate from community members, and action and advocacy is required to battle this decline.

Having worked with international students for almost a decade, I can say that the effects of the pandemic have had an immeasurable impact on international student mental health. The stressors of worrying about their families from a distance, not being able to travel home for emergencies, dealing with neo-racism, all while maintaining a full course load, have had negative effects on their well-being overall. Despite the pandemic, institutions are still bringing international students to their campuses. All faculty, staff, and fellow students need to be prepared to help support them with intentional resources and support both mentally and physically for their incoming and current international students. U.S. universities need to look past the numbers and refocus on the international student experience in order to increase their sense of belonging.

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