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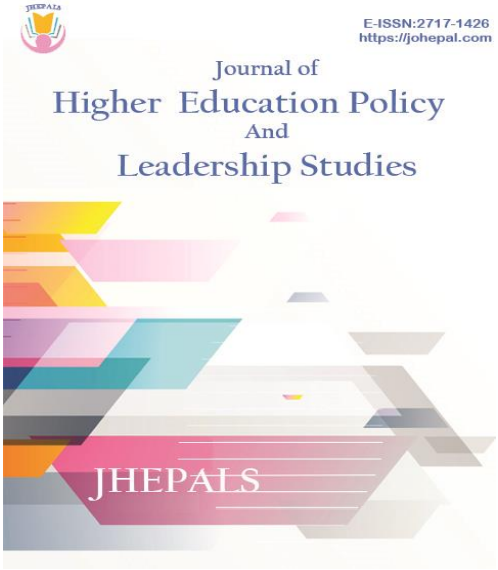

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Abstract

International students are an important presence on U.S. campuses today; however, many student affairs professionals and institutions struggle to engage international students in campus life. This study explored the co-curricular engagement of international students to investigate what motivates students to get involved, how they choose their engagement opportunities, and what inhibitors or barriers they perceive as they consider their engagement. Using data collected through focus group participation, we found that international students may face challenges in making sense of involvement in the U.S. context. Additionally, international students may face challenges to involvement that are culturally centric and different from their U.S. peers. With these findings in mind, we challenge student affairs professionals to redefine involvement to be more interculturally competent, taking into consideration differences in social and cultural capital among students and better understanding the international student experience. Additionally, we encourage student affairs professionals to move from proactive to reactive approaches in engaging international students. We end this article with recommendations for campus-based practitioners to include international students when designing inclusive environments for campus involvement.

Keywords: International Students; Campus Involvement; Student Affairs; Intercultural Competency

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Introduction: Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

International students are a valued, long-standing presence on college and university campuses in the United States (U.S.). As the numbers of international students grew over the past ten years (Institute of International Education, 2021), some scholars began to explore how international students engage within their local campus contexts and with non-international peers (Zhao et al., 2005). While international students are commonly considered as a monolithic group, there are unique challenges that international students may face in campus engagement as compared to their domestic peers. Additionally, an emphasis on understanding the international student experience is often only a small - if present at all - component of graduate preparation programs in U.S.-based student affairs programs. Taken together, there are increasing numbers of international students on many U.S.-based campuses with fewer student affairs professionals with the intercultural skills necessary to effectively support this population. Combined with the unique culture that exists within American higher education and its emphasis on co-curricular engagement, often from a culturally-centric approach, international students may find themselves left out of engagement opportunities and experience challenges in developing a sense of belonging on campus - what research shows is a key metric for student retention and completion in the postsecondary sector (Fan et al., 2021).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived sense of belonging for degree-seeking undergraduate international students at the University of Georgia. For student affairs professionals, it is important to understand how international students perceive their sense of belonging on campus in order to better support them and their unique experiences with acculturative stress and cultural adjustment. Different realities for international undergraduate students, such as increased pressure to perform academically due to the cost of attendance, can impede a student's ability to engage in campus life and co-curricular activities. While international students often find a space of belonging among peers of similar cultural or international backgrounds, research underscores the importance of student involvement on campus outside of the classroom and its benefits for student success (Glass & Westmont, 2014).

Guided by three main research questions, this study explored the co-curricular engagement of international students to investigate what motivates students to get involved, how they choose their engagement opportunities, and what inhibitors or barriers they perceive as they consider their engagement. In the context of this study, engagement is considered in-person programs and opportunities, as this study began prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. We approached this study from a mixed-methods approach, employing both a survey instrument as well as focus groups to further explore the findings from the study. This paper focuses on the qualitative findings and the subsequent recommendations for practice identified through analysis of focus group transcripts. The research questions guiding this study are included below:

1. What are international students interested and involved in?
2. What inhibitors/barriers keep international students from engaging?
3. Do international students approach their engagement in different ways than their American peers?

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The findings from this study allowed the Department of International Student Life at the University of Georgia to supplement and elucidate existing data on student engagement with a deeper understanding of the international student perspective on campus. Our research illuminates particular areas where students may perceive low levels of engagement and highlights ways to remove potential barriers in an effort to create a more inclusive environment for all students. Findings from this research also provide insights that help student affairs professionals adjust their approaches to programing and outreach to better meet the needs and interests of international students and provide more opportunities for domestic and international students to learn and grow together outside of the traditional classroom space.

Review of the Literature

The effects of globalization—economies, people, and places become more interconnected than ever before—influence societies around the world. In the U.S., higher education's response to globalization is commonly referred to as internationalization, referencing the policies and practices institutional actors undertake and pursue to remain competitive in the global marketplace (Altbach & Knight, 2007). While several distinct areas of internationalization exist, the predominant force remains the movement of people and knowledge through a process known as mobility. When considering students, institutions spend a great deal of resources and capital to create and entice students in a mobile world, encouraging students to study abroad and dedicating resources to international student recruitment and enrollment in the U.S.

The emphasis on international student recruitment and enrollment in institutions in the U.S. carries externalities beyond the boundaries of campus. The 2019-20 academic year saw over 19 million international students enrolled on campuses in the U.S., comprising 5.5% of the overall higher education enrollment (Institute of International Education, 2021). These students span both undergraduate and graduate levels, with varying fields of study and with many taking advantage of the engineering, math/computer science, and business and management programs in the U.S. (Institute of International Education, 2021). During that same time period, international students contributed over $38 billion dollars to the U.S. economy (NAFSA – Association of International Educators, 2020). The financial impact of international students is often cited as a main reason institutions place so much emphasis on recruitment (Cantwell, 2015), especially given that over 56% of international students in 2019-20 self-fund their studies from personal or family funds (Institute of International Education, 2020). While research shows this statistic may be a fallacy (Cantwell, 2015), the financial motivator is still of value in U.S. higher education.

It is short sighted only to consider the financial impact that international students bring to our campuses and local communities. In fact, some institutions have a mission statement or outcomes related to educating a global citizenry, particularly as employers seek college graduates who are culturally competent and have an ability to work with others across a cultural medium (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2021). Additionally, it is common for institutions to allocate a significant amount of resources to the recruitment and enrollment of international students. However, what is less common is the same amount of resources dedicated to supporting these students through their

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educational journeys, ensuring a similar campus experience to their non-international peers. In most campus environments, this role falls to the student affairs staff to further support the transition into the campus environment and cultural context. A 2022 report by the American Council on Education found that there is growth in this area of support for international students (Soler, M.C., Kim, J., & Cecil, B.G., 2022). The same report, however, noted that additional comprehensive support is needed from recruitment to completion for international students. With sense of belonging being a key part of retention efforts and creating diverse campuses, this study seeks to understand international students' connection and sense of belonging at a large, research-intensive flagship institution in the Southeast.

Moving from Engagement to Support on Campus

Student engagement and the co-curricular experience is a hallmark of the U.S. campus experience. Specialized staff in divisions of student affairs work to create a positive, engaging experience for all students, focused on holistic well-being, co-curricular engagement, and leadership development. Myriad research shows the benefits of student engagement as an important influence on the student experience and overall educational outcomes (Kahu, 2013), with institutions placing emphasis on student involvement as a key metric of not only student success but also institutional success. In other words, "the value of student engagement is no longer questioned" (Trowler & Trowler, 2010, as cited by Kahu, 2013, p. 758).

For many international students, the versatility of the U.S. campus experience and degree is a strong recruitment factor. The U.S. culture of undergraduate education emphasizes choosing a major based on interests and passion, with the ability to undertake several majors at once. Beyond academics, co-curricular activities and engagement opportunities can complement academic interests while also creating outlets for students to gain practical experiences and skills outside the classroom. These co-curricular experiences typically span four major areas in student development literature: behavioral; psychological development; sociocultural and political context; and holistic development of the student (Kahu, 2013). Combined, these areas guide the work of student affairs professionals in the U.S., as campuses seek to educate the whole student beyond their academic programs.

The challenge at the intersection of student support and international student engagement is simple—campus involvement and student engagement center the non-international perspective and lack the nuance and perspective to transcend cultural barriers. This assessment is not to blame student affairs professionals, as many of the psychosocial theories guiding our work focus almost exclusively on a "traditional" college-aged population and demographic, neglecting the experiences of many students who now fall outside this narrow definition. When we consider the cultural differences between the U.S. and other higher education systems, "student affairs" emerges as an inherently Western concept linked to the fundamental ideals of the U.S. college experience. Combine the lack of knowledge of student affairs professionals with the cultural differences of international students, and the ideas, motivations, and overall understanding of student involvement and developing a sense of belonging for international students must be reexamined - moving to a model of inclusion as opposed to integration (Bittencourt et al., 2019). An approach based

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on integration also highlights the notion that deeper engagement, i.e. the quality of involvement, is more beneficial for student success and thriving than merely considering the quantity of involvement (Vetter et al., 2019).

Sense of Belonging

It is not enough merely to recruit international students to attend U.S. institutions of higher education; it is also important to serve, retain, guide, and support them through graduation. Due to the high cost of recruiting international students from abroad, U.S. institutions waste both time and resources if they fail to respond to international student needs. Byrd (1991) stated that equally as important as selecting the appropriate students for one's institution is providing the appropriate services and resources to meet their specific needs. Retaining international students means assuring their academic and social success. Student engagement broadly is linked to academic success for domestic students in existing literature and is studied extensively (Astin, 1993; Chickering, 1969; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Compared to academic achievement, however, little research exists to explore international student engagement and social success (Zhao et al., 2005). Most of the available literature focuses on the challenges that international students face in adapting to the new campus living and learning environment. Studies on sense of belonging on college campuses typically focus on domestic student populations, especially underrepresented students (Berger, 1997; Hausmann et al., 2009; Museus & Maramba, 2011). The literature to date remains scant on international student sense of belonging.

Sense of belonging is based on student perception of institutional support and interpersonal relationships (Hausmann et al. 2009). Feelings of belonging align with a sense of connectedness with the larger campus community, which is particularly important for students from underrepresented populations (Strayhorn, 2012). Bista and Foster (2016) suggest the concept of social adaptation for international students at colleges in the U.S. parallels the concept of sense of belonging. Several studies have explored adaptation of international students on U.S. campuses and have found that issues with language, challenges adapting to new cultural norms, and barriers to developing friendships as recurring themes for international student populations (Sherry et al., 2009; Pan & Wong, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2011). In addition, further studies have found that international student engagement and sense of belonging can vary by gender, field of study, and student socioeconomic background (Koo et al., 2021).

Challenges to International Student Engagement and Sense of Belonging

The connection between student support services and sense of belonging is important, particularly as student affairs divisions, staff, and programs can create this sense of belonging for all students on campus (Hoyt, 2021). When thinking about an international student, what does sense of belonging mean? How do students make sense of not only a new educational environment, but also utilizing services and resources that are U.S.-culture centric and in a language often not their native tongue? The various challenges that international students may face in their search for belonging and engagement on college campuses must be met with an equal effort from university and student affairs staff members.

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Specific Challenges for the International Students & Identifying Gaps in the Literature

While international students are just as capable and academically prepared for the U.S. educational environment as their domestic peers, they may face unique challenges that can inhibit their ability to engage on campus and develop a sense of belonging within the host campus community. Beginning with the recruitment and enrollment process, international students experience several push-pull factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Push factors encourage a student to study outside their home country generally, while pull factors entice students to enroll at specific institutions. Many of these pull factors relate to the flexibility, variety of experiences, array of curricula, and international student support mechanisms present within many U.S. institutions.

What these push-pull factors neglect to include is the various challenges that exist when studying in a new country and in a language which may not be native. Many of these push-pull factors also lead to increased pressure for international students. With most students self-funding their education through family or other means (IIE, 2021), they face increased pressure to perform academically. This pressure comes from a variety of sources, including family pressure and the challenges of studying in English, particularly in areas where accents or other colloquial slang are spoken (vastly different from English tested by the Test of English as a Foreign Language exam) (Cecil & Hu, 2021). Navigating campus and learning a new educational system is challenging already; these added pressures mean the international population can often neglect the engagement opportunities to develop a sense of belonging.

When student programs or services designed to develop a sense of belonging rely on campus traditions or cultures rooted in the U.S. model, they may inadvertently neglect the perspective and engagement of international students who lack the cultural and social capital to connect to campus traditions and other key elements of the U.S. collegiate experience that others may take for granted. Combined with language barriers, increased academic pressures, and the differences in help-seeking behavior across cultural groups (Tung, 2011) the barriers to developing a sense of belonging on campus are many. Particularly for international students, this lack of connection to campus may result in grouping with other students from similar cultural backgrounds for safety and security or being isolated from the campus community with little connection outside the classroom or academic program.

International students are more likely, compared to their domestic peers, to feel isolated from the campus community because of cultural differences. This reality has both academic and social implications (Lee & Rice, 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Understanding the experiences of undergraduate international students related to their engagement with campus resources—particularly co-curricular opportunities—is imperative to supporting these students through their collegiate career, to developing more opportunities, and to connecting international and domestic students. If international students do not feel a sense of belonging, they are at risk of being unsuccessful in college and may not persist to graduation (Tinto et al., 1993). Beyond this support, it is important for student affairs divisions and staff members to increase their cultural competency (Cecil & Hu, 2021) while also revamping programs and services to be inclusive to an international population. Finally, it falls on student affairs divisions and staff to showcase what they do in a culturally relevant

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and sensitive way, modeling inclusivity across all cultural groups of students served on campus.

Research Design and Methods

Within the context of the larger project from which this paper is derived, this paper highlights the findings uncovered through qualitative data collection in the form of focus groups. In the overall study, we employed a mixed-methods approach to understand international students' perception of engagement on campus. The data were collected at the University of Georgia, a large public university in the South. In the fall of 2020, nearly 30,000 students were enrolled at the University of Georgia, of which approximately 2,700 were international undergraduate students. The sample for this survey was filtered by undergraduate students that the university identified as degree-seeking and international.

The data collection for this study was based on a survey tool and follow-up focus groups. For every survey distribution, all undergraduate, degree-seeking international students were invited via email through the Department of International Student Life to complete an online survey. Two weeks after the initial email, all students received a reminder to complete the online survey. The survey was distributed in three consecutive semesters: fall 2019 (N=405), spring 2020 (N=435), and fall 2020, (N=339). To ensure validity of the survey questions, we elicited feedback on a pilot version from student staff members. To ensure reliable and dependable results of the survey tool, all participants were provided with the same questions and responses, and the same analytical approach was applied to all survey responses (Creswell, 2014). The survey was divided into three sections, and it solicited demographic information; information about respondents' peer groups; their current interest and involvement in co-curricular activities, which included items respondents could select from a list as well as an option for write-in responses; and perceived barriers to involvement, which also were selected from a list with an option for write-in responses.

While a mixed-methods approach was used within the overall project, for this research paper, we sought to further analyze and highlight the rich findings from the focus groups conducted with both second and third year students between spring and fall 2020. In the spring of 2020, in-person focus groups were conducted with sophomores (second years) and juniors (third years). In the fall 2020 semester, focus groups included juniors and seniors via Zoom. A total of four focus groups were conducted for a total of 13 participants across groups, and two interviewers/moderators. Each focus group lasted between 45-60 minutes. The data collected through the survey instrument helped frame the focus group experience and the subsequent findings allow for a deeper insight into the nuances of challenges that international students may face on campus. Focus group participant details can be found in Table 1.

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Table 1.
Participants' Details

Pseudonym	Country called home	Class standing (at time of respective focus group participation)	Major
Chu Hua	China	Third-year	Business
Mei	China	First-year	Entertainment and Media Studies
Eun-Woo	South Korea	Third-year	Financial Planning
Ting	China	First-year	Entertainment and Media Studies
Donghai	China	Second-year	Business
Achara	Thailand	Third-year	Music
Lan	China	Second-year	Marketing
Meera	India	Third-year	Biology
Pratam	Malaysia	Fourth-year	Economics
Xiuying	China	Third-year	English Education
Jorge	Peru	Fourth-year	Biology
Shu-fen	Taiwan	Third-year	Psychology
Prisha	Indian	Fourth-year	Chemistry

The semi-structured focus groups were based on a predetermined interview scheme that addressed the main research questions and were guided by responses from the initial survey tool. The research team developed the questions based on current knowledge from the literature and piloted the interview questions with student staff members to ensure that the questions and language were clear. The student staff members did not participate in the study. The audio recordings were transcribed using a professional transcription service and checked for errors by the research team. The research team independently coded the focus group transcripts based on inductive coding and then developed a code book in an iterative process. In addition, a software program MAXQDA was used to analyze the qualitative data. We also assigned pseudonyms to focus group participants. Our analysis focuses on the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the coding process (Saldaña, 2013; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

At the time of this study, all of the researchers were employed at the University of Georgia. In addition, two of the three worked professionally in international education and international student services, working to improve the experience of international students on campus. As such, we view engagement of international students as a critical component of the educational experience and worked to create inclusive environments for international students, faculty, and staff on campus. Throughout this study, we challenged our own preconceived notions about international student challenges, which were partly based on the experiences of students we knew of anecdotally. Lastly, our own lived experiences, both personal and professional, influence how we view internationalization and international student success as a key component of the U.S. collegiate experience as well as an area of growth for many divisions of student affairs nationwide.

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Findings

The findings revealed that international students at the University of Georgia (UGA) understand the importance of campus involvement and, in many instances, seek out opportunities to connect with the campus community. However, international students encounter unique barriers to involvement as they navigate people, academics, and processes that are situated in a southeastern American cultural context. Findings are presented in three main themes that capture the students' journey with campus involvement, from sense-making to embracing involvement opportunities at UGA. One theme revolves around making sense of involvement, which includes international students' approaches to aligning their interests and expectations with the U.S. context they experience. A second theme focuses on the barriers to involvement international students navigate. A third theme deals with international students' work to recraft/redefine involvement from their own perspective.

Making Sense of Involvement

Participants were asked in both the survey and subsequent focus groups to define and describe campus involvement. The majority of participants offered generalized examples of campus involvement such as events and student organizations. But participants also shared a more reflective understanding of the role of campus involvement in their development. The latter is captured in a response from Meera, a senior from India who transferred to UGA in her sophomore year from another U.S. campus, during the first focus group session:

> I think [involvement] is really important. I think with time I understood how important it is to be involved, because that's how I began meeting more people and growing my network and making more friends. . . . That's how my first two years was, just figuring it out. So, I was just observing, but slowly, I think I realized that it's really important to stay involved so that you can get more, you can connect with more people and make more friends and learn new things. And I think that's how you grow as a student and as an individual in college.

Several participants defined involvement as an alignment of out-of-the-classroom activity with personal interests or an intentional connection to their career ambitions. Nearly 40% of survey respondents indicated that they were either a member or a leader in a professional or pre-professional organization on campus. For many of these students, there appeared to be a delineation between involvement in academically oriented or pre-professional groups as opposed to other general involvement opportunities or attendance at campus events. Achara, a third-year transfer student from Thailand, highlighted this distinction during the first focus-group session when she shared:

> For me [involvement] might be an activity I enjoy. If it is something I'm interested in, then I would consider going, and if it works with my schedule then I would probably go. Also, some involvement to stand out on my resume or to promote my major or my skills or my leadership. . . . And also for example, I want to make friends, so going to international coffee hours would be something I would go to.

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International Student Engagement

While definitions of involvement across all focus group participants varied, what remained consistent was an acknowledgement that involvement meant more than just going to an event on campus. Rather, involvement was understood as being part of the fabric of campus life and something that required intentionality and personal effort. Jorge, a senior student from Peru, expanded on this idea:

> So for [American students], they already going with an, with some sort of network, with some sort of familiarity with the environment, but for us, I feel like it's a lot more of, okay, so everything is new. So I might as well just try this thing or this other thing, we're liking that thing. So I think that makes a big difference. Anything that really, I think that's one of the reasons why we are so open to trying new things because everything is new.

Even though participants indicated an interest in getting involved on campus, and many made active efforts to find a sense of belonging outside the classroom, several barriers made their efforts more challenging. These barriers, we found, are unique to international students and are in general not applicable to their non-American peers. As such, many of these barriers may be misunderstood or not recognized by campuses or student affairs staff when they develop and implement programming for the broader student population.

Barriers to Involvement

Participants in the study indicated several barriers to campus involvement, some common to college students in general and some seemingly unique to international students. While a slight majority felt more involved, nearly half (44%) felt less involved—an approximately even split that indicates international students are not a monolith. The perception of domestic peers being more involved manifested when Pratam, a senior transfer student from Malaysia, shared:

> I would say American students are more involved, they participate more, they're more willing to speak out. Of course, it's not for the whole general population, but I feel that international students, because they're coming from so far from home, they're dealing with different things, just trying to adapt, that's one thing that hinders their participation a little bit. And they're more focused on just keeping up with the new education system stuff.

Pratam's comments illuminated a series of perceived barriers by international students in the study, namely additional adjustment to the social and academic environment of campus that required additional energy and effort. When focus group participants were probed further as to what prevented them from becoming involved or getting more involved on campus, the leading barrier was the perception of not having enough time to participate or being too busy, mostly with academic work. These barriers are arguably a product of unique pressures that international students encounter while navigating a foreign campus environment, such as family expectations for high academic performance, financial concerns, and transportation challenges. Prisha, a senior student who transferred to UGA from another in-state institution, spoke about time constraints:

> I think time constraint happens when junior and senior year, and you do want to get involved. I think the barrier is just not knowing where to start or you see

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> people do stuff, but you don't know how they reach that point. I think figuring that out takes time.

"I think all Americans who are older than 16 own a car," shared Xiuying, a student from China, in reference to his challenges in getting to campus events and involvement opportunities. Other participants pointed out that many international students do not own a car, therefore, transportation to and from campus activities is a hurdle. Mei, a student from China, shared:

> . . . And sometimes, these events happen on-campus it's probably harder for international students to take part in. I think it's one of the reasons why some international students choose not to take part in those events.

This transportation barrier isn't only for international students living off campus: even students living on different parts of UGA's large campus expressed a logistical challenge. This point is an important consideration, as many student affairs professionals equate living on campus to greater ease in involvement. Eun-Woo, a student from South Korea, shared:

> Yeah. It's like time constraints, like when I heard some events are happening on the main campus, I was leaving at East Campus Village [residence hall], so maybe the bus, it won't take me, so I just give up.

Related to time barriers, academic coursework and related academic performance pressures were a second leading barrier. However, through the series of focus groups, it became clear that the academic barrier was often related to the previous barrier of time constraints in students' schedules or language barriers that required additional time studying and preparing for exams. Several students noted the familial pressures to perform well academically, highlighting the intersection of family pressures with the inherent challenges for international students navigating a foreign academic context. Achara, a junior transfer student (from another U.S. institution) from Thailand, said the following about placing academics first:

> For me I would say yes, because I am pretty serious about my GPA. I kind of want to get a good grade in every class, because I know that it will affect me in the future. So I always put academic first and expect my classes and my homework to be done before I get involved in something else. So I would say if I have busy schedule then it would really create barrier to get involved in the campus activities.

Language barriers, beyond their impact on studying, also were cited when it came to social interactions. Nearly 8% of survey respondents indicated language barriers as a leading reason they chose not to get involved on campus. Language barriers can be multifaceted—both in the time it takes to study (individual) and the time it takes to connect with others in a non-native tongue (in a group setting). Both are important and contribute in different ways, as noted by Mei, from China:

> I actually think some of international student are well known that we have this kind of new events here, but they tend to not to go to this events because of probably language barrier or time schedule, time conflict or something else, I guess. I think most of the U.S. student I know prefer to study more actually

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> instead of hanging out with their friends. But I think most U.S. students because they speak English and they stayed here for years so they definitely are more comfortable in those kinds of events.

Often accompanying a language barrier, although not exclusively, was a perceived cultural barrier to involvement. Cultural differences between international students and their domestic peers manifested in several ways. First, survey respondents indicated a lack of understanding of how to get involved within an American campus environment. More specifically, international students indicated challenges navigating student-organization membership applications and other processes.

A second manifestation of cultural barriers to involvement related to difference in cultural values and norms. Thirteen percent of survey respondents indicated a concern about fitting in or not feeling like they belonged as a barrier. Mei, an international student from China, shared the following about challenges with cultural values and norms, particularly as it related to parental support in the academic context:

> But one of the biggest difference or adjustments for me is I'm the first one in my family to go to college here. And for my parents understanding, I can tell that going to college here versus going to college in India is a huge difference. The way that the classes are, the way that the schedule is, . . .Everything about it is different and a lot of times my parents don't understand the things that I'm doing and why they're important, sometimes. So it's sometimes hard to explain to them and then also me myself just learning stuff because I can't really ask them about college because they just don't know enough about it. So that's definitely, I think, a really big difference between being an international student.

Cultural barriers existed for multiple participants, but seemingly more so when it came to organizations that had a majority American membership. Survey results showed low involvement in Greek-letter fraternity and sororities, political organizations, and governing bodies such as the Student Government Association and Residence Hall Association. However, 36% of survey respondents indicated being a member or leader in a cultural or ethnic organization. These involvement trends were examined more thoroughly in the focus group sessions. Another barrier connected to cultural differences is the perceived lack of interest of U.S. students in the cultural heritage and background of international students. The difficulty of taking on a different perspective was shared by Prisha, the senior transfer student from India:

> So I think like one typical ways example is like my roommate, she's from Georgia, and we are four people who share one room. Another roommate is also from Georgia and in the first time they meet they talk about like, "Where are you from?" High school or something and they find that they live very close or they might go that high school before. And then they are very easily to start talking or something. And when they ask me, "Where are you from?" I say, "China," and they say, "Oh cool." And that's the end. So that's one way they very easily to talk with each other. They have a lot of interests, like football games or tennis game or something. And they talk about like, "What's your favorite football player?"

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> and I say, "I don't know." I know UGA is very famous in football but I'm not so familiar.

This challenge of connecting with U.S. students manifested in international students as, at times, viewing U.S. students as a homogeneous social group. Meera, a biology major from India, shared this sentiment related to connecting with non-international, American peers:

> I think I mentioned this earlier to the sororities and I guess fraternities too, but I do feel there is a little bit of challenge besides the time restraints, so I would probably never apply. But I feel it is a little bit harder for international students to apply just because everyone has the same background and their families have told them to join it or they have friends who are joining in and they all have very similar backgrounds and stuff. And so I feel like even if I want to go interview for them, or go through that process of joining them I would just never have anything in common or anything to relate to them with.

Recrafting/Redefining Involvement

As previously stated, nearly 56% of aggregate survey respondents across semesters perceived that they were as involved or more involved than their peers. One student articulated her three-pronged approach to involvement that combined supporting cultural connections/language proficiency development, focusing on career aspirations, and committing to personal development, described by Melody, a first-year student from China:

> So I would think about them from three ways that I decide to become an involved student. The first one is that I really want to get engaged culturally. So I try to participate in some activities that UGA holds for better communication, like Language Lab, to better know a culture from a different culture. Yeah. The second one is for academic achievements. Like I'm going to apply to Grady College next semester, so maybe this semester or last semester I would try to enroll in some club, like the industry or Newsource [student club] to learn more about this view. And during that process, I feel like I'm getting more and more engagement. And the service is that I would do something to be more self-engaged or related to self-interest. I will go to some concerts and music school and work as a videographer at the Red and Black. So this was just my habits and my interest and doing that also helped me to feel more engaged as a student at UGA.

Donghai, a second-year student from China, articulated a similar approach that combined cultural connections, personal growth, and career focus.

> I think for me the first one is based on my interests, like the things I want to do. For me I really like doing volunteer stuff. During the winter break and spring break I went on an Impact [alternative break program] trip with some domestic students to help homeless people or doing some volunteer. And then secondly as an international student I really want to be involved in our community at school. I try to be a work leader in the international student orientation and meet more friends and help more people. Thirdly, I really want to choose

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> organizations based on my major. Since I'm a risk management and insurance major, so I participate in the Risk Management and Insurance Society of Terry [College of Business]. And then also some organizations that relates to what's my major.

The findings in this study highlight how the process of campus engagement is experienced differently by international students. Without resorting to a deficit view of international students, this population faces various challenges not experienced by their non-international peers. Additionally, our study found that involvement opportunities on campus tend to be U.S. centric. Without the cultural capital to understand the what, why, and purpose of specific involvement opportunities, like Greek life, there are little incentives for international students to become involved. Beyond that, staff within those offices to work are not incentivized to bridge the cultural barrier caused by lack of cultural capital. For many international students, we found that academically connected engagement opportunities were more popular, given their connection point to students' overall academic experience. Moving forward, we offer a discussion of these findings as well as implications for practice for student affairs professionals and campus engagement opportunities.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

This study offers insights into the perceptions of international students regarding their co-curricular engagement at a research-intensive institution in the south. It speaks to the experience of international students and their approaches to identifying opportunities, determining which opportunities they plan to engage in, and what barriers or limitations they might experience. Upon review of the data, our findings support previous research findings about barriers related to language and cultural differences as well as the pressures international students might experience regarding their academic performance.

This study adds to the conversation about international student engagement by highlighting that barriers to involvement are only one of the issues that need to be addressed in our work with international students. Improving issues around cultural and social capital would make it easier to both understand the role of co-curricular engagement and support the sense-making process. In addition, our research presents a third area—the recrafting of engagement—in which international students may create new or different ways of engaging and selecting engagement opportunities. The results from this study have implications for practice that student affairs units might consider to ensure full access to their offerings by international students.

- Language barrier: The barrier of language remains an obstacle for some international students and student affairs units might consider language audits of their websites, event descriptions, and applications for students. This issue is not just for marketing and outreach, but it also relates to cultural and social capital when it comes to processes and the hidden expectations.
- Understanding international student experiences: Student affairs units that do not exclusively serve or directly focus on international students may not be as familiar

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with the experiences of international students. Learning opportunities for staff might increase awareness student identity related to program design as well as of barriers to engagement, such as issues related to transportation (e.g., students might not have a car or need to map out a bus route) or lack of clarity around purpose of engagement opportunity (e.g., engaging to meet other students, to network with professionals, to learn more about an academic field).

- Increasing representation of international students: Student affairs units and programs serve a broad range of students but may lack student representation from international students. Analyzing student participation data/dashboards might provide insight into student populations that are underserved in certain areas or programs.
- Intentional program design of engagement experiences: The study showed that international students seek involvement both to meet other students and to support their own personal and professional development, but tensions around time management and co-curricular exploration must be navigated. Programs or engagement opportunities that can be multifunctional and serve to build peer-to-peer relationships as well as advance personal and/or professional development might be most meaningful and beneficial to international students. Related to an earlier implication, the language used to describe engagement opportunities is critical both for accessibility as well as for sense-making.
- Understanding the cultural barriers related to language and social capital: The structure of U.S. higher education can be challenging for international students to fully grasp while also working to excel academically and thrive in a new cultural environment. In addition, for students who may not use English as their first language, constant engagement with English in an academic setting may present challenges, including barriers to involvement. Student affairs professionals should be aware of these barriers and work to support students through engagement experiences and by understanding different ways involvement is conceived. International students navigate a new language and culture as well as the complex structure of U.S. higher education institutions. Increased cohesion, referrals, and different ways of conceiving of involvement and engagement might benefit international students.
- Shifting from reactive to proactive involvement: Student affairs professionals should consider proactively structuring involvement experiences to be of interest and inclusive to international students from their conception. Additionally, staff should be cognizant to view involvement from more than a Western-centric lens, not simply hoping that international students can figure out the context.
- Reframing the burden of intercultural understanding and competency: The study indicated the presence of intercultural challenges between international students and their domestic peers. The burden of engagement often sits with international students, although all might benefit from more meaningful interactions. Student affairs units might consider creating opportunities for multidirectional learning that include both intercultural and interfaith components.

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Questions for Student Affairs Professionals to Consider

It is our hope that this study encourages student affairs professionals and divisions to move toward greater inclusivity in their engagement practices. This commitment requires increased education and awareness of how international student engagement may differ from the "traditional" experience of non-international peers. As programs, services, and engagement opportunities are planned, we encourage student affairs professionals to consider the following questions to move toward a proactive approach to inclusion of international students in engagement opportunities:

- How might we audit language used on websites, forms, flyers, and marketing and outreach materials?
- How might we talk about leadership and civic engagement in ways that make sense to international students and reduce the cultural and social capital required to access opportunities?
- What kind of learning opportunities might advance awareness and understanding of international student experiences across student affairs staff and equip staff to consider international student experiences in their approaches to their work with students?
- How might we integrate considerations for student identity in our program design?
- How might we better anticipate potential barriers for different student populations?
- How might we help international students make sense of co-curricular offerings?
- How might we support international students in their sense-making of the institutional context, e.g., related to athletics and its impact on campus socialization processes?
- How might we create a more cohesive approach to programming and referrals to reduce the need to navigate a complex system and shift to a more proactive approach in our design of student experiences?
- How might we create opportunities for multi-directional learning among students that highlights the role of identity related to culture and faith?

The above questions provide a blueprint for staff, student leaders, and others involved in the co-curricular experience to reimagine how programs and services may be offered in a more culturally inclusive manner to benefit international student engagement. Student affairs professionals should be cautious to avoid the assumption that all international students experience the same challenges and view engagement in the same manner. Much like cultural differences exist across regions of the U.S., so do the cultural differences within the aggregate experience of international students. Regardless, these questions are a starting point to begin creating more culturally inclusive and responsive engagement experiences on college campuses.

Limitations

The limitations of our study relate to the study participants as well as the timing of the study during the COVID-19 pandemic and the context of the institution. The study was oversaturated with international students who are transfer students from other U.S. campuses. In addition, the majority of participants were of Asian background. The second

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limitation relates to the timing of the study. The data collection process straddled both pre-pandemic and the onslaught of COVID-19, a time when engagement was redefined for higher education altogether. We expect that the on-campus experience was altered due to COVID-19 precautions taken by students in their selection of engagement opportunities. The institutional offerings may have also been dissimilar in some ways to previous years with students having fewer choices regarding engagement opportunities. Lastly, this study was conducted at a research-intensive institution in the Southern region of the U.S., with a strong presence in SEC athletics, which impacts campus culture related to student engagement.

Conclusion and Areas for Future Research

This study identified several themes which influence an international student's perception of and decision to pursue campus engagement opportunities. The findings showcase the challenges that international students may face in becoming engaged on campus, with specific issues related to cultural capital, needing to link the benefits of engagement to academic success, and encountering activities lacking in cultural competence or understanding. Our study highlights several suggestions for practice for student affairs practitioners to create engagement opportunities that serve all students and take into consideration the unique experiences of international students. Lastly, this study indicates several areas for future research, including the experience and perception of virtual engagement opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic for international students as well as international transfer students and their specific engagement choices. Future studies could also illuminate in more detail how international students are redefining or recrafting involvement in different ways than their domestic peers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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Human Participants

This study was approved by the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board (IRB). All persons who participated in this study did so voluntarily and were made aware of minimal risks. Participants were provided a $25 Amazon Gift Card for their time and participation. All participants will remain anonymous.

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