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International Students' Acculturation Experience in the United States: Perceptions of the Role of International Students' Engagement in Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT: *International students constitute a significant and growing population within higher education institutions worldwide. These students leave their home countries to pursue academic opportunities abroad, seeking to broaden their horizons, enhance their skills, and experience new cultures. This qualitative study employed in-depth interviews to examine the acculturation process of these students and how they perceived the support services universities provide, and its impact on academic and social adjustment. The findings suggest that international students have a positive and mixed perception, regarding the role the Office of International Engagement (OIE) play in facilitating their acculturative process in a host culture.*

Keywords: international students' acculturation, office of international engagement, support mechanisms, U.S. higher education

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INTRODUCTION

The enrolment of international students in United States (U.S.) higher education institutions has significantly increased in recent decades (Institute of International Education, 2012). The total number of international students at U.S colleges and universities are more than 1.1 million, representing a 7% increase compared to the previous academic year (Institute of International Education, 2024). However, a new analysis of Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) visa data shows that international enrolments in the US have declined by 11%, resulting in an estimated economic impact of up to US\$4 billion (ICEF Monitor, 2025). According to Buckner et al. (2022), North America attracts more international students because it has attractive study destinations and top-notch educational systems, and the status associated with its degrees. Cubillos and Ilvento (2012) explained that when international students studying abroad interact with people from the host country, it can positively influence how confident they feel about navigating new cultural situations. In support of this, Engberg et al. (2016) found that when students step out of their comfort zones, by immersing themselves in the host culture, trying new habits and behaviors, and engaging with local residents outside the classroom, it strengthens their overall global learning experience. International students are usually the top performers in their home countries and are often considered experts in their respective fields of study (Marcketti et al., 2006). The increasing number of international students has cultural influences on the United States (Wang et al., 2022). International students not only enhance the diversity and academic reputation of American universities, but they also provide opportunities for domestic students to benefit from the increased cultural diversity on their campuses (Carnevale, 1999). For example, American domestic students can gain a deeper understanding of cultural sensitivities and develop stronger communication skills through working with international students (Calleja, 2000; Perry, 2016). In addition, they help the faculty and students to develop their cultural sensitivities and skills in working with people from different backgrounds. International students provide opportunities for American faculty, students, and U.S. society to experience different languages, cultures, and traditions (Wu et al., 2015).

Research shows that these students undergo a complex, dynamic, and multidimensional process of acculturation (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). An important aspect of students' process of acculturation is their patterns of social interactions and their ability to establish meaningful relationships within their new communities. These interactions are mediated by students' ability to communicate and participate in social activities (Gallagher, 2013). Higher education scholars and practitioners have actively focused on developing strategies to support international students and assist them in successfully adjusting to American higher education and their respective communities. As a result, research on international student adjustment has increased and explored a wider range of factors that can either hinder or enhance their experiences in a new culture (Krsmanovic, 2020). For example, the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) experience of international students can be unique because the

online information sources they use in their home countries may differ from what they encounter on their new campus (Chang & Gomes, 2017).

In addition to ICT experience, language barriers and cultural differences can affect how some students adjust to online learning (Beckstein, 2020; Liu et al., 2010; Peters et al., 2020) and to the academic advising and support services offered virtually (Liu & Ammigan, 2024). Liu and Ammigan (2024) also argued that ICTs can help improve the quality of learning. Contemporary research in this field is still limited in one crucial aspect.

Although a substantial amount of information is available regarding the social and cultural adjustment of international students, there is a scarcity of evidence specifically addressing the perceptions of international students regarding the role of the international engagement office in facilitating the acculturation process of foreign nationals in higher education institutions.

Present Study

The existing literature on the acculturation of international students highlights the challenges international students encounter, and the support mechanisms and resources provided by educational institutions, particularly through designated offices such as the Office of International Engagement (OIE). However, there are limited studies on how much international students are aware of and utilize these services in facilitating their cultural adjustment and integration within the university community. There is limited knowledge on how international students perceive international student engagement, and the activities of these designated offices in facilitating their acculturation processes. Therefore, this study seeks to fill these gaps by answering the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the primary challenges faced by international students in their acculturation process?
- RQ2: What type of support do international students receive from international student engagement?
- RQ3: How do international students perceive the Office of International Engagement activities in facilitating their acculturation process?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Acculturation

According to Berry (2006), “Acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological change that results from the continuing contact between people of different cultural backgrounds” (p. 27). This contact results in intergroup phenomena that are rich and complex (Brown & Gaertner, 2008). Most of these situations result in the development of societies that have more than one cultural, linguistic, or religious entity living in them and have made communities culturally plural (Berry, 2006). A culturally plural society is one in which several different cultural or ethnic groups reside together within a shared social and political

framework (Skelton & Allen, 1999). The different groups of people that make up plural societies include indigenous peoples, immigrants, sojourners and ethnocultural communities.

Berry (2006) asserts that immigrants in a host culture comprise indigenous peoples who have “always been there” in the sense that their roots go way back, and there is no evidence of any earlier people whose descendants are still in the population. These indigenous groups have formed distinct communities and often maintain a strong connection to their cultural heritage. While immigrants typically become permanent members of their new society, sojourners are only there temporarily, fulfilling various roles and serving specific purposes (Kim, 2001). For instance, they may be international students, diplomats, business executives, aid workers, or guest workers (Berry, 2006).

Challenges Faced by International Students

International students in America encounter numerous obstacles that hinder their successful integration into host communities (Gomez et al., 2014). Research has recorded barriers for students with the unfamiliarity with American culture representing the most prevalent struggle (Andrade, 2005; Kim et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2015). International students’ acculturative stress has been attributed to varied aspects of their personal, social, and academic lives (Krsmanovic, 2020). This phenomenon includes miscommunication, difficulties adapting to the host country’s cultural practices, and misunderstanding of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships in the host culture (Leong, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). International students who are unable to form friendships with members of the host culture often experience self-segregation, social isolation, and feelings of loneliness (Leong, 2015; Wu et al., 2015). Chaliawala et al. (2025) also added that factors such as demographic characteristics, academic stressors, and cultural differences impact the psychological well-being of international students in the U.S. Students perceive their host communities as having a limited understanding of cultural diversity, leading to stress acculturation (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008). Some people associate students’ acculturative stress with perceptions of discrimination, discomfort around others, and guilt for not fitting in (Zhang & Yung, 2018).

Acculturative stress refers to the decline in mental health and overall well-being experienced by ethnic minorities as they navigate the challenges of adapting to a new culture (Lueck & Wilson, 2010). The acculturation process encompasses different stages of modification, survival, adaptation, domination, resistance, and stress (Berry, 2006; Nwadiora & McAdoo, 1996). Acculturative stress can lead to adjustment-related difficulties, expressed in negative reactions between two cultures (Berry, 1998; Smart & Smart, 1995; Thomas & Choi, 2006). Berry et al. (1987) aver that education is a consistent predictor of acculturative stress. This supports Mesidor and Sly’s (2016) argument that many international students experience anxiety when it comes to registering for classes and commencing their studies in a host culture. The primary source of this anxiety stems from the lack of information about the curriculum, and credit systems in the host university or

college, the disparity in the registration process between their home country's academic institutions and the institutions they are attending in a foreign country (Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

Apart from education, linguistic factors have a significant impact on international students' acculturative stress (Lueck & Wilson, 2010). International students face language barriers, limited communication skills, difficulties in understanding complex sentence structures used by certain professors, struggles in grasping American slang expressions used in lectures, obstacles in collaborating with peers on group projects, unease in participating in open-ended class discussions, listening comprehension and oral proficiency (Kuo, 2011; Roy, 2013). Ammigan et al. (2023) affirmed that international students' adjustment experiences are interconnected, where psychological adjustment is often hindered by a lack of meaningful relationships stemming from language barriers or cultural differences. These linguistic challenges directly impact their academic performance and overall institutional experience. Ammigan and Drexler (2021) argued that there is a relationship between international students' academic performance and their satisfaction across four dimensions of the institutional experience: arrival, learning, living, and support services. The authors revealed that academic performance, measured by grade point average (GPA), has an established association with support services and the learning environment international students encounter in U.S. universities. In addition to linguistic factors, Bayati et al. (2025) highlighted that international students lack adequate informational resources prior to arriving, upon arriving on campus, and even post arrival, sowing anxiety, frustration, and consuming immense time and energy in their efforts to access reliable guidance; and this impedes their transition, leading to stress.

Strategies of International Students Engagement *International Engagement Office*

The significant increase in international students' enrollment in higher education has resulted in the need to establish measures to accommodate international students and help them integrate into the academic environment of the host country. This is congruent with Wekullo (2019), who highlighted that higher education institutions have strived to enhance engagement with international students. In doing so, institutions have implemented strategies such as departments responsible for overseeing engagement with international students from when they are admitted into their respective programs until their degree completion (Qadee et al., 2021).

These departments vary across institutions in terms of structure and function, and they are commonly referred to as the International Student Office, Office of International Engagement, International Students and Support Services (ISSS). Previous studies on structures of international student support offices showed that the office is responsible for supporting international engagement on campus and these offices exist in various higher education institutions in the US, UK, and Australia (Ammigan & Jones, 2018; Briggs & Ammigan, 2017). According to

Veerasamy and Ammigan (2022), these units oversee the monitoring of international students to ensure compliance with federal laws, immigration regulations, and adjusting to campus culture (Osfield et al. as cited in Veerasamy & Ammigan, 2022).

These designated offices work collaboratively with other student affairs departments across campus such as career services, health and wellness, recreation, residence, and housing (Jones, 2013) to ensure academic success, mental well-being, and social adjustments. This perspective builds on Rudra's (2025) argument that as international graduate students become more acculturated in the host culture, their attitudes toward seeking professional mental health support tend to become more favorable. According to Briggs and Ammigan (2017), "The ISSS office plays a leadership role in organizing activities that make connections to members of the wider community" (p. 1089). Some of these are coordinating significant holiday events such as Thanksgiving and St. Patrick's Day, in addition to field trips to historical destinations or areas.

Support and Resources for International Students

Recognizing the challenges international students encounter in their acculturation process and transition into their academic journeys, institutions strive to provide support and resources to facilitate students' transition. Several studies have examined the various support mechanisms higher education institutions have implemented specifically for international students.

According to Martirosyan et al. (2019), support services for international students can be categorized as academic, social, financial, and legal. Academic support encompasses academic advising, professional development, and workshops, as well as English Language support programs to facilitate students' success. Marinenko (2021) found that while some professors acknowledged international students' challenges and provided them with academic assistance, some professors refrained from offering extra support to international students during their academic endeavors, as they believed that the expectations for both international and domestic students should be uniform. Baldwin (2023) highlights the vital role of providing guidance and mentorship to support the academic success and cross-cultural adjustment of international students. Mentorship programs will empower international students to thrive academically and also foster a sense of belonging and resilience, as they navigate the complex process of adjusting to their host environment. Martirosyan et al. (2019) highlighted that some institutions offer cultural adjustment programs and counseling services to promote a sense of belongingness, which enable international students to integrate into their campus community. Other support systems include financial aid and scholarships, and legal assistance on visa and immigration regulation compliance.

Council for the Advancements of Standards in Higher Education (2018) supported this view, stating that the international student support (ISS) office exists to provide advising and support services necessary for students to achieve their educational goals. Generally, ISS offices at U.S. institutions are tasked with two main areas of responsibilities: (1) ensuring compliance with U.S. government

regulations and reporting requirements; and (2) providing advisory services and resources that help students acculturate and transition to their new university environment (Darbi & Ammigan, 2024). However, the role of ISS staff has become more complex in recent years due to changing immigration policies and compliance standards; this has resulted in expectations to collaborate frequently with other student affairs and services personnel to support and engage with international students (American Council on Education, 2016). Examples of campus wide collaborations include programming with the career and counseling centers, residence halls, dining facilities, and multicultural centers to address the needs of international students (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2018; Darbi & Ammigan, 2024).

Another type of support is mental health services. Sakız and Jencius (2024) argue that mental health support services are crucial for promoting the well-being of international students and it must be made accessible to foreign students, because of the challenges associated with their adjustments to new cultures. These challenges include academic and psychological stress, stereotypes, and other related barriers. According to Marangell and Baik (2022), international students recommended that universities should increase mental health education and appointment slots for counseling sessions. Maximizing mental health and education and appointment slots for counseling enable international students to get access to mental health resources in higher education institutions. However, international students are unable to navigate such support services due to challenges such as frustration with healthcare insurance, which Carmack et al. (2016) mentioned in their study.

Also, orientation programs are classified as one of the support mechanisms that address the outlined challenges of international student in a foreign environment. Orientation is the initial and common support workshop for newly admitted international students who have entered the host country. As students move to their host countries, comprehensive orientation programs are carried out for international students to familiarize them with campus resources, academic expectations, and cultural norms to help in their transition and adjustment to the new environment (Arthur, 2017; Balarabe, 2022).

Universities also provide resources to help international students develop relationships with host nationals and other international students. Arthur (2017) studied social resources to support international students and categorized these resources into academic faculty, counselors, and local students. The academic resources noted above include the faculty members who mentor, teach, and supervise international students by guiding their academic performance, research opportunities, and career advice to help them achieve their academic and career goals, and the counselors provide support for students to manage their psychosocial demands. Beyond these, Arthur (2017) explained that international students should be supported in their transition to their new cultural environment by connecting them with local students through mentorship programs, campus activities, and peer interactions to facilitate social integration and cross-cultural interactions for these students. These efforts can help international students build

relationships with local students, feel connected to the campus community, and enhance their overall educational experience.

METHOD

Participants

Participants for this study were international students in an R2 institution located in the midwestern United States. There were eight participants in this study, all of whom were international graduate students. Thus: males ($n = 2$) and females ($n = 6$). The study aimed for 12 interview participants - the minimum threshold of saturation or redundancy (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Fugard & Potts, 2015; Guest et al., 2006), but could not satisfy this requirement because of the time constraints on researchers, and students conflicting class schedule. However, Wuest (2012) argues that using 8-12 interview participants depends on the richness and variation in the data. According to Strand et al. (2003), the experience and background of participants are more important than the sample size. Also, using eight international graduate students for this study was appropriate, because these students have different cultural orientations, and have direct experiences with the host environment.

The researchers employed purposive and snowball samplings to recruit study participants. This approach included an email invitation to international students within the researchers' network. Drawing from Tracy (2020), some participants were individually contacted and asked if they were willing to participate in the study.

Data Collection

The primary method used for this research was qualitative in-depth interviews lasting 30-45 minutes. Interviews were appropriate for this study because they allowed open-ended responses (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019), which enabled students to clearly express themselves, providing deeper insights into their acculturative experiences. Participants responded to semi-structured interview questions. Because of participants' availability and convenience, interviews were conducted virtually on Zoom. We informed participants about the study's purpose as the Institutional Review Board has approved the study. Participants were informed of how data would be collected and that their participation was voluntary. After this, participants indicated their verbal consent at the beginning of the interview.

Data Analysis

We used an inductive approach to analyze the data through a thematic lens because the study was not theory driven. The inductive approach to analyzing the data allowed themes to emanate from the data itself. All recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word. We reviewed each transcription, while simultaneously listening to the recordings, ensuring the accuracy and validity of the data. The data analysis followed three operations: (1)

coding (Glasser & Strauss, 1967); (2) unitizing (Guetzkow, 1950; Krippendorff, 1995); and (3) categorizing (Guetzkow, 1950).

During the coding process, we used Microsoft Word color schemes to identify initial conceptual codes and ideas. At this stage, we re-read the interview data with an eye toward “international students challenges,” “international students support systems,” “international students’ perception of the Office of International Engagement,” and “the impact of support mechanisms on students’ acculturative stress.” During the unitizing process, we looked for similar codes and allowed patterns and themes to emerge. Also, in this phase, we made explicit connections such as “students’ challenges lead to seeking support, influencing their perception of OIE, leading to students acculturative stress” to the study’s conceptual and/or theoretical ideas. These conceptual connections helped to form categories in the third stage, leading to the development of themes. To strengthen credibility and rigor in qualitative research, we applied investigator triangulation during the analytic process; meaning that the two researchers independently coded the interview transcripts, compared their interpretations to help address any differences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The collaborative approach between the researchers ensured consistency, ultimately minimizing individual bias in theme development and the interpretation of the data to answer the research questions.

RESULTS

This study explores international students’ acculturation experiences in the U through three interconnected dimensions: the challenges they face, the support they receive, and their perceptions of institutional efforts to facilitate their adjustment. Through in-depth interviews with eight international graduate students, we identified key barriers to successful acculturation, including language difficulties and academic adjustment challenges. We also examined the various forms of support students received from their institutions, particularly through the Office of International Engagement (OIE), and how these resources shaped their overall experience. Finally, we explored students’ perspectives on the effectiveness of institutional support, revealing both positive outcomes and areas for improvement. The following table presents the demographic information of our participants, whose experiences form the foundation of our findings. To protect the identity and maintain anonymity, we used pseudonyms to replace participants’ real names.

The study showed that international students encounter challenges while they are pursuing their academic goals in higher education institutions outside their home country. To address the challenges faced by international students in a host culture, three themes were developed: (a) language barriers; and (b) academic differences. These challenges tend to impact foreign students’ integration into the local culture and academic environment.

Table 1 : Interview Participants’ Demographic Information.

Pseudonyms	Gender	Nationality	Academic Level	Program of Study
Kelvin	Male	Nigerian	Graduate student	Chemistry
Essel	Male	Sri Lanka	Graduate student	Chemistry
Dora	Female	Indian	Graduate student	Chemistry
Susan	Female	Russian	Graduate student	Communication
Fatima	Female	Vietnamese	Graduate student	Accounting
Judy	Female	Indian	Graduate student	Fashion
Ruth	Female	Belize	Graduate student	Higher Education
Jean	Female	Bangladesh	Graduate student	Communication

RQ 1: What are the Primary Challenges Faced by International Students in their Acculturation Process?

Language Barrier

Language barrier poses a significant challenge for international students as they navigate academic and social environments in a foreign country. One of the participants, shared the struggle to understand lectures, especially when professors use only American examples and jokes, making it difficult to participate in class discussions, leading to feelings of isolation. For example, Susan stated:

I think it is mostly communication because the way that the Professor communicates is different. They make certain jokes [that] you don’t understand, because I don’t know the context. They talk about topics that you’re not familiar with like sports [and] films. I don’t usually watch them, or you know about politics, something like that. I think the topics and the culture are a little bit hard to understand. [sic]

Accent-related barriers pose a challenge for international students. Some participants found it challenging to understand speakers with accents different from their own. The difficulty in grasping the information native speakers are passing out lead to misunderstanding or misinterpreting the intended message. For example, Judy, highlighted:

The first thing is language. I would not say I can’t understand English, but it was like the accent. I would say mostly Americans. They speak very different accents from the one we speak... [sic]

Fatima also observed that foreign students, who are British colonies are more attuned to speaking English like their colonial masters. These foreign students are more used to the British style of communicating with people irrespective of their accent. Because most students are used to the British way of communicating, they find it difficult in grasping phrases and slang originating from native speakers in America. In an interview, Fatima stated:

The accent is different. Though we were part of a British colony, we were taught English in British, but here on campus, like in American culture, they have different words and phrases, which have different slangs, and that was confusing to me. [sic]

These responses from interview participants demonstrate that although international students may understand the English Language, linguistic differences, and the host country's accented speech inhibit students' social interaction and ability to contribute in a given context. The use of examples specific to only American culture poses a challenge to international students, who may not be aware of the context in which the examples are situated.

Academic Differences

The differences in educational systems, teaching styles, and academic expectations pose challenges for international students. Some international students find it difficult to understand course material, participate in class discussions, and meet the academic standards in foreign educational institutions. Kelvin emphasized that:

It was very challenging to me initially, because the workload is very high. Just for one course, you have to really spend the whole week working on that, apart from your research and other assignments. [sic]

Building on Kelvin's academic challenges, Dora stated that the structure for completing assignments is different from what is known in her home country, Russia. Being able to complete assignments that meet the structure or requirement of the host educational institution is confusing, because each faculty member has their own structure for students to follow, when completing an assignment. In an interview, Dora stated:

What was challenging was the amount of theories and papers that you got to write in a specific way. [The structure that academic papers in America follow] is so different from the Russian standards. Also, every professor has their own standard, and this makes it confusing to stick to one format, when completing assignments due to the differences in expectation when completing academic work.

RQ 2: What Type of Support Do International Students Receive from International Engagement?

Educational institutions recognize the importance of providing support mechanisms to facilitate the acculturation process of international students, enhance their overall well-being and success while pursuing their academic goals.

In navigating the challenges of cultural adjustment and academic integration in a new country, international students often find solace in the support they receive from the Office of International Engagement. Two themes emerged in response to the support foreign students receive from international engagement offices: (a) financial support; and (b) cultural and social integration programs.

Financial Support

High tuition fees for international students and living expenses pose huge financial burdens that foreign students struggle in their academic pursuit. Participants shared that they received financial support from their department in the form of graduate assistantships, which waived their tuition fees and provided a stipend for their accommodation and other living expenses. This formed part of the essential support they received to cater for their educational expenses. For example, Kelvin stated:

I work as a research assistant, so I am supported financially by my professor. The department pays all my tuition [fees] and other associated costs. Apart from paying my tuition cost, my professor pays me a monthly stipend. I also receive financial support from the National Science Foundation grants, which are federal grants.

Adding up to the financial support that Kelvin receives from his professor, Judy stated that her graduate assistantship pays for the maximum expenses incurred during her educational program in the host culture. In an interview, she stated that: “I’m a graduate assistant, so I get graduate assistantship from my department, which pays me the amount for my minimum expenses and everything. [sic]

Jean, who also benefits from graduate assistantship, explained that the funding opportunities for foreign students help them to meet other expenses such as the cost of rent in the host environment. Jean stated in an interview that:

The graduate assistantship provides tuition waiver, so I am only responsible for meeting the fees, which is a great advantage. The stipend we receive assists with meeting your rental expenses, so there are not many out-of-pocket expenses. [sic]

To support international students’ academic success, Judy explained that faculty members in her department give students access to software, and also provide them with stationary items they would have paid for to enable them to conduct their research. In an interview, she emphasized:

They give us access to many of the software that we’d otherwise have to pay for to do our research work. Apart from that, they provide us with many kinds of stationary items and everything. [sic]

Cultural and Social Integration Programs

Cultural and social integration workshops organized by the Office of International Engagement (OIE) help international students to connect with peers, build social networks, and navigate cultural differences. These workshop events

include orientation sessions and events to enlighten international students on historical events, and places of the host culture that are of significance. Essel shared his experience in this orientation programs, stating that:

...the last time we went to a nearby city here. The students went around the city, [looking] at the beautiful places. That was also a moment of integration for me. During orientation, officials [organize] trips around campus for us to know places to go for grocery shopping and how the bus system operates around campus. [sic]

Building on Essel's comment, Ruth stated that she spent a whole week having fun and enjoying trips. All these experiences help foreign students to immerse themselves in a host culture's environment, which, in turn, facilitates a seamlessly acculturative process. In an interview, Judy stated that:

[The] orientation was really nice. There's a whole week's devoted for trips and fun activities... and it's a nice one that they organize everything. So, I don't have to like, take the headache off organizing everything with my friends...[sic]

Also, Kelvin indicated that the orientation program help foreign students to build their social networks, helping them to get familiar with the host culture's academic environment. Events such as "Thanksgiving Dinner", and "Super Bowl parties" help international students to learn the cultural traditions in the United States. In an interview, Kelvin stated that:

...I would say, socializing plus getting to know something. They also organize other events like Thanksgiving dinner. It was primarily a networking, but they also explained about the Thanksgiving tradition in the United States. They used to host the Super Bowl parties and those kinds of things. So, there are a lot of socializing. [sic]

Apart from the orientation programs, networking events, and trips, international students also receive training sessions on how to maintain a legal status in America after completing their study program and applying for jobs. All these services provided by the OIE help foreign students to keep abreast of current developments in a host culture. These frequent updates help foreign students in their respective academic programs to maintain their legal status in their newfound cultural environment. For example, Kelvin stated that:

... the Office of International Engagement have databases to find jobs and everything. They have a lot of [information] on everything, [for instance,] how to how to get permanent residency, how to apply for permanent residency, how to apply for visa, how to file your taxes. And [,] recently I think I've used that portal to get information about visa extension and getting my international passport updated. [sic]

These results indicate that international students receive career advice in terms of exploring career options, seeking employment opportunities, and preparing adequately for interviews in the job market. Apart from the services rendered by the OIE to help foreign students hone their skills, Thanksgiving Dinner events with host families, and Super Bowl parties are efforts to help international students acclimatize themselves to the host culture's environment.

RQ 3: How do International Students Perceive the Office of International Engagement's Activities in Facilitating their Acculturation Process?

The Office of International Engagement (OIE) serves as a central hub, for coordinating various programs, resources, and initiatives aimed at assisting international students in navigating the challenges of studying abroad and integrating into the host culture. International students in a higher education institution shared their perception of effectiveness and impact of the OIE's efforts in their acculturation journey in their host culture. To address the perception foreign students have about the Office of International Engagement, two themes were developed: (a) favorable perception; and (b) mixed perception.

Favorable Perception

International graduate students in higher educational institutions generally had a positive perception, regarding the role the OIE plays in organizing activities, such as fun games and international orientation days, to help foreign students adjust to campus culture. The activities help students to communicate and build connections with people from diverse cultures and are on campus. For example, Fatima explained how the activities organized by the Office of International Engagement have strengthened relationships, built connections among international students, as well as offered the opportunity for people to spend time with each other. All these experiences and activities show the level of support and commitment the OIE devote to ensure a seamless acculturation process for international students. In an interview, Fatima stated that:

I would say...they are doing a great job with the activities. [The] fun games and [other] fun activities [they organize] to connect people. [These events help students] to spend time together. So, this is definitely very helpful for international students. I would say...it's very positive to have this kind of support here.

Adding up to Fatima's comment, Dora indicated that the orientation programs organized by the Office of International Engagement (OIE) helped her in the acculturation process in a host environment. Through the International Orientation Days, foreign students are able to socialize and network. These socialization and networking opportunities establish a strong camaraderie among international students in higher education institutions. For instance, Dora, highlighted:

I would say the international orientation days...was a great thing and it really helped me. I don't think we didn't exchange contact information, but whenever I see those people on campus or in [the] quad, it kind of, you know, you see someone familiar, and you feel like you're in the right place. [sic]

Mixed Perception

Although some interview participants had a positive perception about the role of the OIE in helping students get accustomed to their host country's culture, one international student explained that the OIE can improve the work they do to help students navigate the acculturation process. The improvement should mainly focus on providing a transportation system or shuttling services to international students, who are first-time travelers into the country. Providing shuttling services to these new foreign students tend to make them feel welcomed in the host country, which creates a sense of belonging, as they navigate the complex acculturative process. For example, Essel, stated that:

Yeah, I think [that they] are doing a good job, but there's always opportunity to do more. They know that students come from different areas of the world. They can provide transport system from the airport... they are doing well. [sic]

Apart from providing working on the transportation systems to make students feel welcomed in the host country, Susan is of the view that the organized social activities by the Office of International Engagement, to help foreign students navigate their acculturation process are not sufficient to make foreign students feel immersed in the host culture. In an interview, Susan highlighted that: "I feel like...there are activities, but it's not sufficient. So, it's like the services they offer are not sufficient to help international students [in their acculturation process]. Yeah, it's not scaled up enough."

DISCUSSION

This study identified several challenges international students encounter during their acculturation process. Language barriers surfaced as one of the most pressing struggles, particularly in classroom discussions and informal peer interactions, where students felt excluded or misunderstood. Beyond language, participants also described difficulties adapting to unfamiliar teaching styles and academic expectations, which added to the stress of cultural adjustment. These findings suggest that international students' challenges transcend communication to capture the broader educational and social systems in which they are embedded. These findings resonate with previous studies on the challenges international students face (Kaya, 2020; Oduwaye et al., 2023; Tajvar et al., 2024).

Universities recognize the outlined challenges international students encounter and have established some support mechanisms to enhance students' adjustment and academic success. Results showed that financial support in the form of graduate assistantships was a common support international students received to alleviate their financial burdens. Similar to the findings by Marinenko (2021), academic support services and mentorship programs by professors are valuable resources that play a crucial role in addressing the unique needs of international students and enhancing their academic success. This is congruent with Baldwin (2023), who posits that intercultural dynamics impact international

students' adjustment and hence, mentorship plays a role in helping international students in their educational journey. Cultural and social integration programs, such as orientation and cultural events, also facilitate students' adjustment as they provide opportunities for international students to navigate cultural differences, by learning about host cultural values and experiencing culture firsthand.

The findings indicate that overall, there is a positive perception of the OIE among international students regarding its role in facilitating their acculturation process. Participants are appreciative of the Office of International Engagement's efforts in organizing activities that promote connections among students from diverse cultures, providing a sense of support and belonging. However, there are recommendations for the Office of International Engagement to enhance its effectiveness in supporting international students' acculturation journey by expanding the scope and scale of services offered. This is through the provision of free shuttling services from the airport for newly admitted international students, providing subsidies on accommodation and groceries, and increasing the variety and frequency of their activities to better meet the diverse needs of international students.

Results have shown that the support services provided by the Office of International Engagement for international students have a significant impact on their adjustment process. These support systems have facilitated social integration, social adjustment, academic adaptation, and understanding of the healthcare system in the host country. Specifically, participants emphasized how the Office of International Engagement events and resources fostered the formation of social networks, provided insights into cultural traditions, and offered practical guidance on academic and healthcare matters. This emphasizes the essential role of international engagement support in facilitating the acculturation journey of students. However, recognize that the findings stipulate that international students' support systems regarding funding, which include tuition waiver, and a monthly stipend purely emanate, from their professors and individual academic departments, and not from the Office of International Engagement.

In the U.S., universities observe International Education Week every November to recognize the value of international education and global educational exchange that attracts international students to the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Beyond this, universities across U.S. also include 'International Education Week' in the month of November to appreciate international students as well as educational abroad. The University of Ghana recently launched its first International Week —a celebration of international diversity, cultural exchange, and collaboration with global partners. Events like these highlight the value of cultural awareness and also give students meaningful opportunities to engage with different worldviews (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, n.d.). Similarly, the All-Africa Students Union (AASU) partnered with the Global Educational Center in Ghana to organize study abroad fairs that connected students with universities around the world and offer guidance on scholarships and academic mobility (AASU, 2024). These fairs drew thousands of students and was supported by national scholarship agencies and

student groups, emphasizing a shared commitment to empowering young people through education programs like *Sankofa* —an Akan based language, which translates “go back and get it” (Stockton University, n.d.). All these educational collaborative efforts offer underrepresented students the chance to study in Ghana. Apart from this, these educational programs demonstrate how international experiences can be transformative. Drawing from these kinds of initiatives can offer insights to U.S. institutions to re-strategize creatively and inclusively about how they support international students, and promote cultural integration on their campuses.

Implications

This study’s findings highlight several practical implications for universities, policymakers, and stakeholders in higher education.

Targeted support for international students’ acculturation

Universities should move beyond generic support services and adopt targeted strategies that reflect the distinct academic, social, and cultural challenges international students encounter in their acculturation process. One good example is developing structured peer mentoring programs, expanding culturally sensitive counseling services, and providing discipline-specific academic support workshops can directly address barriers identified in this study.

Sustained student engagement beyond orientation

Also, engagement with international students should not be confined to orientation periods (i.e., when they are beginning their educational journey), but embedded throughout the student journey. This suggests that universities can establish dedicated units or task forces responsible for ongoing international student engagement, ensuring systematic feedback mechanisms are in place to monitor needs and adapt programs accordingly.

Strengthen institutional support for wellbeing and integration

At the policy level, stakeholders should advocate for increased funding and institutional resources devoted to initiatives that promote international student well-being. This includes programs that foster social integration (e.g., intercultural events, community partnerships), enhance academic success (e.g., tutoring, writing centers tailored for multilingual learners), and ease cultural adjustment (e.g., cross-cultural training for faculty and staff).

Long-term institutional commitment to inclusion

Finally, recognizing international students as contributors to the university’s cultural diversity and global reputation emphasizes the need for a long-term investment mindset. By prioritizing sustainable support structures, institutions not

only enhance student satisfaction and retention, but also strengthen their competitiveness in attracting and retaining talent globally.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study had some limitations and opportunities for future researchers to explore. Due to time constraints, the study was limited in sample size, making the findings ungeneralizable. This does not fully represent the diversity of experiences among foreign students, as male and female international students may differ in adjustment processes. Future studies should have a fair representation of gender and academic levels, since undergraduate students would also have different adjustment experiences.

The study focused solely on international students' perceptions of the international engagement office in one university. Future studies could examine the various designated departments that universities have created to support students' acculturation. Specifically, researchers could investigate the specific strategies, resources, and initiatives these departments implemented to promote international students' sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION

This study extends current knowledge of international students' experiences by highlighting how they perceive the university's role in facilitating acculturation. The findings move beyond general calls for support services by demonstrating the significance of structured, ongoing, and culturally responsive approaches to adjustment and integration. By identifying the gaps between institutional resources and student expectations, the study contributes to the literature on international student acculturation and offers a foundation for future research on higher education's evolving role in supporting global student populations. Using in-depth interviews, this study illuminated the voices, untold stories, and lived experiences of international students, highlighting the challenges they face and the types of institutional support they receive. The findings emphasize that beyond academic assistance, emotional, social, and cultural support structures are equally critical for fostering a sense of belonging and well-being among international students. In particular, the study highlights the importance of having well-resourced, designated departments like the OIE that provide targeted services tailored to the unique needs of international students. These services, including orientation programs, cultural events, and access to financial aid, play a crucial role in helping students adapt to new academic environments, navigate unfamiliar cultural landscapes, and build supportive social networks.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

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