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## Sense of Belonging: International Student Enrollment in Business Programs

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### Abstract

**Objective:** The authors sought to develop a better understanding of the sense of belonging to international students enrolled in graduate-level business programs. **Background:** A theoretical framework exists to support the sense of belonging as a significant predictor of academic persistence. However, a paucity of literature exists that investigates international students' sense of belonging in graduate-level programs. **Method:** The qualitative case-study research method was used to collect data via semi-structured focus groups and interviews with 13 participants. Data were recorded, transcribed, themed, and coded to establish research findings. **Results:** Participants reported barriers such as loneliness, isolation, immobility, and language barriers in the development of academic and social belonging. **Conclusion:** Campus-based support services focus on integrating international students into the campus community. However, little effort is placed on helping domestic students support the sense of belonging to their international peers. Furthermore, there is some evidence indicating that international students either failed to engage or were unaware of services that might help them overcome social and academic barriers. **Application:** Educational institutions should improve the ease of access, enhance existing, and develop additional services to help improve the sense of belonging to international students.

### Introduction

International students are an important part of the United States educational enterprise; helping to make higher education the fifth largest export in the country (Obst & Forster, 2007). In addition to the

economic benefit, international students help to develop global citizens who demonstrate "(1) intercultural understanding, (2) mindfulness, (3) partnerships, (4) pragmatic hope, and (5) social entrepreneurship," which are critical elements in the



development of domestic and international workforces (Bellamy & Weinberg, 2008, p.20; NAFSA, n.d.). Together, the social and economic benefit of international student participation within the educational enterprise of the United States is critical.

## Review of Literature

Evidence suggests that students' decision to persist in degree attainment is largely influenced by their ability to academically and socially integrate (Tinto, 1993). Failure to accomplish these tasks often results in failure to persist in degree attainment, which is both costly and socially irresponsible of domestic and international parties (NAFSA, n.d.). The magnitude of the challenge is growing, with more than 800,000 international students enrolled during the 2012-2013 academic year. These points to further indication of a significant increase in international student enrollment, with a large growth in students coming from China and Saudi Arabia. These students collectively believe a U.S. degree is a sound investment in workforce development (Desilver, 2013; Institute of International Education, n.d.).

To help international students reach their workforce development goals and contribute to the social and economic development of the U.S. and their home countries, it is imperative to develop and practice social and academic skills that contribute to a feeling of a sense of belonging (Aydinol, 2013; Mataczynski, 2013). The sense of belonging is defined as the fundamental human need to feel a part of and be a respected member of a community (Sedgwick & Yonge, 2008). While this is important to all students, the phenomena may be especially important for international students whose ability to succeed is determined by their ability to academically achieve (Aydinol, 2013).

Academic achievement in the United States is often characterized by performance ratings, usually, letter grades. However, international students often perceive their academic achievement to include participation in co-curricular activities that build sportsmanship, personal confidence, communication skills, punctuality, and the knowledge of arts and culture (Ganai, Ganai, & Mir, 2013, p. 1). Thus, the ability to accomplish their goals is often unequivocally tied to social and

academic belonging (Lee & Robbins, 1998; Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007; Mori, 2000; Poyrazli, Arbona Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002). The same authors revealed international students must overcome several significant barriers in developing academic and social belongingness. This includes deficiencies in language skills, awareness of culture and customs and abilities to develop social connectedness.

## Language Skills

Competence in language skills, speaking and listening, is a critical necessity for students to reach academic, personal, and professional success (Morreale, Osborn & Pearson, 2000; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Deficiencies in language skills and the impact of the lack thereof present a severe consequence to international students' achievement. In fact, their failure to achieve is often in stark contrast to a high-level of academic and social success they have experienced in their home countries (Pedersen, 1991). These deficiencies may result in psychological concerns, which include depression, loneliness, and high levels of stress (Lin & Yi, 1997; Hyun et al., 2007; Poyrazli et al., 2002).

The need for proficient language skills is further propelled in academic settings, which often deliver information orally. This presents a significant barrier for international students, which may fail to understand much of the material they are exposed to (Pedersen, 1991). When this occurs, the same students may lack the speaking skills to seek clarity from peers and faculty members (Hayes & Wilson, 1994).

## Culture and Customs

Differences in culture and tradition often complicate the development of bonds and close relationships among those from international and domestic backgrounds. Specifically, students from collectivist cultural backgrounds (e.g. China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and India) often struggle to bond with American peers who value individualism, independence, assertiveness, and self-reliance (Cross, 1995). The mismatch in cultural backgrounds and lack of awareness leaves many international students with the feeling of disconnectedness (Mori, 2000).

Perceived disconnectedness results in international students believing relationships in the



United States are both superficial and shallow (Cross,1995). To combat these feelings, international students segregate themselves into homogenous groups (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985). Thus, their perception of social belongingness may be complicated by feelings of disappointment and loneliness, which are characterized by the failure to bond with domestic and international peers.

### **Social Connectedness**

Variations in the social and academic backgrounds of international students complicate the development of social connectedness. Social Connectedness is defined as an awareness of and practice of acceptable standards of cultural understanding, relationship building, and academic performance (Baulch, 2013). To address the deficiencies, many universities offer short orientation session, usually lasting one or two days, upon arrival that offers advice on matters of immigration and academic expectations (Alfonso & Bailey, 2005). In fact, the primary purposes of the orientation sessions are to help students cultivate skills in “professional development, instructional competencies and techniques, and technology and research” (Graduate College, n.d., p. 1).

While well intended, it was unclear whether orientation sessions were effective in improving the social connectedness of international students (Hughes, Karp,&O’Gara,2008). The sessions often fail to address interpersonal skills, which include verbal communications, non-verbal communications, and assertiveness. These skills help international students better adjust to educational environments a direct correlation to feelings of belongingness (Poyrazli et al. 2002).

### **Summary**

The success of international students in educational institutions in the United States is influenced by their perceived sense of belonging (Hyun, Quinn, Madon,&Lustig,2007; Lee & Robbins,1998; Mori,2000; Poyrazli, Arbona Nora, McPherson,&Pisecco,2002). Failure to academically and socially connect led to high levels of student attrition and dissatisfaction (Aydinol,2013). To improve the rate of retention of international students, educational institutions provide support to develop professional skills, instructional competence, and learning strategies, the use of

technology, and research skills (Graduate College, n.d.). However, it was unclear whether the majority of these sessions also address the interpersonal skills (e.g.,language skills) to communicate, understand differences in culture and customs, and social connectedness to academically and social integration into educational institutions and thereby prepare international students to harvest a sense of belonging (Hughes, Karp, &O’ Gara, 2008).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative, within-site case study was to gain a better understanding of the sense of belonging to international students enrolled in graduate-level business programs at a major Midwestern research-intensive university. Specifically, we sought answers to the following research questions:

1. *What is the academic integration concerns of international students enrolled in graduate-level business programs?*
2. *What is the social integration concerns of international students enrolled in graduate-level business programs?*

### **Method and Procedures**

The qualitative within-site instrumental case study method was utilized to develop a better understanding of the academic and social integration concerns of international students enrolled in graduate-level business programs at a major research-intensive university geographically located in the Midwest section of the United States. The method was appropriate because a paucity of research existed that described the academic and social integration of international students enrolled in graduate-level business programs and there are significant differences in the population of international students enrolled among educational institutions, which results in limitations in the development of representative samples (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014).

### **Design**

The study was designed to collect qualitative data within a selected case with a convenience sample of international students enrolled in graduate-level business programs. Data collection was guided by a semi-structured interview protocol, which was developed by the researchers, reviewed and approved by an institutional review board, and then



administered to a convenient group of eligible participants. Prompts that guided the semi-structured interviews and focus group are shown below:

1. Tell me about your social life at the university
  - a. Who do you interact with most, American or International peers?
  - b. What types of clubs and organizations on campus are you active?
  - c. What type of social activities are you engaged in that help you to get to know your international and domestic peers?
2. Tell me about your reading, listening, and speaking skills
  - a. How do you participate in class discussions?
  - b. Do you find it difficult understanding your professors in spoken communications?
  - c. Do you utilize translation devices?
3. Tell me about the social relationships you have harvested in the United States
  - a. Do you find it easy to bond with your American peers?
  - b. Are relationships in the United States different than those in your home country? How?
  - c. What barriers make it difficult to develop relationships with peers?
4. How is your academic performance at the university?
  - a. Are you satisfied with your academic achievement at the university? Why or why not?
  - b. How is your academic life here and in your home country similar and/or different?
  - c. Do you use campus support services to improve your academic performance?

To control for reliability in the study, data were collected with a semi-structured protocol used to (1) interview eligible male students, (2) interview eligible female students, and (3) query a focus group of eligible and equal numbers of male and female students. Subsequently, collected data were analyzed with themes and codes to help in the generation of a

narrative that details students' academic and social experiences within the case.

Eligibility criteria included (a) current enrollment in a graduate-level business program (b) federal-recognized international student status, (c) use of university-sponsored email, and (d) willingness and consent to participate.

#### **Procedures**

The following procedures were implemented to collect and analyze the data obtained and reported in the study:

1. Participants were contacted via email and sent a recruitment letter, which was sent from the email account of the director of the international students support center at the case under investigation.
2. The primary researcher met with the participants who responded to the recruitment letter, where she read the informed consent to the potential study participants, once the participants agreed to participate and signed the informed consent, they were then asked to select to participate in either an interview or focus group.
3. During the interviews and focus group, data were digitally recorded with the QuickTime ® software application.
4. Digital files were sent for transcription by a professional data transcriptionist and returned to the researchers in a word processing file
5. Data were analyzed with the support of the Nvivo v. 9 software application.

#### **Data Collection**

Data were collected from 13 participants. The participants were divided into three groups. Groups 1 and 2 participated in interviews while group 3 participated in a focus group, see table 1 for participant characteristics. In total, about 140 minutes of data were collected; each interview lasted about 20 minutes and the focus group resulted in about 60 minutes of data.



**Table 1**  
**Table of Participant Characteristics**

Category	Number	Percent
Main activity prior to attending institution		
Studying at the university level	6	46.0
Full time employment	7	53.0
Country of origin		
India	6	46.0
Iran	1	7.7
Cyprus	1	7.7
China	3	23.0
Saudi Arabia	1	7.7
Afghanistan	1	7.7
Age		
22-24	5	38.0
25-27	6	46.0
28+	2	15.0

**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed with the constant comparison method. The method allows for the development of a theory via the evaluation of study participants’ perspectives (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Data were themed and coded.

To assist in data analysis, data were themed into two categories: Academic or Social Belongingness. Data were then reviewed to determine emerging

codes. The Nvivo v.9 word frequency analysis feature was implemented to allow for common keywords to emerge early in the study. This procedure allowed for data to be closely monitored for emerging themes and increased validity in the analysis. Overall, three codes emerged: communications, relationships, and time. Data codes and themes are revealed in Table 2, which also includes a frequency count.



**Table 2**  
**Qualitative Themes, Codes, and Frequency**

Themes		
Codes	Frequency (#)	Percent
Academic Factors (Total)	93	
Communications	19	20.43
Relationships	27	29.03
Time	22	23.66
Social Factors (Total)	170	
Communications	31	18.24
Relationships	42	24.71
Time	15	8.82

**Findings**

As with all case study research, it is important to understand the characteristics of the underlying case, so that findings may be considered within context. As such, it is important to note the research was conducted at a Carnegie-recognized comprehensive doctoral-granting Midwestern research-intensive university (Carnegie Classifications, n.d.). The institution, founded in 1909 currently serves more than 20,00 students across two campuses.

Findings are headed by theme and then presented by code. Because findings have been woven into a narrative, they are also supported by the review of the literature and serve as the discussion within the study. Verbatim data is signified with italicized print. In some instances, the effort has been taken to provide a verbatim quote to help summarize and focus findings. To protect confidentiality, participants’ names have been changed to pseudonyms.

**Academic Belongingness**

*“Maybe it’s the language barrier [which makes it difficult to understand the professor] in class, but [in America] teachers are always open for discussion, and students here are willing to talk, discuss, and express their opinions, but in our country, we are not willing to talk during class.”*

-Kate

As pointed out by Tinto (1993), “it is the characteristics of an institution or program such as its resources, facilities, structural/organizational arrangements, and its members, that can limit or facilitate the development and integration of

individuals within the institution or program” (Ascend Learning, 2012, p. 4). These factors have a great impact on the sense of belonging to international students. One participant in the study, Tess,

stated: *“I don’t feel I belong here. Even though I like [the university], [the] people are kind [to] each other and environment there is very good, but I still [do not] feel I belong here.”* Participants in this study attested to experience difficulty in feeling that they belonged to their institution.



## Communication

*"I'm really having [a hard] time understanding [the professor]."*

- Peter

All of the participants interviewed indicated that they experienced difficulty in communicating in English and that this made it difficult for them to understand the professor in class. Peter stated: "[The language is] *difficult, and you have to [understand the] concepts yourself.*" Due to difficulties of understanding the professor in class, international students also had to spend more time reviewing the material taught in class to ensure that they understood the lessons or the concepts taught. This language barrier made it problematic for international students in classes. One participant noted: "[The English language is hard to understand] *because the professor always [talks] about a product I never heard about, or a commercial.*" Such products or commercials may be exclusive to the US; many international students may not have been exposed to erotic cologne advertisements, as these are banned from airing in certain parts of the Middle East (Edwards, 2012).

Many participants in the focus group experienced similar difficulties in relation to

## Relationships

Participants in the study were asked questions regarding relationships they have formed with their professors, colleagues, and with those beyond the university setting. In regards to relationships within the institutional setting, participants were able to connect with their professors. In fact, international students felt a difference between the interactions they had with professors back home and in America. "*Actually teachers here [are] just like friends. They [do not show] so much authority. In our country we just respect our teacher much more. It's just like ... I mean, you can just not disturb [him] during the class.*" Professors created a friendly atmosphere for the students in class. All of the participants agreed that the classroom atmosphere setting here is very different to than that of their home country, "*but [in America], [the professor] listens to your ideas and agrees with you*" attested Moe. Another participant said, "[In my home country] *you should agree with the professor, but here no, you can discuss with the professor and I think here the professor [tries] to be*

communicating in English. One participant noted: "[The professor] *talks too fast, or [picks on you to] answer a question, that's really hard for me because I have to gather what he said and then prepare my answer to him.*" When randomly chosen in class, the international students interviewed indicated that they needed time to process the question before answering. It is apparent that a lack of strong English language skills made it challenging for international students to take part in classroom discussions, ask questions, or follow the professor during class time.

The majority of the participants in the focus group, along with those interviewed individually, had difficulty with academic language or the language used in the classroom and assignments (e.g., words such as "arbitration," or "statutory laws"). Lynn stated: "*Actually, I cannot follow all the information they give in class.*" Vicky, another participant, noted: "*I'm not that fluent in English.*" This lack of fluency in communicating in English hindered the ability of international students to process the information being taught in class.

*a student's friend instead of be the professor.*" The participants were able to form relationships with their professor's. Peter said, "*I try to talk to all of my professors and tell them my problems.*" The participant's discussed any issues with their professors since they considered their professor's friends, rather than authority figures.

## Time

The participant's felt a time constraint and inability to manage attending social events due to the amount of school work they have. "*I seldom attend [any event on campus] because we have a lot of courses to take so after class we are so tired we just need to go home and rest.*" Another participant also agreed to the lack of time to do other activities besides schoolwork, "*I am [taking] 36 credits in one year, so it's very stressful for me. I'm taking [many courses].*" It was difficult for participants to complete their class work on time and attend social activities around campus. Additionally, many participants attested to a lack of ability to balance their work, thus having to stay up all night. "*For this semester it was kind of difficult to balance, I was on*





campus all the time, I've been home at 3 or 4am sometimes." In order to finish their work on time, they had to sacrifice sleep to work on their assignments. Participants in the semi-structured interview had the same issues. Kate said, "I really wish I was doing a lot better but I'm doing what I can while trying to stay sane like eating and sleeping." Mike agreed and attested, "It's quite an intense program and it's a lack of time." Time was a constraint for the participants, which prevented them from being active and attending events.

Due to a lack of time, participants were not able to participate in many social activities. According to Tess, "I don't have much social activity. We have a 12-month program and I have to take 5 subjects each semester. [I] really has no time at all, it's always school, assignments, and then back to [the] room to sleep." She then went on to say, "I don't have free time. There are too many courses and there is only [so] much time." Participants were not able to balance schoolwork and being social at the same time.

### Social Belongingness

*"I have a friend, but we seldom meet each other because we are really busy."*-Kim

The participants' in the study were not able to form tight bonds with their American peers, which was primarily due to difficulty in interacting or communicating with them in English. "Maybe I'm not very sociable, or [Americans] have different [ways of] communicating," said Kim. They also found relationships in the states to be that of benefit, rather than real friendship. Peter attested, "Here I feel like friendships are just based on purpose." They were not able to do a lot socially because of time constraints. "I am really busy most of the time, even on weekends" said Moe. **Communication**

*"The domestic peers do not interact [with international students] as compared to [my] international peers."*-Vicky

The participants in this study had a very hard time connecting with their American peers, therefore they felt much more comfortable interacting and being with international students. "I don't think it's easy for international student's to communicate with [American's]," said Lynn. Participants were able to make friends with other internationals. One of the main reasons the participant's felt a difficulty

interacting with Americans is due to the English language. "Maybe our English is not that fluent" Lynn continued on to say. Roger agreed that there is a different wavelength between international students and their domestic peers, "I find the conversation a little one-sided." Those in the focus group agreed with the notion of a culture shock, language barrier, and inability to personally understand Americans. "I think [it is difficult] interacting with Americans. I don't understand their culture." Peter also said, "I am having a hard time understanding them."

Due to these issues, the participants in this study socialized often with other international students because they were not able to connect on a personal level with their domestic peers, as they were able to with international students. Peter continued on to say, "I don't find American's really friendly [and] most of the friends I have are international. There is more focus on individual lives [in America], but we come from a collective culture." A focus group participant also said, "Not everyone is able to talk with internationals. Some people don't want to [socialize] with us." The participants attested that the major reason was because of a language issue. "The language has difficulty," said one participant. Another participant went on to say, "If there is a problem it would [be the] language." Vicky also said, "I'm not that fluent in English, which is a problem."

### Relationships

In regards to social relationships in America, the participants in the group felt a difference between friendships in the United States and friendships back in their home country. "Americans are very polite. They are easy to talk to and make friends with them, but I don't feel we are getting the friendship we have in my country, because I have friends from my country that are like brothers to me," said a focus group participant. Another focus group participant agreed with this idea and went on to say, "They know that their friendships are not forever. This friend is for this time period only." In addition to this, the participants were not able to build relationships with their domestic peers, as they believed Americans are busy in their own lives. Peter said, "We share our ideas with each other and we



*talk with our friends. We spend time with them. I just feel like we are coming from a warmer culture, and here people are just busy with their own business.”* He went on to say, *“In my country friends are very close to each other, but here I feel like friendships are just based on purpose and I’m alone here and I don’t have many good friends.”* Tess also agreed by saying, *“Here everyone is friendly, but only to some extent. In our place, we take too much freedom. We get too deep in our relationships.”* As a result, the participants attested that Americans are not interested in getting to know them or where they are from. *“It’s not difficult to be sociable here, but the problem is that I can make a lot of friends from different countries, but in terms of the native speakers, some of them are not interested to [get to know us or where we are from.]”* Another focus group participant agreed and said, *“I think international students are more [willing] to talk with [internationals] than the native American students.”*

#### **Time**

The participant’s interviewed indicated a lack of time which resulted in their inability to socialize. Peter said, *“Now I have to balance a lot... studying. But I wish I had time to go [to events on campus], but unfortunately I don’t have time.”* Tess also said, *“It’s always school assignments, so it leaves us with no time at all for social activity.”* Kate also said, *“I don’t have much social activity, I don’t have free time.”* The lack of available time made it very difficult for participant’s to be social and submit their assignments on time.

#### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Lack of a strong command of the English language makes it very difficult for international students to take part in classroom discussions, ask questions in class, or follow what the professor is saying during class. Kate, a focus group participant, speculated:

*“Maybe it’s the language barrier [which makes it difficult to understand the professor] in class.”*

As Pederson (1991) showed, international students who struggle with the English language also struggle to achieve at US universities, as they are not familiar with the classroom dynamics. In light of such language problems, international

students may feel out of place and that they do not belong. The communication gap also hinders the ability of international students to participate in class as they did in their home countries. Peter stated:

*“I’m really having [a hard] time understanding [the professor].”*

These language barriers also present difficulties to forming personal connections with American peers.

Lynn stated:

*“I don’t think it’s easy for international student’s to communicate with [American’s].”*

As the literature suggested, differences in forms of social interaction and language difficulties may prevent international students from forming close relationships with their American peers (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). International students may go through phases of depression, stress, loneliness, and be unable to meet academic expectations (Lin & Yi, 1997; Hyun et al., 2007; Poyrazli et al., 2002). The participants in this study attested to having many international friends, but only limited interaction with their American peers and attributed this to their inability to feel a social connectedness with American students.

Peter stated:

*“I think [it is difficult] interacting with Americans. I don’t understand their culture.”*

Numerous factors influence the ability of students to academically and socially integrate, including students’ language skills, culture and customs, social connectedness, and interpersonal skills (Lee & Robbins, 1998; Hyun et al., 2007; Mori, 2000; Poyrazli et al., 2002). Many institutions (e.g., Bowling Green States University [OH], Lockhaven University [PA], and Truman State University [MO]) create a social support system to assist international students in adjusting at their respective universities; however, the participants in this study indicated that they did not feel that they belonged at their respective institution. Moe stated this explicitly: *“I don’t feel like I belong here.”*

According to the Graduate College (n.d.), the mission of the orientation program is to enable all students to acquire the necessary skills and techniques required for success in relation to research and technology. However, it appears



students are merely guided through academic procedures that promote professional success. Attempts to provide more opportunities for students to engage in activities within the institution have not been effective (Hughes et al., 2008).

Understanding the experiences of international students has proven to be a challenge for educators, administrators, and staff.

The International Student Services (ISS) office requires all incoming international students to take part in a mandatory ISS session upon their arrival. During this session, the ISS staff reviews a number of topics to help international students adjust to their new environment. Topics covered during orientation include: visa and immigration information, navigating the campus, campus safety, getting involved on campus, and social norms.

To help international students understand the differences between cultures, a representative from the ISS Office also gives a PowerPoint presentation explaining differences in communication, social interactions, and customs; for example, the representative discusses hand gestures that are acceptable in different parts of the world, but considered highly offensive in the US. This presentation is conducted in an effort to help international students avoid offending other people (Baulch, 2013). However, the efforts of the ISS office in helping international students adjust to campus life require further steps be undertaken to bridge the gap between international students and their domestic counterparts.

Participants revealed a sense of disappointment in relation to their American peers' lack of interest in wanting to know more about international students. One participant stated:

*"Not everyone is able to talk with internationals. Some people don't want to [socialize] with us."*

To bridge this gap, non-international students also need to be interested in getting to know international students on campus.

The participants also indicated problems with the amount of credits they needed to take in a limited time frame (i.e., one year).

One participant stated: *"We have a 12 month program and I have to take 5 subjects each semester. [I] really has no time at all, it's always school, assignments, and then back to room to sleep."*

Introducing graduate level business programs that offer more flexibility in relation to course load would be a positive step in improving the academic experiences of international students.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, several important recommendations are made for further research and practice.

### **Further Research**

This study was conducted within case; it is therefore recommended that a more broad-based mixed methods research study of the sense of belonging of international students at universities across the United States be conducted to determine the extent to which findings might be applicable to a larger audience. Further study should also consider the unique difference among cultures and customs of international students (e.g., Are their differences in the sense of belonging of students from India as compared to China and/or other countries). Finally, it appears that the findings of this study support existing literature; thus, quantitative study may be appropriate to generate generalizability.

### **Practice**

Barriers to social and academic integration continue to plaque the academic and social success of international students enrolled at education institutions in the United States. To combat these challenges, it is recommended that educational institutions analyze their current practices to determine the extent to which existing practices meet the needs of international students by (a) fostering social and academic belongingness at the institution, (b) socially integrating domestic and international students, and (c) discussion of the importance of formulating long-lasting relationships between international and domestic peers. Further, language is critical for social and academic belongingness and it is recommended that institutions place more resources into the development of international students' language (e.g., reading, writing, and speaking) skills.



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