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What do we know about international students and how do we know it?

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ABSTRACT: *The present exploratory study investigated whether any reports in the education research literature have overgeneralized their characterizations of American postsecondary institutions' international students as cash cows, academically dishonest, English deficient, or exhibiting mental health issues. The concern was that overgeneralizations could give these students a negative reputation or push them away from American institutions. Purposive samples of relevant reports found by qualitative literature searches revealed evidence of overgeneralizations. This evidence suggests that overgeneralizations, in addition to the coronavirus pandemic, could play a role in international students' postpandemically declining enrollment numbers at American institutions. Implications for the push-pull theory of international applicants' processes for deciding where to attend college are discussed. Practices, policies, and solutions are recommended that could deter these overgeneralizations and reduce America's risk of becoming a reverse push factor.*

Keywords: academic dishonesty, cash cows, English deficiency, enrollment, international students, mental health, push-pull theory

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INTRODUCTION

The enrollment of international students (those originating from countries outside the United States [US]) at American postsecondary institutions varied markedly during the 2020s. Some of the variability is most likely attributable to the coronavirus pandemic. However, additional factors could also play an important role in enrollment variability, especially in years after the pandemic waned. Advances in research on student mobility, in turn, could also be affected by the pandemic and by what we think we know about international students and how we came to know it. The present report consequently explores the possibility that predicted decreases in international student enrollment in the US during the 2020s could result from overgeneralized characteristics of international students that function as push factors.

Figure 1 shows international student enrollment variability in the US during the 2020s (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2024a,b). Total enrollment decreased from 1,075,496 in 2019–20 to 914,095 in 2020–21, and new enrollment dropped from 267,712 to 145,528. The change in annual enrollment from 2020 to 2021 rebounded; new international student enrollment increased from 145,528 in 2020–21 to 261,961 in 2021–22. In 2022, the annual enrollment increased again; new enrollment increased from 261,961 in 2021–22 to 298,523 in 2022–23, and total enrollment increased from 948,519 in 2021–22 to 1,057,188 in 2022–23. In 2023 (the final year for which these data were available at the time of this writing), total enrollment increased again but by a lesser amount from 1,057,180 in 2022–23 to 1,126,690 in 2023–24.

Additional changes in annual enrollment are predicted for 2025 based upon preliminary data available during this report's preparation (e.g., Glass, 2025a,b). The predictions are for decreases in 2025 enrollment relative to 2024 that likely will continue in subsequent years. These changes contrast with corresponding changes that occurred during the 2010s when international student enrollment grew annually (Choudaha, 2017) (Figure 1).

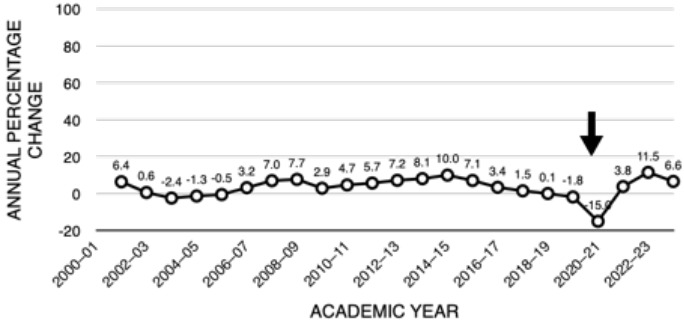

Figure 1: Annual Percentage Change in American Postsecondary Institutions' International Student Enrollment

Note. The arrow indicates onset of the coronavirus pandemic. Data source: IIE (2024b).

Are other factors, in addition to the pandemic, contributing to changes in international student enrollment? This question could attract administrators' attention because of the potential impact on revenue and pressure to implement programs and services for recruiting new international students and retaining continuing ones. It could also attract researchers' attention because of the implications for mobility patterns and factors that influence international students' decisions about where to attend college (e.g., Wu & Liu, 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A potential contributor to variability in international student enrollment in the US could be the negative reputation imposed on these students by postsecondary institution personnel and education researchers who have characterized them as cash cows, academically dishonest, English deficient, or exhibiting mental health issues (see Negative reputation below). *Characterization* is defined in the present report as the process of making research-based, generalized descriptions of international students that typically have been published in the education literature. This process is exemplified by educators and researchers who have generalized from survey, interview, or focus group participants' data to the participants' source population and then extended descriptions to the population based upon observations about the participants. Although generalizability could be essential for the efficacy and efficiency of policies or decisions implemented by educators, and for the validity and reliability of conclusions drawn by researchers (Paniagua & Fass-Holmes, in press), it risks the imposition of an overgeneralized characterization.

To promote generalizability, the present authors have advocated for the following practices: use of stratified random sampling methodology in educators' and researchers' studies; strive for, design, and implement a research protocol that achieves a high response rate on surveys (preferably above 90%); employ a salient incentive to recruit and reward participants; and streamline the invitation process to the studies' random sample (Paniagua & Fass-Holmes, in press). However, the literature contains numerous examples of educators or researchers who have not used stratified random sampling; who instead have accepted and generalized from student surveys with self-selected participants and response rates below 30% (Paniagua & Fass-Holmes, in press).

A second potential contributor to enrollment variability could be push-pull. Researchers in various fields have used push-pull as a theoretical framework for their studies (e.g., Beaudreau, 2023). Migrants, including international students, have been the subjects of studies whose findings were interpreted in terms of push-pull (e.g., Perez-Encinas et al., 2020). This theory's history has seen the consistent association of push factors with international students' home country and pull with their host country (e.g., Perez-Encinas et al., 2020). Push has been defined as conditions associated with home countries that motivate students to seek educational opportunities in other countries versus pull as conditions associated with other countries that motivate students to seek educational opportunities in those countries (Altbach, 1998; de Wit, 2008). In this report, push

includes conditions associated with the US during the postpandemic 2020s that have motivated students to seek educational opportunities in other host countries; aka reverse push factors (Li & Bray, 2007). The above annual changes in international student enrollment will be discussed here from the perspective of postpandemic America pushing these students away.

The following US host country push factors can be recognized in the postpandemic 2020s. Some are not individually unique to the US as a host country but are collectively distinctively recognizable there during the 2020s. They justifiably and compellingly can be characterized as push (rather than pull) factors based upon the evidence below.

Self-funding: US federal regulations require international applicants to prove that they have sufficient funds to independently cover the costs of their education; this is a condition of their F-1 visa status (Study in the States, n.d.) and failure to provide sufficient proof of funding could result in F-1 visa denial.

Higher education's increasing costs: The average cost of a bachelor's degree at American postsecondary institutions has increased during the 2020s, most recently by 5.5% (e.g., Wood, 2024), imposing additional financial hardship on internationals (see Chua, 2021). Many American postsecondary institutions charge substantially higher amounts for internationals than domestic counterparts.

Travel bans: A presidential proclamation implemented a "full" travel ban on 12 countries and a "partial" ban on seven additional countries on June 9, 2025 (NAFSA, 2025a), negatively impacting those countries' continuing international students and discouraging new ones from applying to American postsecondary institutions.

Unwelcoming climate: Students of color reportedly have experienced an increasing sense of being unwelcome at American postsecondary institutions (e.g., Koo, 2021).

Xenophobia; neoracism: Public expressions of xenophobia and neoracism have become more common during the 2020s in the US (e.g., Koo et al., 2021); a diversity of American politicians and their followers has implemented and/or advocated for immigration restrictions (Loweree et al., 2020), mass deportations (Mattey, 2024), and stigmatization of people from other countries (Viladrich, 2021).

Visa interview difficulties: The duration of visa interviews increased from five minutes to 15 beginning in 2025 to accommodate the vetting of international applicants' social media content and online presence; this change resulted in a dramatic reduction in the number of available interview appointments (NAFSA, 2025b).

Negative reputation: The education research literature includes international student characterizations as cash cows (Cantwell, 2015), academically dishonest (Bertram Galant et al., 2015), English deficient (Tavares, 2023), or having mental health issues that began during the coronavirus pandemic's onset (Akiba et al., 2024).

Research Questions (RQs)

The present exploratory study addressed the following three RQs:

1. Do data collection processes in **any** reports characterizing international students as cash cows, academically dishonest, English deficient, or having mental health issues justify generalizing from the reports' participants to the participants' source population?
2. Do **any** of these reports' data collection processes justify generalizing from the reports' participants to all international students?
3. Do **any** of these reports overgeneralize their data?

METHOD

Literature Searches

This exploratory study searched for, purposively sampled (Hassan, 2024), and critically analyzed reports relevant to the RQs. Unlike other literature search studies (e.g., Almadadha et al., 2025), the present study's scope was limited rather than exhaustive, its answers to the RQs were "yes" or "no" rather than qualitative or quantitative, and it was not designed or intended to determine causation. It was designed and intended instead to explore whether published reports' data collection processes and interpretations could have supported a negative reputation about international students at all. If prospective applicants to American postsecondary institutions became aware of the institutions' perceptions of them as cash cows, etc., those perceptions could push them away from the US.

Literature searches' methodology typically accesses multiple reference databases (e.g., PubMed, PsycINFO, ERIC) and often supplements them with Google Scholar. In this exploratory study, the four customized searches described below aligned better with our RQs than the typical methodology because they asked whether the education research literature includes any reports that overgeneralized the four characterizations at all.

The four customized searches' methodology and analysis are summarized in Table 1. The searches for cash cow, academically dishonest, and English deficient standardized on Google Scholar, using the customized search terms listed in Table 1. The literature search for mental health issues instead used Scopus in June 2025 to identify the top five reports based upon the number of times each had been cited; this would indicate the degree to which the characterization has been propagated. The rationale for this method, instead of Google Scholar, related to the proliferation of reports on this characterization following the coronavirus'

onset; it limited the search's scope that otherwise would have exceeded the personnel resources available for this study. Additionally, the authors repeated these searches using the same terms in ChatGPT to determine whether the search results would be replicated with a different search tool.

Data Collection

This study did not require Institutional Review Board approval because its data originated from literature searches rather than human subjects. After finalizing the above searches, the present study discarded reports that excluded any of our specific search terms, reviewed a purposive sample of the remaining found reports, documented in a spreadsheet the information that is summarized in Table 1, critically analyzed those reports based upon the parameters listed in Table 1's columns 6–11, synthesized this information as described below, and derived answers to the RQs based upon the synthesis.

Sampled Reports' Methods

The present authors inspected the Methods of relevant found reports and identified how their studies collected data. None of the sampled reports relevant to the cash cow characterization involved student participants. The other three characterizations' sampled reports employed a survey, focus group, or interview of international students. A second inspection determined what type of sampling these reports' studies conducted (Table 1, column 8) and whether their authors offered an incentive to increase students' response/participation rate (Table 1, column 11; see Paniagua & Fass-Holmes, in press).

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows that, for each of the four characterizations, the findings (including those returned by ChatGPT, which verified the above searches without any additional relevant reports) yielded the same answers for each of the three RQs as follows.

Findings: Cash Cow

The term "cash cow" is not defined in any of the nine purposively sampled reports. A separate Google Scholar search traced this term's origin to a marketing report that defined it as "…products or services that have a dominant market share in a mature or slow-growing market. Cash cows are characterized by their ability to generate substantial cash flow and profits consistently…" (Henderson, 1970, p. 2). This definition will be revisited in the Discussion.

These reports characterizing international students as cash cows can be categorized as follows: cash cow is included only in the report's title (Lomer et al., 2021); the report's study is an economic/financial analysis (Cantwell, 2015), document analysis (Yao & Mwangi, 2022), or qualitative analysis of interviews (Hogan et al., 2021); the report is a journalistic posting (Chua, 2021); or it is a scholarly essay (Bista, et al., 2018; Choudaha, 2017; Mittelmeier & Lomer, 2021).

Table 1: Summary of Literature Search Method and Analysis

Characterization	Search Criteria	Search Tool	Search Terms	Search Target	How many reports were analyzed?	What were the reports' data collection methods?	How were the reports' participants chosen?	Do the reports show evidence of self-selection bias?	What were the reports' participation rates?	Did the authors offer participants an incentive?	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
cash cow	• journalistic reports • scholarly essays • peer-reviewed reports	Google Scholar	"international students cash cows"	none specified	9	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	No	No	Yes
academically dishonest	• reports published in peer-reviewed scholarly journals from 2007 to 2025 • reports on international undergraduates	Google Scholar	• "international students" AND "academic dishonesty" • "international students" AND "cheating" • "misrepresentation" AND "international students"	none specified	8	qualitative and quantitative analyses; iiterature review; survey	non-random sampling	likely, due to non-random sampling	60–100%	no incentive	No	No	Yes
English deficient	• reports published in peer-reviewed scholarly journals from 2007 to 2025 • reports on international undergraduates	Google Scholar	• "international students" AND "English proficiency" • "language barriers" AND "international students" • "misrepresentation" AND "international students"	none specified	6	qualitative and longitudinal analyses; correlation study; survey	non-random sampling	likely, due to non-random sampling	100%	no incentive	No	No	Yes
mental health issues	• reports published in peer-reviewed scholarly journals from 2007 to 2025 • reports on international undergraduates	Scopus	(international AND student*) AND (covid AND 19*) AND (mental AND health) OR (well*) OR (resilience)	report title	5	surveys in four reports; interviews in one	non-random sampling	likely, due to non-random sampling	maximum 23% (one study)	no incentive	No	No	Yes

Note. RQ = research question; n/a = not applicable

None of the nine reports have student participants; the sole interview study's participants are business school deans (Hogan et al., 2021). The absence of data collected from international student participants in these reports is the reason for Table 1 showing that selection bias, participation rate, and incentive are not applicable. The answer to RQs 1 and 2 consequently is "No." However, many of the purposively sampled reports strongly object to the characterization of international students as cash cows; for example, "…treating international students as cash cows is unethical and detrimental to the hard-earned reputation of American higher education" (Choudaha, 2017, p. 6). Despite their objection, the reports *de facto* propagate this characterization by citing and questioning it rather than replacing it with a neutral one (explained in the Discussion). Their overgeneralizing statements, for example, "…U.S. higher education institutions typically valued and viewed international students as 'cash cows'…" (Yao & Mwangi, 2022, p. 1028), are the reason behind answering RQ 3 "Yes."

Findings: Academic Dishonesty

The eight reports purposively sampled from the literature search for academic dishonesty either explicitly discussed academic misconduct or addressed faculty perceptions and institutional concerns that framed international students as more likely to cheat (e.g., Doss et al., 2016; Simpson et al., 2016). These reports included both qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Bertram Gallant et al., 2015; Bista, 2011; Fass-Holmes, 2017), surveys (Bista, 2011; Simpson et al., 2016), or interview-based case studies (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Webb, 2010). Each study provided a distinct lens; some explored students' misunderstandings of academic integrity as cultural or transitional challenges (Bertram Gallant et al., 2015; Webb, 2010), while others interrogated broader systems that label international students as ethically suspect (Fass-Holmes, 2017; Tavares, 2023). One report characterized international students as academically dishonest, either explicitly or implicitly, through discussions of academic misconduct framed by cultural or linguistic assumptions (Bista, 2011).

None of these reports employed a random sample to support generalizability from the sample's results to the source population. None provided an incentive to recruit and reward the studies' participants to increase the response rate. The answer to RQs 1 and 2 for the academic dishonesty characterization consequently is "No."

Several of these reports did overgeneralize their findings (Bertram Gallant et al., 2015; Bista, 2011; Fass-Holmes, 2017; Ison, 2018; Simpson et al., 2016). These tendencies toward overgeneralization often overlooked individual and institutional contexts. In contrast, other purposively sampled reports (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Bertram Gallant et al., 2015; Webb, 2010) modeled more nuanced approaches, attributing academic challenges to systemic gaps in orientation and support rather than innate student deficiencies. Their statements collectively characterizing international students collectively as academically dishonest on the basis of their results from nonrandomly sampled participants constitute overgeneralizations; for example, "…the international student population is

particularly vulnerable because they may be unfamiliar with behavioral standards in western educational institutions and given their previous educational experiences, may not share the same fear of punishment as our domestic students" (Bertram Gallant et al., 2015, p. 226) and "Because international students tend to invest more energy and resources…to support themselves and adjust to a new living environment abroad, the demand to succeed becomes higher. This added pressure leads to the increased risk of performing dishonestly" (Simpson et al., 2016, p. 117). They exemplify the present report's basis for answering RQ 3 "Yes."

Findings: English Deficient

The six reports purposively sampled from the literature search for English language deficiency addressed this characterization either directly as an indicator of academic concern or indirectly through discussions of performance, institutional discourse, or student experiences. These reports prioritized methodological diversity, including institutional data analyses (Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2014), survey-based studies (Schoepp & Garinger, 2016; Wanjohi et al., 2015), policy critiques (Tavares, 2023), mixed-methods research (Neumann et al., 2019), or cultural perspectives on plagiarism (Barkaoui, 2025).

None of the six reports provided sufficient methodological justification to generalize from their study participants to their broader source populations or to all international students. Most used institution-specific or self-selected samples, lacked randomized participant selection, or did not report participation rates (e.g., Schoepp & Garinger, 2016; Wanjohi et al., 2015); this limited their findings' generalizability. The answer to RQs 1 and 2 for the English deficient characterization consequently is "No."

Several of the six reports framed English language ability as a central concern (Schoepp & Garinger, 2016), two of which complicated this characterization by highlighting additional mediating factors such as academic self-concept and policy framing (Neumann et al., 2019; Tavares, 2023). Their statements "Research has demonstrated that being positioned as an ESL student is often equated to experiencing a sense of inferiority and otherness" (Tavares, 2023, p. 137) and "Although language skills are important, other student characteristics that relate to attitude towards studying and engaging in university life in general are seen as more or at least equally as important as students' ability to read and communicate in English" (Neumann et al., 2019, pp. 15–16) illustrate the reasoning behind answering RQ 3 "Yes."

Findings: Mental Health Issues

The coronavirus pandemic's educational disruptions (Krahmer et al., 2020; Lederer et al., 2021; Osaze, 2021) prompted a proliferation of reports about its impact on international students' mental health (Akiba et al., 2024). This characterization's Scopus search returned 62 reports, of which the top five had citation counts ranging from 51 (Collins et al., 2022) to 149 (Lai et al., 2020).

Four of the five involved international student survey administrations (Lai et al., 2020, 149 citation counts; Maleku et al., 2022, 60; Matos Fialho et al., 2021, 58; Van de Velde et al., 2021, 125) and one involved international student interview administrations (Collins et al., 2022, 51). None employed a random sample to support generalizability from the sample's results to the source population. Additionally, none provided an incentive to increase response/participation rates. The answer to RQs 1 and 2 consequently is "No."

These top five reports have propagated the mental health issues characterization through their citations in other reports. Their statements characterizing international students collectively on the basis of their results from nonrandomly sampled participants constitute overgeneralizations; for example, "…our study contributes to advancing knowledge on the mental health impact of COVID-19 on the unique international student population" (Maleku et al., 2022, p. 11). This and other statements in the sampled reports illustrate the reasoning behind answering RQ 3 "Yes."

DISCUSSION

The present study confirmed that at least some of the purposively sampled reports overgeneralize their characterizations of international students. The findings suggest that the four characterizations and related overgeneralizations could play a role in postpandemic 2020s' pattern of annual decline in international student enrollment in American postsecondary institutions (Figure 1; Glass, 2025a,b; IIE, 2024b). They could be educationally significant for administrative policies and practices and for research advancement. Any educators or education researchers who overgeneralize these characterizations could be imposing a negative reputation on international students in the US. The negative reputation might be spread by online dissemination (e.g., Chua, 2021; Mittelmeier & Lomer, 2021) or word of mouth, raising the possibility that other countries' prospective applicants to American postsecondary institutions would be pushed away from the US:

> On the host side, forces which repel foreign students include increasing fees and other costs, restrictive policies on foreign students, uncertainties in visa approvals, tightening of immigration policies, and discrimination against students from particular countries due to the political and religious circumstances of host countries. The positive forces at home and negative forces abroad can be called reverse push–pull factors. (Li & Bray, 2007, p. 795).

The outcome of push and pull factors could play a role in students' decisions about where to attend college (e.g., de Wit, 2008). Awareness of prospective international applicants' negative reputation could be a pivotal issue pushing them away from the US as a host country. An interaction between a negative reputation and other factors in pushing them away raises the possibility that international enrollment could decline in the 2020s (see Glass, 2025b).

Each of the four characterizations is problematic. For example, cash cow is not defined in numerous reports propagating this characterization. If the intended connotation is its marketing definition (Henderson, 1970), it is a category error and dehumanizer (e.g., Yao & Mwangi, 2022), even though the reports' intention might have been to debunk this characterization. Not all international applicants or students have access to unlimited funds. Circumstances for some internationals do change and result in diminished financial support; for example, parents' or students' loss of employment during the pandemic, or medical emergency (e.g., Ma et al., 2025).

The other three characterizations also are problematic. First, most of the purposively sampled reports' data collection methods did not achieve sufficiently high response/participation rates that would maximize generalizability (see Paniagua & Fass-Holmes, in press). Second, the reports' findings were overgeneralized as explained above. Third, similar to cash cow, these characterizations are negative and dehumanizing (e.g., Zhang-Wu, 2021). They probably benefit few if any international students.

Overgeneralization is not the only means by which the four characterizations could impose a negative reputation. Illusory truth is especially relevant in the present context because it increases a message's believability regardless of whether it is true. Simply repeating a statement can increase belief in it even if it is inaccurate, untrue, or misleading (Udry & Barber, 2024). If university personnel repeatedly read reports or hear presentations that include "international students" and "cash cows," encounter some international students who speak English with an accent, cheat on an exam, or show mental health symptoms, they could be more likely to make statements that could become illusory truths.

Recommendations

Replace "Cash Cow" With "Benefactor"

Benefactor is a clearly defined, category-appropriate term and supported compellingly in the international education research literature. Published reports have documented a wide range of benefits that international students' enrollment at American universities has bestowed, including but not limited to their cash (e.g., Martirosyan et al., 2019). These benefits could be leveraged in at least the following two ways. First, a hypothetical report entitled "Are international students benefactors?" that presents relevant evidence to address its titular question would communicate an entirely different message than a counterpart with "Are international students cash cows?" as its title and narrative. Second, American educators and researchers who propagate negative and dehumanizing characterizations or illusory truths instead could publicize gratitude or respect for the benefits these students bestow.

Make Academic Dishonesty Unnecessary

An alternative to characterizing international students as academically dishonest could be to implement conditions that render academic dishonesty unnecessary. Students whose primary language is not English might be at a competitive disadvantage in their classes with domestic students (Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2014). Their competitive disadvantage due to English as a second language could be mitigated by permitting them to write exams and term papers in their primary language during their first year in college (Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2019). This approach to reducing students' perceived need to resort to cheating could be done initially on a pilot basis and subsequently with process improvements or ramping up.

Acknowledge English Proficiency

According to the most recently available data at the time of this writing, Canada and the United Kingdom (where English is the first language) were the countries of origin for the fourth and sixteenth largest cohorts of international students attending American postsecondary institutions (IIE, 2024a). India and China were the top two, and both have multiple languages, one of which actually is English; many of their presecondary or secondary schools teach their students English (e.g., Chandrakar, 2014). International students who transfer to four-year institutions matriculate with up to two years of English-immersion experience. Some international students attend American high schools before enrolling in American postsecondary institutions, gaining up to four years of English-immersion experience. Taken together, these observations further support this report's finding that the English-deficient characterization is an overgeneralization. Educators and researchers who characterize international students collectively as English deficient could instead specify which particular international students need English language support.

The characterization and overgeneralization of English deficiency are problematic because they "…can negatively impact [international students'] content-subject learning, preventing them from accessing equal educational opportunities" (Zhang-Wu, 2021, p. 11). Any universities that label these students as English deficient and then place them in remedial English classes without having a valid and equitable standard for defining English proficiency contribute to overgeneralization. The present authors advocate for acknowledging the relevant international students' English proficiency (i.e., bi- or multilingualism) rather than their allegedly collective deficiency.

The present findings warrant researchers to exercise caution against including statements in their publications about what postsecondary institutions should or should not do on behalf of their international population regarding English deficiency without knowing in advance what these institutions already are doing. For example, the imperative that "Therefore, universities should design social initiatives that can meaningfully and systematically bring together the two groups of students" (Tavares, 2024, p. 152) implies that no universities have already

implemented such social initiatives. In the absence of relevant evidence, an alternative possibility is that at least some universities in fact *are* already implementing such social initiatives. A potentially more useful recommendation would be for universities not already implementing such social initiatives to do so. Universities already having implemented such social initiatives could instead pursue program evaluation processes or other relevant supportive activities to facilitate international students' academic success regardless of English proficiency.

Replace "Mental Health Issues" with "Resilience"

Resilience is defined as an ability to recover from and adapt to adversities and stress (e.g., Robbins et al., 2018). Use of this term would guide readers or listeners to focus on international students' adaptations to the coronavirus pandemic's educational disruptions; for example, spending more time studying while sheltered in place (Aucejo et al., 2020), adjusting to online instruction (Blankstein et al., 2020), or benefitting from enhanced institutional support (Fass-Holmes, 2022). This is not to deny negative impacts or outcomes associated with the pandemic but rather to draw attention to the degree to which the present study's sampled reports have emphasized mental health issues self-reported by nonrandomly sampled international students. Emphasizing these self-reports could risk stigmatization in addition to all the other difficulties these students experienced during the pandemic.

The present authors caution researchers against including statements in their publications about what postsecondary institutions should or should not do on behalf of their international population regarding mental health issues without knowing in advance what these institutions already are doing. For example, the imperative that "Educators, institutions, and mental health professionals need to proactively reach out to their students to understand their needs and provide assistance" (Lai et al., 2020, p. 11) implies that educators, institutions, and mental health professionals are **not** already proactively reaching out. This imperative is broad, overgeneralizes, and does not account for those who already are proactively reaching out.

Deter Overgeneralizations

One approach to deterring the overgeneralization of international students' characterizations could be to improve the generalizability of relevant data or findings. Generalizability could be improved by implementing the following recommendations for best practices in collecting and interpreting international students' data.

Standardize on Random Sampling. Random sampling is essential for ensuring that a study's participants are truly representative of their source population, for minimizing bias, and for maximizing generalizability (e.g., Paniagua & Fass-

Holmes, in press). Stratified random sampling further ensures true representation of the population and enhances generalizability. The present recommendation to utilize stratified random sampling in studies involving international student participants is consistent with the history of research design in the US where it has served as a *de facto* standard (Groves, 2011).

Achieve Response/Participation Rates Above 90%. Random sampling alone is insufficient to guarantee the generalizability of a study's results or findings. If some randomly sampled international students decline their invitation to participate, the sample becomes *de facto* self-selected and hence biased. Bias, in turn, compromises the validity and credibility of generalizing the study's results or findings to the source population. Achieving a response/participation rate above 90% (e.g., Paniagua & Fass-Holmes, in press) would be a best practice for minimizing self-selection bias and maximizing generalizability.

Salient Incentives. This report's authors advocate for offering a study's invitees an assured incentive with high saliency, such as course credits or grades. This would take advantage of the likelihood that many international students will work for credits or grades. Consequently, a portion of course credits or =to their required learning and participation in laboratories accompanying science courses) (Paniagua & Fass-Holmes, in press).

Streamline Recruitment Process. Published findings suggest that undergraduates' email inboxes are so overloaded with university emails that they read only a handful of their incoming messages (Simpson et al., 2024). Limiting reminder emails to two would help minimize the inbox overload and streamline studies' recruitment process.

Conclusions

The findings of the present qualitative literature review support the following conclusions:

- The education research literature contains at least some reports (i.e., the present sampled ones) that overgeneralize international students' characterizations.
- Most of the present literature searches' sampled reports used nonrandom sampling methodologies or propagated interpretations that could impose a negative reputation on international students. The imposed reputation could contribute to international applicants' decisions about where to attend college, putting the US at risk of becoming a reverse push factor.
- The present findings suggest that a potential solution to this risk would be to follow the above best practices in research design and data collection (Paniagua & Fass-Holmes, in press), exercise prudence in

interpreting their results, and resist initiating or propagating illusory truths.

Limitations

These conclusions are constrained by the present study's following limitations:

- Its RQs were limited to the four specific characterizations. If any other characterizations of international students exist in the research literature as prominently as these four, they could be the focus of future research.
- The present qualitative literature searches were limited rather than exhaustive. However, their findings demonstrate that an exhaustive search is not required to provide sufficient evidence for answering this study's RQs.
- The choice of RQs, words, and interpretations in this report intentionally has been limited as an approach to guarding against overgeneralization and hypocrisy. The resulting frame and narrative style could serve as an example for others to consider using in their reports.

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