Engaging International Transfer Students at University of Washington Tacoma

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ENGAGING INTERNATIONAL TRANSFER STUDENTS
AT UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON TACOMA

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ABSTRACT

International student social engagement on university campuses is increasingly challenging as more students transfer from community colleges and commute from long distances. Furthermore, international student programming has traditionally viewed appropriate engagement behavior through the lens of the host campus’ cultural norms, not through the lens of the students’ native cultural attitudes and behavior. As a result, the programming is unrelatable, overlooks international students’ actual needs, and/or poorly attended. This case study at the University of Washington Tacoma, which was conducted by an international student advisor, used qualitative research methods to examine the ways in which cultural dimensions and contexts may influence an international student’s attitude and social behavior while studying at a university. Explorations of transfer and commuter identities are also evaluated as factors that impact international students’ social engagement.
Introduction and Statement of Research Question

Engaging students on campus is an important component of international student services, but programming is often outdated, overlooks cultural attitudes and behaviors, and simplifies student development. Many colleges and universities offer a variety of social events and programming intended to integrate international students into the campus community, provide opportunities for them to meet other students, and introduce them to aspects of U.S. culture. These initiatives are often supported by internationalization efforts from the highest administrative echelons at the university, who believe that an increase in international student presence and diversity will create a more multicultural and accepting campus community (Glass, Wongtrirat & Buus, 2015; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013; Lee, 2014).

Despite the energy and enthusiasm of international student services staff and volunteers, these efforts often fall short: events are poorly attended, international students cluster with peers from their home country or other international students, and many lament their lack of American friends. According to Baladassar & Mackenzie (2016), there is an assumption that engagement and integration will happen organically, prompted simply by the mere presence of international students on campus. International educators expect that because they chose to study in another country, international students will naturally have the same eagerness to participate in cross-cultural exchanges. Part of the problem could be that international student assessments rarely touch upon the attitudes and behaviors behind these students’ actions.

Across the university campus, student services staff are equally puzzled by how to effectively integrate first generation college students, commuter students, and those who have transferred from other universities or community colleges. Students with these identities are often juggling multiple priorities, such as full-time work, caring for family members, and
contributing to their household income, as well as long commutes and financial stressors. Furthermore, they may be unfamiliar with the bureaucracy of academia, the assumptions that are made by faculty, staff, and administrators, and a lack of confidence in navigating these systems without the guidance and support of family. These student population may commute to campus and already have social networks in another community, so they may not recognize the value of campus engagement as a component of student success and professional development.

As college and university campuses diversify – not just in terms of cultural diversity, but also in terms of age, socioeconomic status, ability, gender identification, sexual orientation, veterans status, and the like – leaders need to think more broadly about the ways in which they define student engagement and success (Glass, Wongtrirat & Buus, 2015; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). Programming needs to be meaningful, applicable, and appropriate to all needs and expectations; it cannot rely on the expectation that students live on campus and have time to participate in events in the evenings. Instead, it should meet the students where they are and meet the needs they have at that particular moment, rather than six months or two years in the future.

Moreover, university programming should be mindful of the range of points at which a student is developing. Marcia Baxter Magolda (Arnett, Magolda & Taylor, 2015; Baxter Magolda, 2001; Hodge, Baxter Magolda, & Haynes, 2009; Magolda, Creamer, & Meszaros, 2011; Baxter Magolda & Taylor, 2017) proposed a theory that humans develop in a way that connects the cognitive, social and identity along a path of self-authorship. When an individual is young, she argued, she regularly seeks the opinions and validation of others when making decisions, gathering information, and developing relationships. However, as the research suggests, once an individual feels more confident and settled into her identity, affirmation and
the opinions of others become less valuable because the individual is placing value on events, information, and relationships in ways that make sense and feel authentic to her unique lived experience and personhood. The overarching guideline for how these beliefs, identities, and relationships are constructed is called meaning-making. “By allowing individuals to reflect on and decide how to filter external expectations, self-authorship enables individuals to think critically, act authentically, and interact mutually” (Baxter Magolda & Taylor, 2017, p. 154). The ultimate goal of this journey, which often occurs from the teenage years into the 30s, is to reach a point where an individual is synthesizing information from others in a way that makes sense to herself based on personal values and worldviews.

Self-authorship is an important consideration for international and higher education professionals because the vast majority of students are likely somewhere along this journey. “College students gain the capacity to make internally based decisions through experiences that help them recognize the shortcomings of uncritically following external formulas, see the need to construct their own beliefs and values, and engage them in doing so” (Arnett, Magolda & Taylor, 2015, para. 7). Some students are very independent at age 18, while others need extra guidance and reassurance when they are 28. Moreover, academic and personal pressures can create internal conflict, but these complex challenges can be the impetus for an individual to make meaning of the experiences and form his or her own identity. The same is true for international students who have additional challenges that may have significant impacts on how they process their experience in another country, such as navigating acculturative stress and homesickness. Although many expect to struggle with language, traditions, and social networks, Glass, Wongtrirat, & Buus (2015) found that international students are optimistic about and ready to embrace the journey to self-identity that lies ahead of them.
Shifting away from a one-size fits all programming mentality is particularly important for fostering a community of inclusion that welcomes international student involvement. International students are simultaneously experiencing a new culture, a new academe with a different methodology and bureaucracy, navigating new grocery stores, transit systems, and social interactions – and all in their second (or third or fourth) language (Russell, Rosenthal & Thomson, 2010; Terrazas-Carrillo, Hong & Pace, 2014; Singaravelu & Pope, 2007). University staff seems to expect that international students should engage in the same ways as domestic students, only they should step up and represent their culture, wear their native clothing and cook their native foods when prompted by administrators during diversity days or International Education Week. Basic needs are either completely overlooked or disproportionately the center of focus.

This attitude reveals ignorance and ethnocentrism because it completely ignores the fact that there are many variations of cultural context. As noted by Edward Hall (1976),

Seldom do we look to our lack of understanding of the processes themselves or entertain the notion that there might be something wrong with the design of our institutions or the manner in which the personality and the culture mesh (p. 91).

Administrators may have the best of intentions, but their actions may not always exhibit cultural awareness and they may unknowingly marginalize international students when the separate them from the rest of the student body.

Geert Hofstede introduced the notion of “mental programs” in his pivotal book *Culture’s Consequences*, in the 1980s, which revealed the five major dimensions of culture: individualism versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity versus femininity, and long-term versus short-term orientation. He argued that the culture in which one was raised has a
direct impact on what one values and how they behave (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). “Every person carries within him- or herself patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting that were learned throughout the person's lifetime” (p. 4). These rules are unwritten and learned behaviors that influence attitudes and actions even when an individual is no longer in that same space.

Each of these cultural dimensions has a different impact on the ways a person acts and perceives others’ behaviors (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Individualistic cultures, for example, expect that one is independent and thinks first of her best interests, whereas collectivist cultures value community, doing things as a group, and consider how an action or decision will impact one’s family, organization, and those around her. Cultures with a high power distance revere hierarchy and individuals do not challenge those who have authority over them, particularly parents, teachers/professors, and leaders, whereas cultures with a low power distance value equality and encourage the challenge of ideas and authority. In uncertainty avoidance cultures, individuals are anxious about ambiguity and structures, organizations, or rules that are not clearly defined, while individuals in uncertainty accepting cultures will suppress their emotions and believe in common sense. Masculine cultures will place greater emphasis on clearly defined gender roles, material wealth, and asserting themselves, while feminine cultures will emphasize equitable gender roles, nurturing, and quality of life. Long-term orientation cultures value perseverance and future rewards while short-term orientation cultures value traditions rooted in the past and saving face.

Hall further explains the differences between the ways in which cultures communicate and process information in his pivotal work, Beyond Culture (1976). Some cultures, such as the U.S., are low-context cultures, which tend to be more explicit and direct in their communication,
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whereas other cultures are high-context and rely heavily on information that is implied and assumed to be understood.

Understanding these cultural dimensions and contexts is particularly important for international student services professionals in the United States because most international students are from cultures that are quite opposite the U.S. For example, according to Open Doors (2017), the top sending countries are China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Vietnam, Taiwan, Japan, Mexico, Brazil, and Iran. With the exception of Canada, which is similar in most ways to the U.S., all of these cultures are collectivist, have a higher power distance, high context, and long-term orientation, whereas the U.S. and Canada are individualist, lower power distance, low context, and short-term orientation cultures. Aside from India, all of these cultures have a higher uncertainty avoidance than the U.S. and Canada. One of the only cultural dimensions that most international students may share with U.S. students is masculinity. Once one recognizes how these “mental programs” may influence an international students’ perspective, their actions and behaviors begin to make more sense.

Literature Review/Authority for Study

An extensive literature review for this study determined that on campus engagement strategies for international students and transfer students, but there is a void in exploring their attitudes and behaviors as well as understanding the intersectionality of students who fall into both categories. Gone are the days when all international students entered a four-year university as freshmen and lived on campus in dormitories. Like their domestic peers, international students can no longer be viewed as a singular unit or population; increasingly, international educators should support them as intersectional individuals who are part of multiple marginalized campus groups.
Today, international students are looking for ways to pursue their degrees in ways that are efficient and provide a return on their investments without going into debt. The latest Open Doors report (2017) indicates that many of the governments that once offered comprehensive scholarships for international students are decreasing these opportunities. They are not eligible for financial aid, most do not qualify for fellowships such as Fulbright or Gilman, and many universities, particularly those funded by state taxes, offer very few scholarships to international students.

Some international educators and administrators are under the false assumption that international students are from wealthy families and therefore do not need financial assistance, but the reality is very different. Instead, most students are relying on personal or family finances to fund their studies with the expectation that a degree from an international university will enable them to return home and help improve the entire family’s circumstances (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). In this way, international students are not pursuing their individual dreams – they are pursuing the collective dreams of their entire family.

Furthermore, the emerging international student markets are from countries such as Vietnam, Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Nepal, which have a growing middle class and a lower cost of living (Open Doors, 2017). Potential students from these countries are more cost-conscious and their families may have made numerous personal and financial sacrifices to fund the education of their child, who may be the first in the family to pursue a post-secondary degree. These students feel added pressure to succeed while also honoring these sacrifices while not squandering the financial investment (Lee, 2014).

Finances are regularly cited as a major source of stress for international students (Rubin, 2014; Lee in Quaye & Harper, 2014; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Moreover, U.S. visa regulations
limit international students to on-campus jobs with limited hours. Campus positions are usually scarce, competitive, and often offered to domestic students who hiring departments may perceive as having more skills, experience, and English language skills (Lee, 2014). These assumptions and stereotypes should concern university administrators because as noted by Orfali in Rubin (2014), “Retention rates for students who have campus jobs are very, very high” (p. 36). As a result of these challenges, most international students are distracted by financial issues throughout the course of their studies and may struggle academically.

As a result, they may be more inclined to begin their studies at a community college to reduce costs. Some students will complete an Associate’s degree before they enroll in a four-year institution. Many, particularly those in business, science, and math majors, will experience transfer shock, or the difference in academic expectations, bureaucratic systems, and other challenges, when they first arrive at a new university (Wood & Moore, 2014). Moreover, transfer students may experience a change in their GPA and may seek more help in finding and accessing resources, meeting new students, selecting classes, and engaging on campus.

Others will oscillate back and forth between a community college and four-year university throughout their degree. This non-linear pattern of completing coursework has been termed “swirling” (Hagedorn & Hu, 2014; Jacoby, 2014) and although it has been common with domestic students, it is becoming increasingly popular tactic for international students. Many use this opportunity to save money on tuition or enroll in classes that better fit their interests or schedules. However, as Hagedorn and Hu (2014) observed, some also use it to avoid taking general humanities and social science courses that they perceive as too difficult or demanding at a university, particularly if the student is not confident in his or her English-language writing or
speaking abilities. Perhaps, they concluded, this trend is not exclusively about finances; perhaps it is also because universities are failing to serve international students’ needs.

International students are not only part of a university’s transfer student population; they also comprise a large segment of the commuter student population. Mediocre, unreliable, or non-existent public transportation infrastructure often surprises international students (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Some students will commute from a long distance as a means of reducing costs, but this in itself becomes a stressor as their routines become less predictable due to traffic, transit schedules, and finding parking (Jacoby, 2014). Moreover, commuting to campus often limits their ability to engage with the community in a meaningful way and many feel disconnected from the rest of the campus community. Those who are “swirling” have the added stress of commuting both to the university campus and to a community college, which exacerbates time management challenges (Hagedorn & Hu, 2014).

As a result, these international students face the challenge of being part of three marginalized groups that have been historically undersupported by university administrators. Multiple studies have underscored the isolation, depression, anxiety, and loneliness experienced by many international students (Glass, Gomez, & Urzua, 2014; Lee, 2014; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Rubin, 2014; Russell, Rosenthal & Thomson, 2010; Singaravelu & Pope, 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Sue & Sue, 2015; Zhao, Kuh & Carini, 2005), but researchers conclude that these feelings are the result of speaking a second language (Glass, Gomez, & Urzua, 2014). Few of them look at how the student’s culture influences their perspectives, and none evaluate how other identities, such as transfer or commuter student, may impact their behavior and attitudes.

The majority of research regarding international student engagement is focused primarily on one of two areas: academic engagement and social connections and relationships. Academic
engagement, although integral to a student’s experience and success, is an entirely different realm of theory, frameworks, and scholarship, and such, will not be addressed in depth in this research. International student social engagement is deeply impacted by a student’s social connections and relationships, however, and as such, it is worth exploring this research as a way of better informing trends within international student services.

In terms of social connections and relationships, all of the literature reviewed for this study focused on how well international students were integrating with their peers. Some studies focused on assimilation, meaning to become part of the local culture and take on these values and behaviors as one’s own. Others focused on acculturation – modifying, adapting, or borrowing parts of a culture’s behaviors and values while retaining elements of one’s own culture - or becoming an equal part of a community through integration. The main question that was asked over and over again was, do international students have friends? If so, where are they from – and seemingly most importantly, are they making friends with students from the U.S.? In other words, are they assimilating into our culture?

Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) developed a social interaction continuum model that explains the nature of international students’ relationships. The first category they proposed is self-segregators, or international students who avoid uncomfortable or challenging social interactions and instead form relationships solely with conational students from the same country or culture group. Self-segregators, which comprised 27 percent of their study sample, seemingly intentionally exclude both domestic or host nationals and other international students. Students who self-segregate rely on other co-national students for help with personal problems (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002). Conational relationships provide social support and a connection
to one’s cultural identity but may also unintentionally lead to the entire group’s marginalization within the greater campus community (Singaravelu & Pope, 2007).

Interestingly, Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) noticed that a self-segregator approach to social interactions is appealing to a very specific demographic: students from China, Taiwan, South Korea, India, and Turkey with very limited travel experience and the majority (63 percent) of whom are female. Although they have established social supports within their conational groups, they tend to suffer the most from acculturative stress because they have opted to withdraw from and to avoid dealing with cultural differences rather than working through the discomfort (Singaravelu & Pope, 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002).

The second, third, and fourth categories developed by Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) can be generalized as global mixers. Exclusive global mixers, which comprised 38 percent of their sample, interact with both conationals and international students from other countries, but like self-segregators, they avoid host nationals. Some students in this category, such as those from South and East Asia, Mexico, Palestine, and Switzerland, gravitate only to conationals and those who are ethnically similar, while others mix with a wide range of conationals and international students.

Inclusive global mixers, on the other hand mix with everyone. Most of the inclusive global mixers, which comprised 28 percent of the sample, were well traveled, fluent in English, and, notably, very few were from cultures in South or East Asia. Interestingly, these students viewed their relationships with the host national as mutually beneficial and the vast majority of these relationships were with U.S. students who had traveled extensively or lived abroad. The shared identity of “international student,” similar challenges, and, frankly, rejection lend themselves to common ground and a strong support network (Lee, 2014; Glass, Wongrirat &
Buus, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011) and foster opportunities for students to discuss their values, opinions, and culture with others who are very different than them (Korobova & Starobin, 2015).

Research has indicated that inclusive global mixers are, in fact, the most adaptive because they are the most accepting, flexible, and supportive and as such, these relationships tend to be the most enduring and deserving of loyalty (Singaravelu & Pope, 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Global mixer relationships provide an ideal environment for international students to develop their own individual meaning-making and self-authorship because they are not under pressure to conform or assimilate and can instead grow in their own self and cultural identity.

The final category identified by Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) are host interactors. These international students, which comprised only seven percent of the sample, interacted exclusively with host nationals. All had travelled extensively, had advanced English-language skills, had similar interests in aspects of the local culture, particularly sports. Host interactors tend to be from Canada, Australia, and Western European countries (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002). They seemed motivated to avoid isolating or segregating themselves from the host country and were therefore more inclined to assimilate with U.S. culture, which made them more relatable and accessible to host national students. Notably, all of them also appeared to be White.

In many ways, relationships with host nationals can be valuable for international students because they provide insight into the culture, practices, and expectations of both the host country and university. Moreover, research suggests that relationships with host nationals lowers acculturative stress and loneliness (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhao, Kuh & Carini, 2005; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002; Glass, Gomez & Urzua, 2014; Caplan & Stevens,
However, they are also the most difficult relationships to cultivate and maintain, and the rejection or disappointment international students may feel when their attempts to develop these relationships are thwarted can have a negative impact.

There are numerous reasons why international and host national students do not easily engage with one another. For starters, there is a disconnect between intent and impact. Host nationals often self-assess their level of friendliness and openness very differently than international students. Glass, Buus, and Braskemp (2013) discovered that U.S. students viewed their campuses as welcoming of international students, but the vast majority of those interviewed scarcely interacted directly with those from other cultures and did not intentionally integrate international students into their social circles. As noted by Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010): “Contrary to popular belief, intercultural contact among groups does not automatically breed mutual understanding. It usually confirms each group in its own identity. Members of the other group are perceived not as individuals but rather in a stereotyped fashion” (p. 387-388). Lee (2014) has confirmed this tendency in multiple studies which have revealed a trend of neoracism, or discrimination based on negative assumptions about one’s country of origin, on many college and university campuses, which negatively impacts a student’s comfort level in engaging with host nationals.

Next, there is a difference between expectations for friendship. Research has shown that international students categorically viewed their relationships with host nationals as superficial; although they view their host peers as kind and helpful, the difference in attitudes towards friendship were difficult to overcome. International students expect close friends to take an interest and active role in their daily lives, and their perception of U.S. students’ attitudes on friendship did not match this expectation (Gareis, 1995, as cited in Glass, Wongtrirat & Buus,
They are often surprised that invitations for coffee do not lead to closer relationships and
casual “how are you?” inquiries are not actually sincere. Moreover, cultural norms and language
barriers may also make it more difficult for international students to befriend host nationals
(Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Finally, these two groups often struggle to find common ground. International students
prefer to spend more time on campus (Edwards, 2008) and focus more energy on academics and
studying in groups, whereas host nationals spend more time working, traveling, relaxing,
partying, and participating in family events (Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Zhao, Kuh & Carini,
2005; Lee in Quaye and Harper, 2014). Students from some collectivist cultures with high
uncertainty avoidance may feel uncomfortable with students of diverse backgrounds, such as
different races and sexual orientations, because their home cultures encourage conformity. As a
result, they may choose to avoid “diversity issues that require tolerance of uncertainties and
ambiguities” (Singaravelu & Pope, 2007, p. 181). Moreover, both Gomez’s EPRP Model and
Berry’s model of acculturation (as cited in Glass, Gomez, & Uruza, 2014) discovered the impact
of language of choice: international students who use only English in leisure contexts were more
likely to integrate or assimilate into the local culture, whereas those who use only their native
language were more likely to unintentionally marginalize themselves.

Difficulties in developing relationships are directly related to differences between the
ways individualist and collectivist cultures engage with one another. Self-segregators, for
example, felt that the disconnect between their collectivist cultures and the individualist culture
of the U.S. to be a challenging barrier in developing friendships with host national students
(Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). Most international students come from collectivist
cultures that also have high levels of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity
indexes. As such, most feel a strong sense of obligation to the expectations of their families, respect authority figures such as their teachers and parents, and avoid making drawing attention to their lack of knowledge or mistakes. They are often surprised by U.S. student’s willingness to voice dissenting, uninformed, or narrow-minded opinions in and out of class, exhibit disrespect or rudeness to their parents and professors, use foul language. From their perspectives, they feel they would have to sacrifice or reject their cultural identity in order to develop friendships with host nationals (Zhao, Kuh & Carini, 2005). As Rose-Redwood and Rose Redwood (2013) concluded,

…the American college campus has indeed provided an ideal setting for cross-cultural dialogue between students of different nationalities, yet such global mixing has largely occurred to the exclusion of, rather than the adjustment to, the dominant American culture (p. 426).

Russell, Rosenthal and Thomson (2010) conducted a study on the acculturation behaviors of international students that revealed three patterns in behavior. First, they noted that those who isolate themselves may be most vulnerable to psychological distress or at-risk behavior because they internalize their pain, loneliness, and worries about academics and finances. The study indicated that one third of students, the majority of whom are female, isolate themselves and tend to exhibit an array of psychosomatic symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, paranoia, sleep disturbances, and loss of appetite. On the other hand, roughly 6.7 percent of primarily male students who isolate themselves and feel a strong sense of acculturative stress tend to be more inclined to channel their pain, loneliness, and frustration into at-risk behaviors such as drugs, alcohol, gambling, and self-harm. The majority of students (60 percent) feel a strong sense of
connectedness to their peers and host community and have found healthy ways to navigate acculturative stress.

Russell, Rosenthal, and Thomson (2010) concluded that international student services professionals should focus their outreach efforts to the first group of students because their experiences can be more easily improved. Although it is unknown how closely these acculturation behaviors correlate with Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood’s social interaction continuum model, there seems to be a direct relationship between the percentage of students who internalize or externalize their pain and the percentage of self-segregators.

As international students are learning about their new environment and relationships, they are simultaneously exploring new aspects of themselves. Relocating to a new place disrupts an individual’s sense of place identity, or their attachment, meanings, and emotional connections associated with familiar spaces (Terrazas-Carrillo, Hong & Pace, 2014). Navigating the unfamiliar and their shifting feelings about their cultures may be stressful and confusing because they are not surrounded by individuals and social structures that reinforce their cultural frameworks and programming (Singaravelu & Pope, 2007). As Baxter Magolda explains,

Only when we have encountered a number of exceptions do we stop to consider whether our rule needs to be changed...It is this ability to extract ourselves from how we operate in the world to analyze it that reflects movement along the development journey (as cited in Baxter Magolda & Taylor, 2017, p. 157)

Some struggle or may even refuse to reflect on their experiences in a meaningful way, while others adapt easily to new cultural rules. Most, however, define their new positionality as neither their native culture nor the culture of their university, but rather a cultural identity that lies somewhere in between (Glass, Wongtrirat & Buus, 2015; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood,
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2013; Terrazas-Carrillo, Hong & Pace, 2014). International educators sometimes forget or overlook the strong sense of confidence and independence that international students must possess in order to move to another country and pursue a degree (Yang, Noels & Saumure, 2005). Perhaps instead of grumbling that international students require extra handholding, professionals should instead play an important role in supporting students as they “reintegrate their identity as they perceive themselves, and empower them to not allow U.S. culture to redefine their identity” (Singaravelu & Pope, 2007, p. 204).

Research has been conducted on making campus engagement programming meaningful, experiential, and appealing to the international students’ desire for professional soft skills (Glass, 2017; Glass, Gomeze & Urzua, 2014; Glass, Wongtrirat & Buus, 2015). Rather than sightseeing trips and casual conversations, international student services should provide opportunities that allow participants to develop leadership skills, volunteer in the community, and collaborate on cross-cultural projects or tasks. Today’s international students are seeking ways that they can set themselves apart from the rest of the job market when searching for internships and OPT positions, so they are more inclined to find value in activities that specifically develop skills that will help them succeed on a multicultural team.

Moreover, professional development also provides opportunities for self-authorship development and cross-cultural understanding. In particular, “leadership programs that involve collaboration and teamwork with others from varied cultural background has a markedly strong effect on international students' sense of community” (Glass, Buus & Braskamp, 2013, p. 13). Leadership opportunities offer a non-threatening space and context for international students to connect with peers they might not otherwise meet, explore different viewpoints, and improve their confidence in cross-cultural relationships (Glass, Wongtrirat & Buus, 2015). The key is to
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provide leadership opportunities that allow international students to both gain confidence in their abilities and retain their cultural identity.

Another theme that emerged from the literature was the importance of cross-campus collaborations. Entirely too often, international student services offices are responsible for all cross-cultural engagement; as Glass, Wongtrirat, and Buus (2015) indicate, this responsibility may be directed by administrators, or it may be perceived, assumed or expected by the campus community or the international student services office itself. Many universities are siloed and competitive, which makes collaboration challenging. Nevertheless, the most important factor in helping students feel welcomed – whether they are international, transfer, commuter, veteran, first generation, or students from another marginalized group – is a campus community that fosters inclusion and eliminates unnecessary structural barriers (Laanan, Starobin & Eggleston, 2010). Everyone who interacts with international students and other students of diverse backgrounds should receive training on global awareness and appreciation so that they can contribute to this type of supportive community (Lee, 2014). It is up to the “adults” in the room to find ways to simplify processes, bridge gaps, and better serve students.

When all of the student services offices on a campus collaborate – from international to disability to transfer student offices – it results in more robust and effective programming for all students. The same is true with offices that support international student services: collaborations with groups such as housing, food services, admissions, the registrar, and the like, coupled with improved intercultural awareness, helps improve processes and experiences for all students from diverse backgrounds (Glass, Wongtrirat & Buus, 2015). Working collaboratively also prevents duplicative efforts and instead pools resources into one streamlined initiative.
Partnering is not enough; offices should also advocate together for common needs and solutions they present should take students’ self-authorship and development needs into consideration. As noted by Baxter Magolda (2017), international educators and student services staff “need to combine challenges that require students to stretch beyond their current ways of making meaning toward more complex ways of making meaning with supports that validate their ability to develop and use their internal voice” (p. 165). Each program, event, service, and appointment should help students explore new viewpoints, skills, relationships, decision-making tactics, and agency.

Initiatives that impact international students should be linked to a university strategic plan. Assessment results should be provided to all campus stakeholders (Wilkie, 2016). If a college or university wants to internationalize its community, it needs to think beyond the extra tuition dollars that international students contribute to the budget. Instead, it should encourage international student feedback and voices from the top to the bottom of organizational structures. For example, one student government voice could be allocated to an international student who is nominated by international student advisors, faculty, and their peers. As stated by Glass (2017):

Diversity without inclusion is only a metric. Inclusion recognizes and embraces the need for all members of the institutional community to have a sense of ownership in the institution and a place of belonging. It requires sustained and intentional institutional commitment and action. Tolerance is passive and may be a starting point. Inclusion is active and reflects the continuing character of a campus (para. 4).

If a campus community wants an inclusive environment that invites, honors, and respects international students’ voices and experiences, then they must at the very least invite them to the table.
Too often, it seems that some international educators gauge a student’s success based on their engagement with host national students or achievements in overcoming cultural challenges. Those who are not succeeding by Western or U.S. standards are viewed as maladjusted (Sue & Sue, 2015). Programming offered to combat culture shock promotes Westernized concepts of social skills and stress-coping strategies (Lee, 2014). Students are advised, for example to manage their studying using strategies that do not take into consideration the extra work required for those who are learning in a language that is not their first.

However, as the literature shows, this is a misguided measure of socialization and acculturation. Pushing for assimilation does not accelerate adaptation; in fact, an individual adapts best to a new culture when one has conationalists who can help support them through the transition (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Moreover, this ethnocentric attitude completely overlooks the unique experiences and perspectives that international students bring to campus dialogue (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). As noted by Lee (2014):

The fundamental problem with such viewpoints is that they not only place the responsibility on the newcomer to adjust, but they also discount the cultural value that international students offer in bettering the host environment. The acculturation framework, for instance, assumes cultural superiority and devalues what newcomers may offer; that is, that there is a “better way” to be and live, namely from the position of the host society in comparison to the environment of origin (p. 112).

It is time that international educators “…move away from deficit models of engagement, which position international students as interculturally deficient and home students as interculturally efficient, when both need support” (Leask, 2009, as quoted by Glass, Wongtrirat & Buus, 2015, p. 62). Instead, they should avoid the role of expert, which exerts external
influence on international students’ decision-making processes, and instead foster a relationship that encourages students “to gain intellectual, relational, and personal maturity through continuous feedback and high expectations” (Hodge, Baxter Magolda, & Haynes, 2009, para. 16). Therefore, it would be prudent for universities to reflect on and prepare for the ways they can better serve these students and help them maximize their educational experience.

**Research**

**Culture of Inquiry**

The University of Washington Tacoma (UW Tacoma) is a unique university campus in several ways. First, the majority of its students are transfer students from local community colleges. Washington is known across the United States for its strong network of 34 community and two-year colleges. Today, they enroll about 381,000 students and serve as a stepping stone for the state’s four-year universities (Long, 2017). UW Tacoma benefits significantly from this system. For example, only 24 percent of the student population is enrolled at a first-year or sophomore level; 62 percent are enrolled as upper levels and 14 percent are enrolled in graduate programs (UW Tacoma, 2018). The unusually high numbers of upper-level students is largely due to a UW Tacoma policy that assures admission to those who transfer directly from a Washington community college and complete their associate’s degree with a GPA of at least 2.75 (UW Tacoma, 2007). As a result, most of the student population has experienced transfer shock.

Second, UW Tacoma is a largely nonresidential campus, which means nearly all of its students commute to campus. Many students commute from long distances, such as Seattle, Bellevue, and Olympia, and use public transportation which can consume several hours of each day (figure 1). Course schedules accommodate the needs of the three aforementioned groups that
often have work and family responsibilities in addition. Consequently, many do not stay on campus to socialize or engage in programming or activities after class.

Finally, one of UW Tacoma’s underlying values is its urban-serving mission. The campus was built in the middle of Tacoma’s historic warehouse district (figure 2), which had been neglected for decades, was reclaimed in the late 1990s, and is now redeveloped with museums, local businesses, and several post-secondary institutions (figures 3, 4 and 5). The UW Tacoma campus is situated at the crossroads of these varying sectors, and faculty, staff, and students are cognizant of the complex interactions between these socioeconomic groups.

The international student population at UW Tacoma is an unusually representative microcosm of the university demographics, even though they comprise only five percent of the greater population. Like the domestic population, nearly all of the 299 students on F-1 visas who were enrolled during Autumn 2017 and Winter 2018 were transfers from local community colleges. More than half (51 percent) are Juniors, Seniors, or Post-baccalaureate level students, and only 2 percent were enrolled as first-year students. Sixty percent of the international student population identifies as male. Half are from China, followed by India (16.7 percent), Hong Kong (7.5 percent), Taiwan (4.6 percent), and Vietnam and South Korea (3.5 percent each). In addition to the F-1 student population, 29 students on H-4 visas were also enrolled at UW Tacoma in Autumn 2017, all of whom were female, from India, and pursuing degrees in technology and business programs. The majority of these students are married to H-1b visa holders at Seattle-based technology companies and change their status to F-1 while they are a student at UW Tacoma. Unlike the broader student trends, one-third (33 percent) of students are graduate students, most of whom are enrolled in a technology or business program. Nearly all of the graduate students are from India and China (comprising 45 percent each). An additional 163
international students are graduates who are currently completing Optional Practical Training (OPT).

As with the rest of the UW Tacoma student population, international student engagement is challenging for many reasons. Because nearly all of the international students transferred to the university from other colleges, most students already have established social circles in other communities. Additionally, nearly all commute to campus, some for up to four hours each day, so their time investment on campus is often limited by public transportation schedules. Student engagement in social programming has been a challenge for all UW Tacoma student services departments, but it has been exceptionally modest amongst international students based on their identities as transfer, commuter, and international students, as well as other limitations. As a result, many struggle to connect with their peers, underutilize the resources and opportunities that are available to them, and instead opt to focus their time and energy on studying.

**Research Methodology**

UW Tacoma’s unique international student demographics lend themselves as a case study of three marginalized identities. The questions of inquiry that formed the basis of this research was threefold. First, it focused on the ways attitudes and behaviors influence engagement. The research explored the ways in which the cultural contexts, self-authorship and the identities of “international student” and “transfer student” impact engagement. Finally, it determined how international student services professionals can overcome these obstacles, avoid attitudes and behaviors that may unintentionally influence or negatively impact the international student experience, and offer services that meet the needs and expectations of our international student population, and build an international student and campus community that is engaged, welcoming, and resilient.
Data collection for this sample included two components: three informal interviews with one student each with the International Student Advisor in a meeting room on campus and distribution of an online survey to 299 international students. Both the survey and the interviews gathered qualitative information, which was coded, categorized, and used to identify participants’ level of satisfaction with the International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) Office and social engagement on campus. The term engagement was used to define participation in student services and social activities. Hofstede’s cultural contexts and Baxter-Magolda’s self-authorship theory were used to inform the interpretations of the findings and the engagement analysis. In doing so, the research highlighted trends in social engagement and expectations that could be traced back to certain on-campus offices, such as the International Student and Scholar Services Office, Student Involvement, Career Development, and the academic departments. In order to better understand why international students at UW Tacoma behave in a certain – in this instance, why they do or do not engage in campus events – there must first be an understanding of how their cultures have shaped their values and attitudes. The goal at UW Tacoma is not for international students to assimilate into the campus community, but rather to recognize their own uniqueness and value that they contribute to the group as a whole while simultaneously exploring and respecting the perspectives and experiences of their peers.

Participants

International students at the University of Washington were studied for their cultural values and attitudes towards social engagement on campus. A survey was distributed to all 299 international students who were enrolled at the University of Washington Tacoma during Autumn 2017 and Winter 2018 quarters. Invitations to take the survey were sent to participants in three separate emails and in the International Student Weekly Memo email newsletter for three
consecutive weeks. The term international student, in this context, refers to a student who has entered the United States on a short-term visa classification of F-1 or H-4. The students were actively enrolled at the time, maintaining lawful status, and their degree levels varied to include Bachelor’s degrees, post-baccalaureate, and Master’s degrees. The international students at UW Tacoma represent 27 countries and 96 percent of them are from countries in Asia, namely China (50.7 percent) and India (16.9 percent). The vast majority (62.8 percent) of the student population transferred from either a community college or another university, and 87 percent of them transferred from within Washington. The majority (65.5 percent) of international students at UW Tacoma are enrolled in programs in either the Institute of Technology (43.8 percent) or the Milgard School of Business (21.7 percent), and an additional 14 percent are classified as Pre-Majors, which means they have not yet been accepted into their program of interest. Of the 38 survey participants, 81.5 percent were from these degree areas and they were evenly split between Bachelor’s and Master’s level degrees. Country of origin was specifically not requested in the survey because 20 of the 27 countries represented on campus have three or fewer students and responses to this question could have unintentionally disclosed a student’s identity. The three participants for the interviews range in degree areas and country of nationality, but all were from South or East Asia and reflected the degree levels and programs that comprise the majority of international students.

**Data collection methods**

A survey was distributed to all 299 international students. Thirty-eight participants completed the survey, which is a 12 percent response rate. Those who completed the survey and separately emailed the researcher were entered into a drawing for a $15 or $25 Amazon gift card.
Additionally, invitations to participate in one of three interviews were distributed using direct emails and the newsletter. Only three students participated in the interviews, which resulted in one-on-one interviews with the researcher. Participants received a $10 Amazon gift card for their time. All three of these students voluntarily disclosed their participation in the survey, but did not disclose their responses. All interview participants were reassured that their identifying information and responses related directly toward specific individuals or institutions would be kept confidential.

**Analysis of Data**

Each week, UW Tacoma students have multiple opportunities to engage in programming that ranges from student organizations, professional development, community service, development of academic skills and strategies, intercultural dialogues, workshops, and social events such as potlucks, trivia, dances, intramural athletics, and film discussions. Campus events are promoted through a weekly email called Husky 411, which is distributed by the UW Tacoma Student Involvement office, as well as using Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and posters around campus.

Additionally, ISSS offers a weekly event for international students called UWTea Time during the lunch hour on Thursdays, which is an opportunity for international students to meet each other, socialize over a cup of coffee or tea, and ask questions to the international student advisors in a casual setting. Each UWTea Time celebrates a different holiday or culture by providing a relevant snack, such as a *gulab jamun* sweets for Diwali or dumplings for Lunar New Year, and shares information about the theme with host national students, faculty and staff who stop by. ISSS also coordinates monthly trips to local attractions, and shopping and quarterly workshops on topics such as OPT, CPT, academic skills, professional development, and the like.
Once per week, the international student advisor distributes an emailed newsletter comprised of important announcements for international students and an overview of all of the events scheduled on campus for the upcoming week. The weekly update newsletter has an average open rate of 50 percent and 92 percent of survey respondents indicated they learn about ISSS and campus events through this newsletter. International student workshops and events are also promoted on Facebook, WeChat, the ISSS website, and occasionally on Instagram.

Based on the survey results, participants indicated that they learn about events through email (76.3 percent), posters around campus (68.4 percent), Facebook (50 percent), and word-of-mouth from their friends (26 percent), in addition to the ISSS weekly newsletter. However, there is a discrepancy between the ways they learn about events and the methods they prefer to learn about campus events: although email remains one of their preferred methods (86.8 percent), the vast majority prefer using WeChat and WhatsApp (71 and 65.8 percent, respectively).

The preferred communication methods mirror student demographics in many ways because half of UW Tacoma’s student population is from China, a country where Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat are blocked and nearly all users instead use WeChat. Similarly, WhatsApp is one of the most popular platforms outside of the U.S. Respondents also preferred social media platforms, such as Line, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat were also preferred,
although these seem to be more reflective of the popularity of the platform in their country of origin. Participant A explained:

I always check the email, but I found out that many students never check the email… WeChat is very good because, you know, they always check it and then we can see the message and we must check it. So it’s good, but WeChat is only for Chinese students, so we should find, like Line or that kind of stuff so also other countries can attend using that kind of social app.

If ISSS wants to effectively connect and engage with international students, it must adapt its communication strategies to use the platforms and methods that are already routinely used by its international student population.

Despite these efforts to improve awareness of social opportunities, engagement has not changed. The same six students attend UWTea Time each week and a different four students participate in the ISSS trips primarily because they are friends with one of the ISSS student employees. Roughly 12 students attend the OPT workshop each quarter, while another two dozen choose instead to email their questions to their advisors or schedule personal appointments to discuss the process. All other ISSS workshops garner attendance from the same two students who are also regular attendees of UWTea Time. Anecdotally, the international student advisors have never seen an international student at a campus social event, which could also be attributed to the types of events the advisors attend. Clearly, UW Tacoma has a problem with international student engagement.

The vast majority indicated they had not attended an event or trip sponsored by ISSS (57.9 percent) or UWTea Time (47.4 percent). Among those who had attended an ISSS-sponsored event, the majority attended occasionally (28.9 percent for trips and events and 31.6
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percent for UWTea Time). When prompted to explain what would entice them to attend UWTea Time, the majority of respondents indicated they would attend if their friends also attended (44.7 percent), if the event offered free food (44.7 percent), and/or if the event was not offered during the lunch period (31.6 percent). Only two respondents stated they had no interest in attending UWTea Time. Participant A expressed dismay that from her perspective, other international students were missing the point of UWTea Time:

I like UWTea Time because I can meet some people. Sometimes new students, and also what I feel is good is that sometimes I can talk with advisors. And also with some students to understand what is UWT. So I can go – I go there and then I talk not just with the student staff, but I feel it’s really safe…if I have trouble, I just feel, “ah, just go to UWTea Time and ask advisor, ask friend” and I can solve situation.

From her perspective, rebranding UWTea Time and explicitly marketing it as opportunity for informal advising and connecting with other international students could result in improved attendance.

Similar responses emerged when prompted to explain what would entice them to attend an ISSS event or activity: the most popular reasons were if their friends attended (63 percent) and if the event offered free food (44.7 percent), but respondents also indicated an interest in events on weekends (50 percent) and topics or themes that were of personal interest (47 percent).
Participant C expressed strong enthusiasm for the events that had been planned during the 2017-2018 academic year: “I think this year is so much better than last year. Like, last year, barely had nothing. This year, we have like Space Needle, Seattle visiting, or ice skating – that’s more fun to me.” Participant B agreed, stating, “I would say that it’s a good experience going there and it’s a good think you are organizing and showing us that thing.” However, he chose not to participate in most of the events and activities that were offered because they were either not of interest to him, or because he was afraid of hurting himself and paying subsequent doctor’s bills.

When asked which topics or activities were of the most interest to the participants, the vast majority expressed a desire for professional development opportunities (84.2 percent for OPT or CPT workshops and 68.4 percent for career workshops), while 42 percent expressed interest in learning about U.S. culture, going hiking or participating in outdoor activities, and/or developing cross-cultural communication skills. Notably, 52.6 percent expressed an interest in meeting other international students and learning about their experiences and 39.4 percent expressed a desire to network with other international students and alumni through a LinkedIn group, while only 39 percent had an interest in interacting with students from the U.S.

These results indicate two significant themes. First, international students are highly motivated by their friend groups. Participant A explained the difference in friendship expectations:
I feel (people in home country) try best for not making any trouble…that’s why we just get together with some people and do everything same stuff and then don’t try to make any issue, and if they make issue, all of them have kind of similar issue and they figure out each others. So it’s not independent; always they’re with someone, always someone can do together with them… it’s always depends [on the] group, people do everything same – take same class, go same place, wear the same clothes, the similar hobby.

Based on this insight, even if an individual student has an interest in an event, he or she is less likely to attend it by him or herself. Group preference directly correlates with both previous research and the students’ cultural programming. As previously discussed, individuals from collectivist cultures prefer group activities over independent endeavors. Both Participants A and C mentioned multiple times that attendance in activities is driven by her friend group consensus.

However, based on the survey responses and interview dialogues, international students at UW Tacoma are more interested in developing friendships with each other, rather than host nationals. Participant B explained this desire:

We need to have a strong network here because there’s no network here. So when I go into my program, my classes, then there isn’t such a friendly atmosphere there. And when I’m coming to this Tea Time, I can see only 4 or 5 others. And it’s good to have some – at least 5 friends rather than 0. I think we should have some kind of activity, networking.

Participant A echoed this desire:

…for me I feel I want to have more like event with other international student and also more local students because yeah, only – I can have find friends from classes, but I still feel like I want to know more people from different countries with similar situation as me…I have a lot of local student [friends] here, but I don’t have a lot of international
student [friends] here. But I feel like if we met to talk about international students club, if I have friends, I could ask them first before I make appointment with advisor, and then maybe they have similar situation. We can talk about how, what we need to do, maybe we can help each other. So because my major don’t have a lot of international student, I cannot meet a lot of international students.

The challenge for ISSS, then, is to find ways to engage groups of international students rather than appeal to individual preferences.

Secondly, international students are highly motivated by food. Sharing food and meals in collectivist cultures signifies community and in-group connections. Moreover, it provides a common denominator and a shared experience amongst strangers: it is easier to begin a conversation with a stranger about the food you are both eating, which can easily transition to other topics.

ISSS has long identified that food is an important motivator and seeks opportunities to offer snacks at its events. Unfortunately, offering food at events is a challenging and unnecessary structural obstacle at UW Tacoma: due to Washington state laws and policies administered by the university finance department, departments are extremely limited in their ability to serve food. Only events that conduct official university business or recognize students, faculty, or staff may be approved for light refreshments, and meals can only be provided if the event is longer than 4 hours in duration. Based on these requirements, events such as ISSS workshops and UWTea Time do not qualify for food approval, and the international student advisors often resort to purchasing snacks out of their own pockets while regularly advocating to administrators for greater flexibility in the interpretation of this policy.
Regarding engagement on campus, there seems to be a disconnect between the expectations of international students and the reality of their participation. The majority (nearly 79 percent) of survey respondents agreed to the statement, “I think social activities and events on campus are an important part of my experience at the University of Washington Tacoma,” but 42 percent indicated they had never attended a campus event. Among those who indicated they had participated in a campus event, only 29 percent attended an event occasionally (once per month or more) and 16 percent indicated they attended at least one event per week.

When asked why they chose to attend a campus event, the overwhelming majority responded that they chose to attend because their friends were attending (68.4 percent), followed by professional networking (57.9 percent) and professional skill development (52.6 percent), or the event had some element of novelty (“the event was something I had not tried before” or “it looked like fun”). Participant C echoed these sentiments: “It depends on whether the activity is fun or not… I would try to go to the activities that has more people, yeah, instead of only a few. And fun activities. Usually fun activities has [sic] more people.” In other words, optics are an incredibly important in influencing international student engagement in on campus events.
However, when asked what might motivate them to attend an event in the future, the responses were very different. The primary motivator for future participation was free food (71 percent), followed by availability on Friday afternoons and “I had finished all of my homework and I had free time between classes” (65.8 percent each), and opportunities to talk with U.S. students, add the event to their resume, and have fun (60.5 percent). These responses for future engagement motivation are particularly interesting because almost all of these reasons were ranked as least motivating for prior engagement. Although this feedback is inconclusive, it is notable that none of the respondents indicated they have a disinterest in attending events on campus.

Time investment on campus is essential for understanding UW Tacoma international student engagement. Of the 38 survey respondents, 63 percent indicated they lived in Tacoma. Of those who do not live in Tacoma, 79 percent have daily commutes that range from two to four hours.
On average, 84 percent of students commute to campus four or more times per week, which means international students may be commuting anywhere from 8 to 28 hours per week.

Participant B discussed the nature of his routine:

I need to travel for 4 hours per day. So it’s all my time when I’m coming to my classes, and I just have leisure for 3 days which I do all of these assignments and all these things, so don’t really have this free time. It’s all of my assignments and what – searching for internships or jobs. That’s pretty much my life in here.

The majority of students study while they are on campus (79 percent), socialize with other students (47.4 percent), or attend on campus-events or programs (44.7 percent). Only 16 percent of respondents leave immediately after their classes. Based on this feedback, it seems that the vast majority of students are primarily focused on academics, but nearly half also have an interest in engaging on campus in some way.
Commuting patterns are a particularly important consideration for planning international student services, events and programming, but opinions on the best time are wide-ranging and inconsistent. First, if students are commuting from long distances, event schedules should reflect their availability. As stated by Participant B, “when it gets late, I couldn’t get a bus [to my home], so that’s a main factor for me to not stay here long in the events.” Advanced planning is also a critical element; as stated by Participant C, “I just go to school calendar and…they have a lot of the selection, I just select the one I want to see…then I can ask my friends, are you free on that day? We can join this activity together.”

Currently, nearly all international student workshops and programs are offered between 12:00 – 3:00 p.m. on Thursdays and Fridays. This is due largely to the university course schedule: there is a short break in all classes from 12:20 – 12:50 on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and very few classes are scheduled on Friday afternoons. However, because of this schedule, nearly all student services departments schedule their events and programs on Tuesdays or Thursdays during the lunch break, and most international student clubs schedule their meetings on Wednesdays at this same timeframe. A large number of students do not travel to campus at all on Fridays. Consequently, there is immense competition for students’ attention and engagement, particularly for a timespan when they may also need to eat lunch.

Weekends are also busy times for international students because there are other obligations that compete for their time and attention, such as grocery shopping, household chores, and sleep. As stated by Participant A:

I feel if the event is on the weekend, on Friday, I don’t think international students will attend because they want to take rest…So, maybe it depends on the kind of event, but I feel like after the weekdays – the afternoon – is really good, not the weekend.
Clearly, it will be impossible to meet the needs and expectations of all students, but more thorough analysis is needed to determine a more suitable time for ISSS events.

Conventional wisdom is that student engagement begins either before or during orientation when students are beginning to meet their peers and learn about campus resources and opportunities. Several years ago, UW Tacoma transitioned to a new model of new student orientation, which is facilitated by the Office of Student Transition Programs. During Autumn quarter, separate orientation days are scheduled for first-year student and transfer students. First-year students are required to attend an on-campus orientation, while transfer students have a choice between an in-person orientation session or an online module. Incoming students during Winter and Spring quarters attend the same orientation because nearly all are transfer students. There is not an on-campus orientation for graduate students because the Graduate School is housed at the Seattle campus, which provides students with an online module to orient them to basic resources, and a brief overview of program requirements that is facilitated by UW Tacoma academic departments at the beginning of Autumn quarter.

Unlike other colleges and universities that offer separate international student orientation sessions, ISSS has opted to foster inclusion by requiring that new undergraduate international students attend one of the aforementioned orientations with their domestic peers. They must also complete an online module that provides an overview of immigration requirements, health insurance, employment options, and the like. Students who do not complete both of these requirements by the end of their first quarter are reminded of the requirement and receive a registration hold on their academic record.

Although nearly half (47 percent) of the survey respondents indicated they had been enrolled at UW Tacoma for less than one year, nearly 84 percent indicated they had lived in the
U.S. for more than one year. As exemplified by all three interview participants, the vast majority of UW Tacoma international students transfer from local community colleges. Many have already completed sessions discussing immigration and academic skills at previous schools, so they may perceive UW Tacoma orientation as redundant and unnecessary. Whatever the reason, a number of transfer international students choose to complete all online modules and consequently, circumvent all opportunities to meet others who could become part of their social support network and resources that could help them engage on campus.

During the 2017-2018 academic year, ISSS offered an optional Meet and Greet social mixer to international students after the first-year and transfer orientation sessions. These sessions were marketed as a time and place to meet other new students, meet international student advisors, and ask questions. In Autumn quarter, the mixers were scheduled immediately after the session ended and students were excused to pick up their student ID cards. Between the six Meet and Greets, only 12 international students attended. During Winter quarter, the Meet and Greet was scheduled during lunch period on the third day of classes, and three of the ten new international students attended. ISSS also offered a new graduate international student orientation at the beginning of Autumn quarter and 39 of 44 new graduate students attended. Anecdotally, the students who regularly attend UWTea Time and other ISSS events also attended these Meet and Greet sessions. It is unclear whether only those students who want to be engaged attended the Meet and Greet sessions, or if attendance at these events and meeting other international students prompted their engagement in future events.

The current orientation design is not meeting the needs of international students. Participant C described mismatched expectations between community-building orientations offered in her home country and at both UW Tacoma and the community college she had
transferred from: “They only have the orientation day for academic advice – that’s it – and knowing the building and here [academic advising center] – that’s it.” Participant A was particularly dismayed by this disconnect:

I think we should have more, bigger international student event on the orientation day…They [international students] don’t do anything – they don’t even notice how the international student service works for us, so maybe we can use this kind of room and say what we are doing for international students. For example, you can say what kind of things you are doing, these kind of questions, how to make an appointment – this kind of thing I think maybe international student advisor should do on orientation day.

Both of these perspectives echoed research that indicates students from some countries, namely China, have very limited understanding of U.S. culture, practices, norms, and academic expectations, which may result in them unknowingly polarizing their classmates and professors and overlooking non-academic opportunities that are more highly valued to U.S. employers (Caplan & Stevens, 2016). Orientation is a prime opportunity to explain these values, discuss cultural differences, and create awareness of expectations. Moreover, many other international students arrive at U.S. university campuses expecting opportunities to build social networks, learn about international student services, and ask questions, but they are disappointed by the lack of these opportunities at UW Tacoma.

The design of UW Tacoma’s campus is not always conducive for building community. As previously mentioned, the urban-serving campus occupies remodeled warehouse buildings that share space with retail businesses and restaurants with the intent that this design would foster more interaction between students and the local community. Therefore, the campus does not have a cafeteria, dining hall, or communal gathering space. Instead, most students eat at a local
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restaurant, which charge around $10 or more per meal, or they bring their lunches. UW Tacoma provides multiple microwaves and lockers, but it does not offer refrigeration spaces for students, which makes brown bag lunches less appealing. Participants B and C expressed disappointment with this design. Participant B viewed it as a lack of support systems, while Participant C described it as a missed opportunity:

We only have a little grocery shops here. When we have lunch hour [at previous college], we always had our friends in the cafeteria and we had our lunch meals together…we met [students from other countries] in the club meeting and then sometime we see in the cafeteria and we say hi to each other and friends with friends – then we know more friends because we sit at the round table and start talking.

The lack of international student community development during the critical first weeks may have a long-lasting impact on the students’ experience. If international students are not meeting each other during orientation, at student activities, in an international student club, or in the cafeteria, they are more inclined to self-segregate with other conational students. As explained by Participant A:

The students don’t really attend activities mostly they’ve already found friends in same country, so they feel really comfortable with staying with students from same country. They thought, “I don’t have to make more friends because I already know more, some people from same country then we can help each other, so I don’t have to have more friends.” Yeah, I can’t understand this one this one, but I feel, why are you guys here in United States? Because, you know, if they just want to speak [their language], just go to [home country] university. But here in the United States, we can learn more stuff, engage
more with different cultures, but they don’t really think it’s important instead of just
taking degree. I cannot say it’s wrong, but I feel they kind of should attend the activities.
The ISSS office, therefore, should find ways for international students to connect in a casual and
informal manner.

As a whole, international students are interested in opportunities that develop skills that will benefit them with their post-graduation plans. Nearly all of respondents (92 percent) stated they would like to develop their leadership skills while they are a student. All three interview participants discussed leadership experiences they had at previous universities, such as engagement in an international student club. Participant B in particular had strong experience in leading a student organization with impressive results. He described at length the self-authorship that developed as a result of forming and motivating a team, planning campus and state events, and cooperating with professors and university officials. Feedback such as this correlates with previous survey responses that indicated a strong motivation to develop professional skills and prepare for future employment. Moreover, the leadership skills and experiences of these students are untapped resources that could be used to expand outreach and improve services and engagement.

Additionally, 89 percent of respondents stated they like helping other international students, which may correlate with the collectivist nature of their home culture. Anecdotally, the
international student advisors have noticed that when a general request for help is announced, only one or two students will respond. However, if individual students are contacted directly and invited to help with a group of visitors, nearly all of those called eagerly accept the opportunity. This difference could be attributed to high power distance indexes – in other words, it would either be improper for them to assert themselves to someone in response to a general call for help or to decline a personal invitation from someone in power – or it could be due to a collectivist desire to help one’s conational peers. More research is needed to better understand the motivations behind these attitudes.

The vast majority of respondents feel respected at UW Tacoma. Nearly all (92 percent) indicated that they feel their international student advisor respects their culture, while 89 percent feel respected by professors and staff and 84 percent feel respected by host national students.

Participant C explained these opinions in more detail
[In my home culture] we respect the people who is higher position or senior than us. So it’s not like when we communicate with the advisor, we are not like freely friendly – we are really honored to them, listen to what they say. It is not like now, casual chatting – it’s kind of like semi-formal. Yeah, and [community college] gave me a really good example to experience the culture here, so I know people can be really friendly and casual and you know, the style is kind of different…I know that I don’t need to be that restrained or that nervous…Like I can share my concerns and worries with my advisor and my advisor will give me a good suggestion and solutions to solve the problem.

In other words, Participant C was from a culture with a high power distance, and she had embraced the opportunity to be more informal with staff and faculty in the U.S.

Patience and empathy with student questions and inquiries were highly valued characteristics for an international student advisor. Both Participant A and B stated that they appreciated UW Tacoma international student advisors’ patience with them as they explained their questions or concerns in English – a language that was not their first. Moreover, they both stated that international student advisors listened carefully to provide the best answer. As stated by Participant B:

We don’t know anything here…so we might have some questions regarding the culture or whatever the religion…I mean, you guys might think it’s silly, but it’s a very big question for us, so we like to know all these questions. Someone who is tolerant to answer all of these questions. That’s the thing I expect. And [someone who is] somewhat friendly.

Moreover, all three interview participants appreciated the time international student advisors at UW Tacoma invested in face-to-face conversations. As stated by Participant A:
[At my community college] maybe they were too busy. So even I ask them…but they always say, check website, and that’s all the information – just go to website. But I say, so maybe just website is kinda - not really enough information and I still feel a little bit confused and I could not really 100% sure, that’s why I’m asking you. But they say, oh, we’re kind of busy, so I only can give you the information on the website…if it’s a [home country] university in my language, I feel oh, okay, I can try my best…But here it’s different; it’s possible I misunderstood information, possible I forget something, so I need more help …So, mostly, if the advisor say, just go to website, I would say okay, because I know they don’t want to help more...And then I found some friends already in the [community college] longer and ask them more information.

She further explained how a lack of help and support from staff often leads to misunderstandings that have significant setbacks for international students, such as missed deadlines and declined admission into university academic programs. Her feedback explained a common gripe amongst international student advisors” the prevalence of the phrase, “my friend told me…” Clearly, students are turning to each other for help and advice when they are directed to use website resources that aren’t clear to them rather than meeting with an advisor. As a result, misinformation and rumors circulate and can negatively impact students.

Complete and timely information is particularly important for today’s international students because misunderstandings can also cost them their visa status. Participant C noted:

There’s certain confusions on the federal law things…especially to the student visa and the OPT and that stuff, yeah, like, we don’t know. I’m sure the laws keep changing too because of the president – he keeps changing. So, like everyone is confused.
Direct dialogue with international student advisors, therefore, play an integral role in assuaging anxiety and dispelling myths.

Each of the interview participants exemplified a different stage of self-authorship development. Of the three, Participant B was at the earliest stages of self-authorship. He was the only one who was living with family and he talked the most about needing guidance and advice from staff about classes, professional development, and basic life necessities. In particular, he had a strong expectation that university personnel should be introducing him to potential employers: “we need some support system that in order to get some experience, we need to have an entry-level job like these…If there’s something that all you guys could help us get into something like that it would be helpful.”

Interestingly, Participant B had the strongest story of self-authorship in his home country. When he entered his undergrad degree, his parents wanted him to study a different degree, but he proved his ability to them and was allowed to switch degrees. Once he was in his new degree, he became increasingly more engaged in leadership opportunities in his department, to the point that he was the vice president of a student organization.

However, Participant B also exhibited the greatest signs of acculturative stress. His social isolation was exacerbated by his long commute, inadequate time to participate in social events or hobbies, and a lack of understanding of the bureaucracy of the university. He was experiencing psychosomatic symptoms and anxiety from the pressures placed on him by his department’s expectations that he complete an internship. “I’m a little bit mentally having some thoughts about all of these things,” he said. “It’s confusing me mentally and having some external things like headaches and that’s an issue.”
Similarly, Participant C relied heavily on the opinions of others to form her own opinions. Her decision to transfer to UW Tacoma was due to strong encouragement from the international student advisor at her community college. Attending events seemed influenced in part by her friend’s willingness to participate with her. However, her behavior is likely due more to her collectivist cultural background, not necessarily her position on the self-authorship trajectory. Anecdotally, Participant C often participates in ISSS activities by herself; she is the only interview participant who is an active member of Global Ambassadors, a student organization focused on social justice and building cross-cultural relationships. She engages as an International Global Mixer who is willing to socialize with other international students but has a preference for those who are ethnically similar to her culture. Of the three interview participants, she had been at UW Tacoma for the longest period of time and seemed the most established and confident in her abilities.

In most ways, Participant A seemed most independent. Although she routinely sought the guidance and opinions of international student advisors, she talked extensively about the ways in which she independently and proactively sought out information and resources. Participant A was from a heavily collectivist culture in which friend groups expect cohesion and long-term loyalty and self-authorship was not encouraged, but she seemed to reject this expectation:

Maybe most of the [people in my country], if they find that kind of friend they can stay longer, they can keep the relationship longer, but for me, I feel kind of tired, right? So I have three really good friends from high school, but from university, I couldn’t have a lot really good friends because that kind of group stuff, I didn’t like, yeah…Most of the typical [people from my country] really like that kind of relationship and try to keep it longer.
Participant A had similarly reflected on her identity and the ways in which she could incorporate some U.S. cultural values into her behavior. For example, she noted that professors expected active classroom and social event participation, strong teamwork skills in group projects, and regular visits during office hours, and she used this insight to adapt her behavior accordingly.

I found that I shouldn’t be shy… I should just kind of try my best to improve my skills in group work and share my opinion. All the time what I can do is forget what I have from my culture and be like a local student.

It seemed that Participant A wanted to be an Inclusive Global Mixer, but due to her degree area and the lack of engagement on the part of other international students, she was becoming a Host Interactor who was assimilating into U.S. and UW Tacoma culture rather than acculturating or integrating.

Self-authorship is not a straight trajectory; based on internal and external influences, it often follows a meandering path with periods of transition and setbacks (Arnett, Magolda & Taylor, 2015). Sometimes, a student benefits from help in navigating to the next level. As noted by Arnett et al (2015), “intentional attention to challenge and support is crucial in creating educational environments that promote the emergence of an individual’s internal voice” (p. 24).

In each of these participants’ journeys, there is opportunity for an international student advisor to coach and support him or her to greater self-authorship. For example, Participant B would benefit from a leadership role because he seems to grow and shine most when he is challenged to execute an initiative. He could be invited to collaborate on an alumni network development task force. Participant A is passionate about helping other international students understand the purpose of ISSS events and the difference in engagement expectations between
collectivist and U.S. cultures. She could be invited to participate in orientation events to share her experiences with new students, serve as a peer mentor, or play an enthusiastic role in an international student club. Finally, Participant C has developed a strong social network and has a breadth of engagement during her tenure at UW Tacoma. She could be invited to participate in a brainstorming committee tasked with improving outreach and marketing of events. Each of these individuals brings unique skills, abilities, and perspectives to the campus community, and with a little guidance and support from international student advisors, both the individual and the university could benefit from their engagement.

Limitations inherent in the research design

The greatest limitation proved to be collecting a variety of perspectives. First, UW Tacoma is a small university and cannot represent a nation-wide trend. Moreover, it is located in a region that has been considered home for individuals from Asian cultures for nearly two centuries and has policies, laws, and attitudes that are largely welcoming of diversity. Therefore, the perspectives that the participants shared are unique to their lived experiences at previous institutions, the local community, and UW Tacoma.

Secondly, engagement among international students at the University of Washington Tacoma has been modest and participation in the research followed suit. Survey respondents were anonymous, so it is unknown whether these participants are already actively engaged in campus and ISSS social programming. All of those who participated in the interviews were regular participants in ISSS programming and have strong interpersonal relationships with the international student advisors that were established before they began their studies at UW Tacoma.
Moreover, participants communicated their perspectives and experiences in their second (or third or fourth) language, and although they are highly proficient in English, there was a chance for miscommunication or differences in word choice or utilization. Finally, nearly all of the international student population is from collectivist cultures with a high power distance and uncertainty avoidance. The students may not have been open and honest with their opinions because the researcher is an international student advisor to many of them and articulating criticism to a position of authority would be considered improper.

**Discussion**

International students value social connections, but there is not one right way to develop these relationships. Some prefer the company of conationals, while others seek friendships with host nationals. Ultimately, it is up to each individual student to decide how deeply he or she wants to explore the host nation’s culture. When international educators place value on some types of relationships over others, they are imposing their own cultural values on those students. Their role should be to provide opportunities for students to make social connections of their own choosing and monitor students for isolation and acculturative stress.

Self-authorship may not be an appropriate theory for international student development. First, it assumes that a student is from a culture that expects individualism and independence, does not value the opinions of family and community norms, does not revere authority figures, and has a low uncertainty avoidance. Few international students come from cultures like these. Instead, it may be helpful to advise international students in manners that consider and honor their cultures while also empowering them in their personal journeys. They should be encouraged to retain elements of their culture that give them a sense of pride and resonate with
their personal identity while also giving them a foundational understanding of how the host culture may differ. Above all, they should not be forced to fully assimilate to U.S. norms.

The identity of “transfer” and “commuter” student significantly impacts an international students engagement at a university campus. As such, programming for international students should be strategically scheduled so that it allows for public transportation schedules and long commutes. If trips are scheduled on weekends, for example, alternative arrangements should be made for students who want to meet the rest of the group at a location that is more convenient for them. Whenever possible, international student workshops should allow for more than one method of engagement, such as livestream, video, or audio modules.

**Conclusions**

The survey and interview results have informed numerous pending changes to ISSS programming and services. First, the service delivery models will be expanded. The sheer number of students who commute long distances explained the discrepancy between the demand for, but low attendance, at workshops, followed by the high volume of inquiries and personal meetings to discuss topics covered at the session. Moreover, although they were not invited to participate in the survey, numerous students on OPT have commented about the need to take a day off of work to meet with an international student advisor from students. Expecting students to use their hard-earned benefits to sit in traffic for 4 hours for a 30-minute review of paperwork is unacceptable. Students value personalized interaction with international student advisors, but they should not have to make significant sacrifices to meet their basic needs. As a result, meetings using video streaming platforms, such as Google Hangout, and phone appointments have been offered as optional alternatives for students who cannot easily meet on campus during business hours. These diverse services allow students to succinctly ask all of their questions
while still engaging with their advisor in a manner that is somewhat personal. Additionally, some workshops will be livestreamed and other sessions will be recorded so that students can engage with the content in a manner that is more interactive, but also access these resources at a time and place that is more convenient for their class, commute, and work schedules.

Event information and announcements to students will be communicated using new platforms. Rather than relying solely on email and our website, more information will be posted in WeChat, WhatsApp and Line. Although using new platforms will require additional training and time investment on the behalf of staff, the hope is that it will result in a significant improvement in student awareness and engagement in ISSS and campus events.

Currently, UW Tacoma does not have a strong alumni network and alumni records are not distinguished between domestic and international status. The international student advisors have already met with the Alumni Relations office to brainstorm ways of developing services that are meaningful and appropriate for international students. As a result of this study, several departments are coordinating alumni networking events for their students so that they can help alleviate the stress and anxiety of searching for an internship. This project will be ongoing for several years, but the intent is that this alumni network will help engage new international students, mentor currently enrolled students, and assist with recruitment or international visits if the alumni return to their home country.

Similarly, the international student advisors will organize and launch an international student club. Representatives from each of the major degree, departments, and countries of origin will be selected for the first committee to ensure equal representation. The committee members will decide on ISSS events and activities and play an active role in soliciting ideas from their peers, coordinating the events, and marketing them to the campus community. Moreover, one
representative will serve as liaison to the Office of Global Affairs Council and, if possible, on other campus committees such as the New Student Transitions Committee and the Associated Students of UW Tacoma student government. UWT Tea Time will be rescheduled for a different time and reformatted into a Geography Series/Global Café event, which would invite international students to present an aspect of their home culture to the campus community. Through these platforms, international students voices and experiences will be invited to the table and valued throughout multiple levels of the university organization.

A lounge area will be created on campus that may be used as space for commuter students’ needs. It will include refrigeration, lockers, and tables conducive for student socialization. Moreover, this space will be introduced to international students during orientation and it will be a space conducive for ISSS events and gatherings.

As much as some staff decry the students’ lack of participation, poor engagement is part of the UW Tacoma culture. Because many faculty and staff also commute long distances, they are also not inclined to leave their offices for lunch to engage with one another or stay after work hours to attend campus events such as public lectures, staff recognition events, and the like. Therefore, campus staff – particularly the international student advisors - should be encouraged to model the behavior they expect from their students by taking breaks to socialize with colleagues or attend campus events.

Most significantly, the current delivery model, structure, and content for new international student orientation will be completely redesigned before the beginning of the 2018-2019 academic year. Basic content about immigration and health insurance will remain in an online module, but it will be reformatted and redesigned so that it is easily accessible for students to reference. Moreover, this module will implement several comprehension checks so that
international student advisors can verify that students actually completed the content and understand the regulations. Students will be assessed at the end of both the in-person and online sessions to determine areas for improvement and opportunity.

In addition to the mandatory UW Tacoma orientation sessions or modules, international students will be required to attend an in-person session that will focus on cultural differences, allow them to meet each other, and ask questions. Current international students will be invited to attend and share their experiences with new students, offer advice, and act as peer mentors. In this way, ISSS will help students build a foundation for an active and engaged international student community. An ongoing, weekly opportunity for students to meet and continue learning and discussing the topics presented during orientation may be implemented.

Although international students at UW Tacoma cannot represent the experiences of international students at all universities, international educators and higher education administrators can learn from their example. International students want to engage on university campuses, but they also don’t want to sacrifice their identities. Their engagement might not look the same as their domestic peers’ engagement, but it should be supported nonetheless. International educators must dig deeper into the attitudes and behind students’ behavior and find ways to connect students in ways that reflect a variety of cultural contexts. Only then will they be able to empower and help international students make the most of their experiences abroad.
REFERENCES


ENGAGING INTERNATIONAL TRANSFER STUDENTS AT UW TACOMA


Figure 1: estimated commute distances from UW Tacoma, based on Google Maps.

Figure 2: UW Tacoma campus map. Source: www.tacoma.uw.edu/sites/default/files/sections/Campus-map-directory_Nov_2017.pdf.
**Figure 3:** Most of UW Tacoma’s buildings are remodeled warehouses. Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/uwtacoma/1677684095/in/album-72157650822011787/

**Figures 4 and 5:** UW Tacoma prides itself on its urban-serving campus. The lower level of the campus buildings along Pacific Avenue (left) host local businesses and restaurant (right), offering community engagement with the local community and tourists visiting the museums across the street. Sources: www.flickr.com/photos/uwtacoma/37021624332/in/album-72157686572610164 and www.flickr.com/photos/uwtacoma/34622829243/in/album-72157682335762584.