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The American Campus Kaleidoscope: Examining the Academic and Social Experiences of International Students

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the academic and social experience of international students in colleges in the United States of America. Specifically, the study focuses on colleges with a high percentage of international students as they represent diverse cultural backgrounds and contribute significantly to the campus environment. Data were collected from 30 participants (undergraduate students) across five focus group interviews and a thematic analysis was performed. For academic experience, four sub-themes emerged: relationship with professors, academic resources, liberal arts requirements; and class participation weightage. For social experience, four sub-themes emerged: role of student clubs and societies; inter-college collaborations; intercultural sensitivity; and religious/cultural events. Findings provide valuable implications on how colleges with a high population of international students can improve the academic and social experience of these students.

Keywords: Higher education, International Student Academic Experience, International Student Social Experience, Social Connection, College Community

Each year, higher education institutions in the United States enroll a large number of international students (Bittencourt, et al. (2021), and collect higher amount of tuition fees which is accumulated as national revenue that boosts up in the national economy of United States. It also increases cultural diversity on university campuses and promotes tolerance, equity, and inclusion among the greater community. For international students, moving to another country, while

adjusting to its cultural norms and understanding the new academic system can be challenging (Bird, 2017). Therefore, the onus lies on the college administration, faculty, and the overall college community to ensure that it is a fulfilling experience for them. Existing research has investigated the satisfaction levels of international students in American universities, however, there are gaps in the literature as far as the rich, thick descriptions of their lived experiences is concerned.

According to OECD (2008), international students are those individuals who move to another country outside their own to study and are enrolled in degree programs at higher education institutions in that country. The United States (U.S.) is one of the most popular destinations in the world for international students to pursue their higher education. During the 2020-21 academic year, U.S. colleges and universities welcomed nearly 0.91 million international students (which makes 5% of the total student body enrolled in tertiary education institutions), adding a revenue of 39 billion USD to the nation's economy (IIE, 2022).

Generally speaking, the international student population has been growing each year in the U.S. -more than 948,000 international students were enrolled in the academic year 2021-22 (Opendoors, 2022). Although there was a dip in these numbers during the COVID-19 pandemic but rapid recovery has been observed and even during the pandemic, recruiting international students remained the top-most activity for institutional internationalization (ACE, 2022). Increasing the number of international students benefits the country and its institutions in several ways. When they graduate, they contribute to the economy by becoming productive members of the labor market (Mundava & Gray, 2008). Moreover, international student enrollment provides a major financial incentive to colleges and universities as they are charged a significantly higher tuition fee as compared to their domestic counterparts (Mu, 2007). Han & Hall (2012) argue that bringing in international students helps in promoting a culturally diverse atmosphere in the campus and enriching the classroom discussions with cross-cultural, global perspectives. Therefore, it is essential to provide international students with a campus environment conducive to holistic learning, community engagement, and fulfilling social connections - ensuring the life-changing college experience they deserve.

This investigation was conducted at the business schools of five private colleges in the state of Massachusetts. These colleges welcome a vast number of international students (representing almost 75 countries from all over the world) who make up nearly one-third of their undergraduate student population. Hence, they make a suitable site for conducting research on international student experience in order to capture a wide range of perspectives, experiences and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, researching colleges with a substantial international student population is expected to enable a deeper exploration of how these students interact with peers, faculty, and the campus community, fostering cross-cultural engagement and enriching their academic and social experiences.

This study covers academic and social aspects of the international student experience at the institutional level and specifically analyzes how international students engage in the college community through participation in different sports, societies, and programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Student Experiences

Various factors determine international student experience in post-secondary education institutions. Jones (2017) has classified these factors into four main domains (termed as 'milieus' i.e. environments): a) personal, b) familial, c) institutional, and d) national. In the personal factors, a student's personality traits, individual characteristics, values, and beliefs determine what kind of college experience they have. Familial context is related to the educational level, profession and international exposure of the student's parents and/or siblings and how all these aspects affect the student's university life abroad. Examples of institutional-level factors include, but are not limited to, the college facilities, services, community life and academic / social support. Finally, the culture, economy, educational structure, and foreign policy of the student's home country determine the national context and in what ways it impacts the student experience. These factors can be related to the dimensions of personal identity development (i.e. individual, group and universal) provided by Sue et al. (2022), where personal and familial factors are associated with individual level uniqueness; and institutional and national factors correspond to group level similarities and differences.

While all the four milieus by Jones (2017) are crucial in determining the international student experience in college life, this study focuses particularly on institutional-level factors related to their academic and social experience. In doing so, it explores their group level similarities and differences as defined by in the framework provided by Sue et al. (2022).

Jones (2017) has further expanded on the different aspects among each domain based on their influence on the student's academic, pastoral and social experiences. In the institutional context, academic experience is dependent on the medium of instruction, the learning environment, ratio of international to domestic students, diversity and inclusion in the classroom, teaching methods, curriculum design, and orientation/support services etc. Pastoral or living experience is determined by geographical location of the university, residential life, dining services, campus safety, international student services, provision of financial assistance, and availability of on-campus jobs/assistantships. The social facets of an international student's life are impacted by the institution's socialization initiatives; presence of various student associations and societies pertaining to their interests; diversity, inclusion and equity on campus; and the way the institution welcomes them upon their arrival.

The Impact of Social Connection on Education

International students are interested in attending social events, engaging in cultural activities to enhance their social network and integrating in the college community (Han & Hall, 2012). Social integration of international students with their domestic counterparts and overall community inside as well as outside the institution has various short and long-term implications.

In an empirical investigation exploring the determinants of academic success of international students, Li et al. (2010) found that perceived social communication had a positive impact on academic performance. Moreover, students' social integration into the college system has a positive effect on their retention rates (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). For first-year students, Christie et al. (2004) reveal that their social network resources determine whether or not they leave the university early. It has also been demonstrated that students who are adjusted smoothly in the university culture, well-connected to peers and faculty, and are actively involved in extra-curricular activities have significantly higher chances of graduating on time (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). Most importantly, social integration positively influences a student's academic achievement (Baker & Siryk, 1999). In exploring the link between emotional intelligence and academic performance through a meta-analysis, MacCann et al. (2020) propose that fostering social relationships plays a critical role. Social capital, specifically peer and faculty support, has shown to positively contribute towards study success among university students (Brouwer et al. 2016). However, in a more recent study, Son and Cho (2020) empirically demonstrate that academic achievement of international students is not affected by social factors such as social adjustment and cultural adaptation. Hence, extant literature highlights the role of student's involvement in the college community in enhancing their academic performance.

Apart from the educational outcomes, community engagement among students also improves their soft skills, which in turn enhances their career preparedness (Selvaratnam, 2013). Furthermore, research evidence suggests that participation in extra-curricular activities has positive implications on students' emotional well-being (Guilmette et al., 2019), as it breeds social connectedness. Liu & Liu (2000) suggest that social integration into university life in terms of the communal value of extra-curricular activities; friendliness in the campus environment; close connections with faculty; helpfulness of staff; participation in cultural events; and involvement in sports and recreational programs, tends to enhance student satisfaction with their overall academic experience. Being part of different social groups is an essential component of international students' learning experience which ultimately leads them towards global citizenship (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009).

The extant literature could benefit from a rich description of the lived experiences of a diverse body of international students in understanding their academic and social experiences (Ammigan & Drexler, 2022; Martirosyan et al., 2018). The current body of research fails to address how and why participation in different social events, activities, and societies positively influences international student satisfaction. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic forced

universities to adapt to new ways of teaching, learning, and assessment; and has brought about significant changes in the way universities operate. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the impact these drastic transformations had on international students' academic and social experiences.

METHOD

This study was conducted to understand the academic and social experiences of international students at American higher education institutions (with a high international student population) and gather their recommendations on how these institutions can make improvements to enhance their (and future international students') experience. Data were collected through focus group interviews using semi-structured questions. This particular methodology helps in the collection of rich, thick qualitative data describing the lived experience of the subjects (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), which cannot be captured fully through quantitative surveys or highly structured questionnaires. Since this is an exploratory study, interview questions were designed in such a way that allows flexibility to the respondents in openly sharing their opinions, feelings, and thoughts (Merriam, 2002).

Data Collection

For this purpose, 584 undergraduate international students in various student leadership positions were approached through the international offices of the selected institutions for participation in the study. Out of these, 42 students signed up to appear in the focus group interviews. Participants were provided an incentive of a \$10 coffee gift card upon successful completion of the study. Among the students who signed up, 30 students joined the focus group sessions. Hence, the overall participation rate was 5.13%. Compared to similar qualitative studies such as Bird (2017) and O'Reilly et al. (2013), this is a relatively low participation rate. It could be because the study was conducted right after COVID related restrictions were eased in the US. As the international students were already finding it difficult to navigate the post-COVID academic environment, involvement in research interviews may not be a priority for them. Moreover, since we approached students involved in leadership positions, they may have found it challenging to manage time for participation in this study. Five interviews (each of one hour duration) were conducted over the course of two weeks; three were held online and two were carried out in person. Informed consent was taken from the participants prior to the interview and they were ensured of anonymity and confidentiality at all stages of the research.

Survey Collection

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the participants. Out of the total participants, 11 were male (36.7%) and 19 were female (63.3%) students. These students were in different stages of their program including junior, senior and

sophomore years. Freshmen year students were not approached due to the consideration that their program had only begun and there would be limited experiences in this short period for them to share.

Table 1 Demographic Information

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	11	36.7
Female	19	63.3
<i>Nationality</i>		
Indian	5	16.7%
Chinese	4	13.3%
Ukrainian	4	13.3%
Nepalese	3	10.0%
Pakistani	3	10.0%
Turkish	2	6.7%
Brazilian	2	6.7%
Rwandan	1	3.3%
Vietnamese	3	10.0%
Canadian	2	6.7%
Costa Rican	1	3.3%
<i>Academic Year</i>		
Sophomore	12	40.0
Junior	10	33.3
Senior	8	26.7

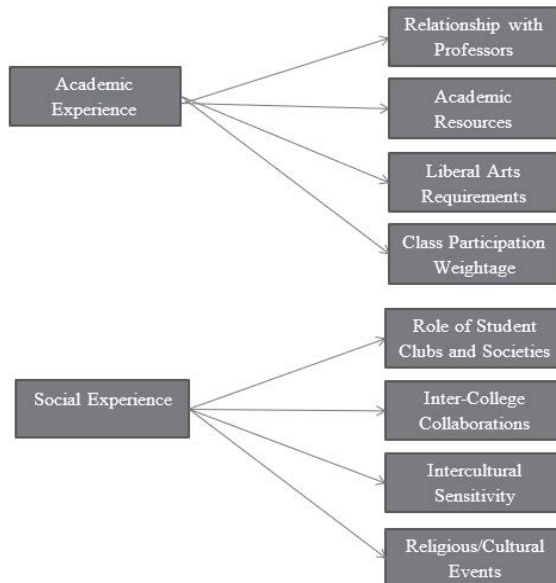
The students were asked the following questions related to their academic and social experience at their institution:

1. How would you describe your overall learning experience at your institution?
2. What, according to you, are some of the strengths/weaknesses of your academic program?
3. How would you describe your level of social engagement with the college community?
4. How have you been involved in this student leadership position? What was the motivation behind it?
5. How do you think this role helps you in being connected with the college community?

6. Could you share an occasion/event/activity when you felt particularly more engaged with other students/faculty / staff of the college?
7. What could the college do to improve your academic experience as an international student?
8. What could the college do to improve your social experience as an international student?

For data analysis, the conversations in the interviews were electronically recorded with the permission of the participants. Once all the focus group interviews were completed, the researchers carefully transcribed the data using the recordings. Thematic Analysis, a method aimed at recognizing, examining, and delineating patterns within data (Braun & Clark, 2006), was utilized to explore the data. Initially, the researchers engaged in multiple readings of the data to gain familiarity and develop preliminary impressions. Coding and theme development commenced, focusing on two primary areas: academic experiences and social experiences. While these codes provided a starting point for organizing the information, the researchers remained open to unforeseen codes and themes emerging from the data through inductive reasoning. The initial codes were reviewed and refined to establish a coding framework, which was then applied to all data. To ensure the credibility and reliability of the data analysis process, relevant quotations were selected from each theme to substantiate and reinforce the findings. The themes are provided in Figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1: THEMATIC ANALYSIS



THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The participants demonstrated a general contentment towards their academic and social experiences in their colleges. They were satisfied with the quality of education and the opportunities for social engagement. As shown in Figure 1, the initial themes were 'Academic experiences' and 'Social experiences'. Eight sub-themes emerged from the data. 'Academic experiences' included: relationship with professors, academic resources, liberal arts requirements and class participation weightage. 'Social experiences' incorporated role of student clubs and societies; inter-college collaborations; intercultural sensitivity and religious/cultural events.

International Student Academic Experience

Broadly speaking, the participants of this study showed a high level of satisfaction with their academic experiences in the colleges.. They highlighted the invaluable support provided by their professors, emphasizing the significance of personal connections in their academic journey. Students also appreciated how professors' professional experiences bridge theory and practice, effectively preparing them to enter the industry. Moreover, access to various academic resources seemed to have a transformative effect on their learning experience. In terms of liberal arts requirements, students had mixed views based on their varying individual needs. Finally, they discussed about the high weightage given to class participation and how it is a challenge for them to cope with it.

Relationship with professors

Students were generally satisfied with the guidance and support which they received from their professors making the transition from secondary to post-secondary education in a new geographical context easier. Those who came from a high-power distance culture (e.g. Turkey, Pakistan, India, and China) appreciated the up-close and personal relationship they could have with their professors unlike in their home countries. As one student pointed out: "The curriculum is made for students. Our professors really care about our education. This makes the change really easy for us"

Moreover, one aspect that particularly stood out in all the interviews was that the reportedly vast professional experience of the faculty was greatly helpful in enhancing student's academic experience as they gained valuable insights from the industry rather than just theoretical knowledge. Most of the participants said that they are being provided with hands-on learning opportunities which make the course work exciting and engaging for them. As such, these students welcomed the shift from 'mechanistic' traditional teaching practices in their secondary education to experiential, visual, team and project-based approach in university. One student commented:

I really enjoy working in projects with my class fellows. It's such a fun way to learn new things. I love that it's all hands-on and they have built

the curriculum for students. The best part is that we don't have to cram everything like we did [back home].

However, some students who took online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic felt that the professors were not prepared for the virtual teaching environment and due to restricted faculty-student interaction at that time, they suffered substantial learning gaps. According to a participant, "Taking classes during COVID was tough - honestly, teachers weren't ready for it. It felt like we were all figuring things out as we went along. Online learning made it harder to focus and it was so tiring.

Academic Resources

There was a wide consensus among all the participants about the reportedly vast variety of academic resources the colleges provide to their international students. About the writing center, one student mentioned, "The writing center was a great help for me! My writing skills were basic when I came but now I have improved a lot". Furthermore, the peer mentoring initiative for all programs was particularly popular with many students as an experienced senior student guided them through the process. Newsletter was also pointed out as an effective way for most of them to keep updated about events and activities in college. For many, the concept of academic advisor was relatively new and they found it to be helpful in navigating through the early years of college.

Unfortunately, all the students who started their program during COVID-19 pandemic were not apprised of these resources thoroughly by the college as they had an online orientation due to which they could not make the best use of them. In a student's words: "I started the program during COVID so I was unable to know about these resources. College should have made extra effort in communicating about these resources to international students without assuming that they might already know"

Liberal Arts Requirement

The next important issue brought up by most of the participants was their college's approach towards the path to concentration - where the students are required to take a substantial number of liberal arts subjects before they can opt for courses related to their specialization. Students had mixed opinions regarding this as some considered it necessary to gain ample knowledge about a wide variety of topics to make an informed decision related to their concentration. On the other hand, a few students thought that they were spending too much time, energy, and effort to study all those not-so-relevant courses instead of focusing on their specialization. In the words of one student: "It is a great path towards concentration by giving two years of different courses and choice of classes". Whereas, another student opined: "The college could reduce liberal art requirements as no space or time is left for classes of concentration or interest"

This appears to be an individual preference; for students who are sure about their concentration, studying other unrelated courses may seem as a

distraction from their path. One participant who was only interested in studying finance mentioned:

I'm focused on finance because it's my passion and career goal. Why should I be forced to study subjects that won't help me in the future? It's so annoying. Why not add more electives related to finance? That would really help me achieve my goals.

However, for those who have not determined their concentration so far, it is a good idea to explore multiple fields before they can discover what they are passionate about. In the words of another student:

The liberal arts requirements are really good for me. Right now, I'm not sure about my plans. I really like marketing but I'm interested in sociology too. I feel I should study more [of these subjects] to decide about my concentration.

Class Participation Weightage

The high weightage – as much as 40% in some courses - given to class participation (i.e. actively speaking up during classroom discussions) was a concern for some students coming from more traditional educational backgrounds as opposed to US-based high school or IB (International Baccalaureate). In traditional education systems, the teaching style is teacher-centric where teachers deliver lectures more like a monologue and there is little room for class discussion. For students coming from that background, it seems difficult to start participating in class conversations as soon as they entered college. –Also, it was pointed out by a few that language barrier was one of the main reasons why students from non-English speaking countries could not effectively engage in classroom interactions. In the words of one participant:

Participation is too high weightage. Some people are shy, class is too diverse and the accent is different. Not everyone can raise their hands and start talking in the new environment... and if you don't say the right thing, the class will make fun of you

Apart from the major themes presented above, some minor themes also emerged during the focus group discussions with the participants. One of these was a concern related to the Grade Point Average (GPA) system. It was new for most of the international students starting college, which made it was really difficult for them to understand and get used to it. For this reason, many of them had low GPAs in their freshmen year at college. According to a participant: “We were not guided about the GPA system when we started college. It didn't make sense to us and we lost grades initially. It would have been better if it were part of orientation”.

Second, the local versus global debate was also touched upon. Some participants highly valued the college's efforts in teaching students how to start an entrepreneurial venture in the US market. Conversely, other participants were of

the view that the curriculum is too US focused, in that they cannot apply the concepts in the context of their own country. One of the participants had a more balanced perspective: "It's good to see that courses related to other countries are being added in advanced semesters which were not present in the first year."

International Student Social Experience

Study participants feel that, in general, there are several opportunities for international students to be socially engaged at their college campuses. Specifically, various student societies, clubs and organizations helped them connect with the college community. Next, students emphasized on the need for inter-college collaborations as they desired to interact with their peers from other institutions. Students had different opinions regarding intercultural engagement in enhancing their social experience. Finally, it was highlighted that religious and cultural events organized by the colleges were the most popular among students as they tend to increase social cohesion.

Role of Student Clubs and Societies:

Most students agreed that different clubs, organizations, and social events greatly help them connect to the college community. According to them, the colleges make an extra effort to engage students in leadership positions by incentivizing them to participate in extra-curricular activities as it is instrumental in developing their resumes. Such community-oriented initiatives make a significant difference, by providing them with an opportunity to learn about the lives and perspectives of other cultures; express their ideas in a better way, and promote a relaxing atmosphere at the campus. Summing up their social experience, a student said: "Our college provides a good platform to socialize as it is a close-knit community and at the end of the program, most people get to know each other".

Working in student organization gives students a chance to get in contact with other clubs for various activities on campus. They are able to meet new people they would not have met otherwise. Most participants argue that these college societies provide a safe, informal space for different social groups to get together and engage in recreational activities. They describe how small size societies promoted intimate interaction with other members, supported them in classes, and helped finding common interests. While, a few pointed out that some clubs are so big that they feel like an academic institution in themselves and it becomes difficult to openly communicate in such forums. One college has a program where it offers need-based scholarships to a small group of highly talented students with exceptional academic achievements. Talking about being a global scholar, a junior shared the following:

This role really helped me connect with many students at college. We became good friends, traveled together and helped with each other's problems. I got to interact with a diverse set of people. Most importantly, I was able to support those who were struggling, such as first-generation students

However, during COVID-19, some students commented that they had become introverted as classes were online and they missed out on a whole year of social interactions. Social media did fill in the gap to an extent but the experience of in-person social relationships cannot be matched. One student narrated:

I started college during COVID – that made it hard to socialize. Everything was online, so I missed out on all the hangouts and chats. Just staring at screens all day. It was tough to bond or feel like part of the gang. Couldn't even join clubs or do any fun stuff.

Inter-College Collaborations:

While all the students had a generally positive experience with student clubs, associations and organizations within the college, most of them expressed the lack of inter-college collaborations in this regard. They commented that such student-led societies could greatly benefit from partnering with similar associations in other colleges. For fields that are not the specializations of their college, joining hands with other schools could add great value through their expertise and experience. One student pointed out:

I'm really interested in computers and tech but my college doesn't have a society for computer geeks. I know of other colleges that have such cool computer clubs. It would be awesome if we find a way to connect with those clubs. We could learn a lot together.

Most participants seemed enthusiastic about attending events and participating in activities at other colleges. Some mentioned that being far away from their friends and family in their home country, they feel the need for inter-college collaborations more than their domestic peers. However, transportation was a major hindrance in connecting them to those institutions because of the geographical location of their campuses. Since they do not have personal vehicles nor the extra finances, they suggested that the university should provide them access to different colleges in nearby cities. One student reflected:

I get so excited whenever I hear about some concert or sports activity happening in another college close to my campus. I could make new friends and it would be a nice change to visit another college. But it's so disappointing – there is no easy way to get there.

Intercultural Engagement:

In terms of intercultural engagement on campus, students had diverse opinions and individual factors such as ethnicity, personality type (extraversion/introversion), locus of control (external/internal) and time spent in college etc. Some students observed that there isn't as much social cohesion among international and domestic students as one might expect, whereas others believed that the onus is on the individual to get out of their comfort zone and expand their social circle. A global scholar commented that international students normally interact with the same nationality as theirs but different clubs and associations help them socialize with other nationalities too. Some disclosed

that initially, they did not want to connect with students from their own or a similar culture as they desired to have a more diverse circle of friends. However, different nationalities - like Indians, Turkish and Mexicans - have their separate groups which are hard to get into for other cultures. As a result, they wished that there were more people from their community to form a group, or there was greater inter-cultural mixing on campus. According to one of those:

When I came here, I only wanted to make friends from other nationalities. I felt [that] this is what I'm here for – to interact with people from different cultures. But that changed really soon because everyone had their own groups and I felt left out. I also wanted a group with my people

One participant from Eastern Europe on a need-based scholarship shared their struggle with communication due to cultural differences, xenophobia and, under-privileged economic background. Due to this, they are not able to develop deep interpersonal relationships with their American class fellows and their interactions are only superficial. Even if they have American friends, they would either be first-generation, low-income or immigrants, showing that they need some element of similarity to connect with them. One student described their inter-cultural socializing: “I do not confine to my ethnicity only. It is nice to interact with other cultures and backgrounds – that is why we are here and our college provides an opportunity to do that.”

Religious/Cultural Events:

Students provided interesting responses when talking about the event or activity which made them feel more connected to the community in college. Most of them indicated that events related to religious and cultural festivals where they get a chance to bond over food were their favorite ones. They explained that participating in these events allows them to connect with others who share their identity, creating a sense of belonging and solidarity. Some of them felt that such festivals are occasions for celebration and joy, providing them with an opportunity to break away from the routine of academic life and come together in a spirit of festivity. One participant remarked:

A few days back, our college celebrated Diwali. I really loved the vibes of the event. The place was all lit up with colorful lights and vibrant music. And the food was simply amazing. 120 students from different cultures showed up – it was great connecting with them

Some participants mentioned that these events provide great opportunities to meet students from other departments and classes. As a diverse body of students attends such occasions, there are higher chances of finding people with similar interests. A few participants disclosed that they had successfully established meaningful friendships during these gatherings, maintaining long-lasting connections with those peers over an extended period.

The international student office hosted a barbecue party last month, and it was a blast! We all enjoyed a lot. It was great meeting so many new people from the campus and we started friendships that we could keep up with later on.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the academic and social experiences of international students at five colleges in the US that take pride in the diversity and strength of their international student body. Students provided their feedback, gave specific examples to support their arguments and gave recommendations for further improvement of the services provided by their international student offices. In summary, a vast majority of the study participants demonstrated high satisfaction levels with their college's efforts in providing an effective learning environment, and initiatives to enhance social cohesion at campus.

Academic Experience

The study participants came from different nationalities and based on that, their academic and social experiences differed from each other. This signifies that international students are not a monolithic, homogenous group and that differences in nationality are but one significant marker of their diversity. Apart from nationality, these students had varying career goals; distinct personalities; and unique individual needs. Based on these differences, they had multiple viewpoints on the various aspects of their academic and social experiences. Therefore, an important finding of this research is that understanding the nuanced perspectives and diverse backgrounds of international students is essential for effectively analyzing their experiences in college.

Students were highly appreciative of the constant support they received from the professors and having a personal connection with them made a significant positive contribution in their learning experience. This is in line with the research conducted by Hill, Lomas, and MacGregor (2003) related to students' perception of high-quality education where they concluded that some of the traits of effective professors include being empathetic, helpful, supportive and encouraging. Smith (2020) also highlights the critical role played by faculty in enhancing the learning experience of international students in terms of academic support; diversity and inclusion; and positive learning environments etc. Additionally, interviewees entailed how the professional experience of the college professors helped them apply the taught concepts to actual business practice, making them feel more confident and prepared to enter the labor market. An experimental study on four U.S. universities by Tindall & Waters (2016) reinforces this claim as it argues that students give high weightage to professors' industry connectivity when evaluating their teaching performance.

Students mentioned the critical role played by the college resources (e.g. writing center, newsletter, peer mentoring, funding guidelines) in enhancing their learning process. It is particularly striking for international students from the Global South because of a lack of such resources in the country of their

origin. Most universities and colleges in these geographical regions do not have enough funding to invest in providing such services and academic support to the students (Hayward, 2008). Arambewela & Hall (2008) also demonstrated that Asian students highly value resources such as counseling services; access to computer facilities; and availability of modern technology in Australian universities because institutions in their home countries have capacity constraints. Similarly, Sabateyeva et al. (2018) reveal that computer and laboratory facilities obtained the highest level of perceived quality among international students from Central Asian background. This shows that international students from developing nations greatly benefit from the different services provided by colleges in developed countries as these are not widely available in their home countries.

In terms of the high weightage given to class participation in most of the courses, participants raised strong concerns as they were not used to this practice back in their country. In the college teaching literature, class participation carries great significance as it serves many purposes such as accountability; learner involvement; and stimulating thinking in terms of recalling information and systematically laying out ideas (Jones, 2008). However, Tatar (2005) argued that silence can also be a communication strategy used by certain students in the class where they are mentally alert while following the conversation and respecting the teacher's authority by not interrupting the flow of the lecture. In such instances, it cannot be assumed that students are being silent due to lack of knowledge or interest. Therefore, the assessment of class participation could also include other forms of student engagement other than active involvement in class discussions.

Social Experience

Participants demonstrated a general contentment with their social experience at their college owing to the international diversity the campus offers; new interpersonal connections through student organizations and societies; and opportunities to socialize in social events. Hence, the findings support Liu & Liu (2000) in their argument explaining how involvement in various cultural and social extracurricular activities increases students' satisfaction.

Students who attended semesters online during COVID-19 pandemic discussed the considerable social isolation they experienced as they missed the face-to-face interaction with their class fellows. This is in line with results from the study on university students from Democritus University of Thrace, Greece by Kedraka & Kaltsidisi (2020), where among all aspects of college life, students missed the social interaction with other students and teachers the most. As the pandemic-related restrictions have ended and campuses are back to in-person teaching, it is expected that students will regain their social engagement.

In terms of intercultural engagement, students showed a non-uniform pattern where some openly interacted with all nationalities and some were more specific about which nationalities they socialized with. It can be reasonably deduced that personal preferences, cultural background and individual traits

determine the breadth of their social cohesion with other cultures. In a meta-analysis on international undergraduates, Wekullo (2019) also concluded that student engagement varies depending on their region, background, field of specialization and type of institution.

Some participants described instances reflecting a lack of intercultural sensitivity and racial inclusion in certain practices of their college, which negatively impacts their social connections and involvement in social organizations/events. Evidence from empirical research by Van Horne et al. (2018) also suggests that perceived discrimination among international students adversely affects their social relations in the college and decreases their participation in campus activities.

Lastly, it can be observed that academic and social domains do not operate in silos because students shared that being in teams or study sessions for course assignments helped them connect with their peers by having common problems and solving them. Similarly, working in different student organizations facilitated them to reach out to their seniors who guided them in their studies and assisted them with internships/placements. Therefore, academics also promote social integration and socialization aids in academic success and career growth.

Implications and Conclusions

There were some limitations of this study. In a qualitative investigation, researchers depend on the participants' comments (Queirós et al., 2017), which are a reflection of the individual's interpretation of an event or activity rather than objective views. The researchers did not directly observe students - they were dependent on the students' (subjective) opinions. However, one is to also acknowledge that a qualitative study does not aim to generalize its findings but to gain deeper insight into the perspectives of the participants. Nevertheless, future studies could benefit from including other research methods such as participant observation or experiments, to further substantiate the findings.

Another limitation is that this study only included colleges with a high proportion of international students. Since all colleges in the US do not have this high percentage of international students, the study findings are limited to colleges with similar demographics. Therefore, future investigations could benefit from studying colleges with lower numbers of international students as the academic and social experiences are expected to be different there.

Based on their strategic positioning as institutions specifically catering to international students, these colleges are taking valuable initiatives to provide a favorable academic and social experience to their international student population. Students at such colleges are highly satisfied with the academic resources they could use at college, and the support they receive from their highly qualified and professionally experienced teachers. To further improve international students' learning experience, the colleges could develop a system that incorporates student feedback more effectively in curriculum design, assessment methodology, grading system, etc. For the social experience,

international students have varying levels of engagement and connection with the community. Nevertheless, creating more spaces for inter-college collaborations; fostering cultural sensitivity among faculty and students along with creating a more inclusive environment could go a long way.

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