

An Examination of Asian International Students Sense of Belonging

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International students comprise a significant portion of the student population at institutions of higher education within the United States, with a number of these students being from countries on the Asian continent. Past research surrounding this population has shown that international students face a unique set of challenges, especially in their transitional phase, in comparison to their domestic peers. This paper focuses on the ways in which Asian international students develop and experience a sense of belonging at Indiana University Bloomington, and provides recommendations for future practice to better foster a sense of belonging and create a culturally relevant environment for this population.

Every year, thousands of international students come to the United States to study at universities. In fact, the United States had more than one million international students studying at colleges and universities during the 2016-2017 school year (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2017). Most of these international students came from the continent of Asia, followed by students from Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and North America (IIE, 2017). These students come to study in the United States from all over the world, and the adjustment to American colleges and culture can often become a difficult process and transition for these students (Baba & Hosada, 2014; Mori, 2000).

Current studies of international college students have primarily centered on examining their transition and potential challenges faced due to their backgrounds and other factors (Lee, 2010; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Mori, 2000; Olivas & Li, 2006). Research findings indicate the challenges faced by international students during their studies in the U.S. include language difficulties, academic adjustment, financial concerns, lack of social support, and racial discrimination (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Andrade, 2008; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). On the other hand, research has

found that international students coming from backgrounds that are similar to westernized or American culture and are native English speakers have a better time adjusting and face fewer challenges (Akanwa, 2015; Spencer-Rodgers, 2001).

In addition, extant literature on college student experiences has suggested the importance of understanding their experiences from aspects other than challenges, such as sense of belonging (Phillips, 2015; Yao, 2015). Understanding sense of belonging can lead to universities figuring out how to care for and retain these students. Sense of belonging is defined as a student's perception of their own affiliation and identification with the greater university community, which consequently results in a higher level of persistence, academic success, and retention (Strayhorn, 2012). This highlights the importance of understanding sense of belonging due to its impact on one's experiences, learning outcomes, and intent to persist. Despite the need to understand one's experiences through studying their sense of belonging, there is limited research that aims to understand international students' sense of belonging and its association with their experiences during their study in the U.S.

Thus, this study centers on exploring the ways in which international students

experience sense of belonging at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB). Specifically, the study focuses on Asian, undergraduate, international students, as they are more vulnerable to facing discrimination, psychological distress, acculturation, and language difficulties than their domestic counterparts (Lee & Rice, 2007; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002; Wei, Ku, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Liao, 2008). Sense of belonging is especially important for international students because, “limited opportunities of contact with local society are significantly associated with international students’ negative psychological emotions, such as homesickness, loneliness, anxiety, and depression” (Yue & Le, 2012, p. 127). Therefore, it becomes important to understand the ways in which international students experience sense of belonging to examine further what could be done to better foster and develop those feelings in a positive way.

For the purpose of this study, the research team defined Asian, undergraduate, international students as those coming from Asian countries to complete their undergraduate studies here in the United States. The research question was as follows:

1. How do Asian, undergraduate, international students experience a sense of belonging on the IUB campus and what are the factors that cultivate these students’ sense of belonging?

Theoretical Framework

This study was rooted in two theoretical frameworks that focus on sense of belonging and inclusive campus spaces: Strayhorn’s Theory of Sense of Belonging (2012) and the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model (Museus,

2014). The intersection of these two frameworks gave insight into how sense of belonging relates to the ways in which students navigate and feel validated in their campus environments.

Sense of Belonging Theory

Strayhorn defined sense of belonging as a basic human need, a feeling that influences behavior (2012). Sense of belonging, when applied to the collegiate setting, is students’ perception of their own affiliation and identification with the greater university community (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009). The degree to which a student feels accepted, respected, valued, and included in an environment influences their feelings of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Several studies have indicated that sense of belonging is linked to a high degree of success, and a motivation to persist in higher education (Hausmann, Schofield, Woods, 2007; O’Keefe, 2013; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). Students’ social and academic involvement often affects their sense of belonging and vice versa (Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010; Strayhorn, 2012). When students interact with others on campus in a productive and positive way, they develop meaningful relationships with others that they can use as a system of support to deal with the challenges of college life (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Rayle & Chung, 2007). An absence of sense of belonging results in alienation, decreased interest in activities, and poor performance in academics (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007).

Although all students are expected to feel accepted in universities, “historically, ethnic minorities have been marginalized from mainstream society, which may impede their sense of connectedness to mainstream society” (Yoon, Jung, & Lee, 2012, p. 64). Due to the hostile campus environments for students of color, it can be

difficult for them to feel like they matter and are included in the campus community (Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, Lewis, 2012; Lee, 2010). Sense of belonging can then be understood as “a critical aspect in retaining all students and particularly students of color” (Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007, p. 238). Sense of belonging relates to normative congruence, which suggests that students seek environments that align with their own values, expectations, and attitudes. If campus environments are broad and diverse in their norms and values, it can help to facilitate students’ sense of belonging in that environment (Strayhorn, 2012).

Culturally Engaging Campus Environments

Much of the research on college success focuses on White students’ experiences, not taking into account the needs of diverse populations. According to Museus (2014), prior models of student success have not adequately addressed the role of race and cultural background in the realm of educational success. To address these concerns, Museus (2014) reviewed decades of research regarding student engagement, sense of belonging, persistence, and degree completion to develop a model that addresses some of the limitations of previous research and serves as a guide for colleges to promote an inclusive learning environment for all students.

Within the CECE model are nine indicators that promote, “a greater sense of belonging, more positive academic dispositions, and higher levels of academic performance” - factors that contribute to persistence and success for students, particularly students of color (Museus, 2014, p. 210). Although all nine indicators are positively correlated to sense of belonging, some indicators had stronger influences on sense of belonging than other indicators

(Museus, Yi & Saleua, 2017). While recent studies have primarily focused on utilizing the CECE indicators to promote inclusive campus environments for racial/ethnic minorities, (Kiyama, Museus, & Vega, 2015; Museus, Yi, & Saleua, 2017), this study investigated how two of the CECE indicators (proactive philosophies and cultural familiarity) that were strongly correlated to belonging affected Asian international students’ sense of belonging.

The first indicator, *cultural familiarity*, involves the opportunity for students to engage with faculty, peers, and staff who share similar racial/ethnic backgrounds as well as individuals from different racial/ethnic backgrounds who understand students’ backgrounds, experiences and cultures (Museus, 2014). *Proactive philosophies* happen when faculty and staff make the extra effort to provide resources and information to students rather than merely doing the bare minimum (Museus, 2014). Understanding how the CECE indicators can help foster Asian international students’ sense of belonging is instrumental in helping student affairs professionals in developing and/or improving programs and services.

A review of Strayhorn’s (2012) Theory of Sense of Belonging showed that engagement, social support, and academics were all components to students’ feelings of belonging. With this in mind, the research team looked for these components in the responses of their participants with the mediation of cultural familiarity and proactive philosophies.

Literature Review

Literature that is relevant to this study discusses the different challenges that international students face when studying at institutions of higher education in the United States. Particularly, literature surrounding

sense of belonging for international students emphasize their social barriers, engagement with the institution, and their academics.

Social Barriers

According to Strayhorn (2012), social support is one of the primary tenets that influences sense of belonging of students in the higher education environment. However, this social support may be easier to find for domestic students than for international students. Generally, international students could be lonely in their new environment due to the loss of shared identity that comes from being with family and friends and from familiar cultural or linguistic environments (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012; Sherry, Thomas, & Wing Hong, 2010). Likewise, Asian international students experience the same obstacles (Lin & Yi, 1997). The lack of social support, coupled with adjusting to a new environment, could lead to an increase in stress and, if left untreated, possibly depression (Mori, 2000). One's home culture can be a major factor in how people perceive the importance of social support and the level of ease in adjusting to new environments.

International students often report receiving less social support from American students than from other international students. A study by Sherry et al. (2010) found that 50% of international students who made friends at their institution developed friendships with international students, whereas only 35% indicated that they were friends with American students. Furthermore, students reported their relationships with American friends were superficial, and they were less likely to go to them for social support. Over time, international students' disappointment with superficial relationships may deter them from developing meaningful relationships

with Americans (Mori, 2000). Though relationships with domestic students are a better predictor of cultural adjustment, Asian international students tend to remain in smaller groups with same-ethnic peers due to an increased difficulty of building relationships with domestic students caused by sociocultural barriers (Constantine et al., 2004).

Based on this evidence, it can be assumed that international students experience a harder time developing a social support due to the loss of their home culture, family, and friends in their new environment. Furthermore, Asian international students are less likely to seek out social support on their own. As a result, it can be inferred that Asian international students are not receiving the social support and interaction that is necessary for developing a sense of belonging. Therefore, it is essential to seek out ways in which this specific population is currently receiving some degree of social support to figure out ways of expanding that reach and exposure.

Engagement and Sense of Belonging

A robust body of research revealed the importance of student engagement regarding civic responsibility and leadership (Berger & Milem, 2002; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998), critical thinking and clarified values (Flowers, 2004; Strayhorn, 2008), and multicultural competence and cultural expression (Harper & Quayle, 2007; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995). Strayhorn (2012) added that college student engagement is related to sense of belonging because it includes the time and energy that students devote to purposeful activities that lead to student success. Other definitions of engagement have been formed based on other factors; however, empirical evidence supports the conclusion that engagement promotes college student learning (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2005). It is assumed that

interacting with domestic and other international students through extracurricular activities, international students obtain social support, enhance language proficiency, and become familiar with the host society's customs and values (Moore & Popadiuk, 2011).

A study conducted in 2017 examined how Chinese, Japanese, and Korean international students participated in on-campus leisure activities to balance their academic life (Lee, Sung, Zhou, & Lee, 2017). This study provided three meaningful findings relating to how engagement fosters a sense of belonging for this population. First, engaging in leisure (non-academic) activities can be a powerful way to obtain social support for international students. Second, this study reinforced that engagement is a strong contributor to adaptation because students develop social networks that have positive association to their social adjustment. Third, this study demonstrates that through engagement, Asian international students are more likely to adapt well to the university environment (Lee, Sung, Zhou, & Lee, 2017). Students create community and social networks that empower each other as they adjust to a new educational system, and the challenges of studying in a second language (Moore & Popadiuk, 2011).

Academics and Sense of Belonging

A major reason why international students come to universities in the United States is for the perceived prestige of American higher education. Academic problems are the biggest concern when it comes to international students (Lee & Ciftci, 2014). It is important to note that academic performance does not affect sense of belonging; however, without a sense of belonging, the process of learning and succeeding academically is challenged (Strayhorn, 2012). It is also important to

understand the difference between academic performance and academic adjustment. The former is the process and outcome of academics while the latter is the ability to comprehend and adapt to the academic environment.

Previous studies have indicated that Asian and non-Asian international students are hesitant to share their opinions in class either in a large setting or small collaborative teams (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Kim, 2012; Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Lee & Ciftci, 2014). Kim (2012), also noted that students from collectivist cultures, like most Asian countries, are less likely to speak up compared to those from more individualistic cultures. Students with no sense of belonging are likely to become disengaged, and in turn, struggle academically or even drop out (Lee, 2014). With classrooms becoming increasingly intercultural, the importance of nurturing international students' sense of belonging is sacrosanct (Kim, 2012). Perceptions of hostile university environments make it difficult for students to adjust academically (Fourie, 2017). According to the study conducted by Fourie (2017), there are many factors, both academic and non-academic, when it comes to sense of belonging and academic performance, and they all affect each other in one way or another. Such examples include motivation, ability, diversity, and friends. For international students, the successful process of adjusting academically has a direct positive effect on their sense of belonging (Singh, 2018).

Methods

Sense of belonging impacts students in all aspects of their higher education experience, and there is no single environment that encapsulates or fully determines a student's sense of belonging. Furthermore, Strayhorn's (2012) Theory of

Sense of Belonging, premised on social support and engagement with the institution, does not come about as a result of a student's experiences in one specific environment, but rather through their overall involvement in various contexts on campus. Based on this premise, the scope of this research does not focus on a particular environment to examine sense of belonging. Instead, the research team was interested in understanding how Asian, international students experienced a sense of belonging in the broader campus context as a whole. By broadening the scope, this research study was able to better comprehend the different environmental contexts that influenced sense of belonging for this particular population.

Researcher Positionality

All five researchers identify as persons of color, two of which were born outside of the United States. The following ethnicities are represented in the makeup of the researchers: Xicana, African, South Asian, Vietnamese, and Hispanic. Although none of the researchers identify as international students, the research team was interested in studying this student population due to the difficulties surrounding studying in a foreign country as demonstrated in the literature review. The hope was that this research study would shed some light on how IUB can better provide spaces and programs that contribute to the development of belonging for international students.

Data Procedures

For this study, the researchers employed a qualitative stance, and collected data through personal interviews with volunteer participants. The researchers recruited participants through communications that were sent to several departments across campus, alongside a flyer that was distributed to residence halls and to student organizations that were

known to have many Asian international members, as well as to popular large-scale campus events.

In regard to sampling, the researchers chose criterion sampling for data collection. In this case, the criterion was set as undergraduate, international students at IUB that come from Asian countries. Before the interview, to protect the identity of the participants, the researchers asked each interviewee to choose a pseudonym that would be used in the research report. All members collaborated in collecting data, and a maximum of two interviewers were present per interview. Interviews were voice recorded, and anonymity was preserved when presenting data, in order to comply with protecting participants' privacy. Interviewee pseudonym and demographic information can be found in table 1 below.

Table 1
Participant Demographic Information

Participant Demographic Information				
Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Classification	Country of Origin
Fiona	18	Female	Freshman	China
Tyler	18	Male	Freshman	Indonesia
Jack	20	Male	Sophomore	China
Bert	21	Male	Junior	China
John	21	Male	Junior	India
Bruce	21	Male	Senior	India

Data Analysis

Upon completing interviews, all five members of the research team reviewed the audio and transcriptions from every interview conducted and found themes among the narratives of all the participants, observing specifically if the relationships between participant experiences correlated

with concepts related to Strayhorn's (2012) notions on sense of belonging and the selected CECE indicators. Additionally, the research team utilized a phenomenological approach to analyze the data and ensure congruence by making sure the claims made about the data align with the interpretation and findings.

Results

Themes identified through participant interviews are expanded upon below and include: transition and assimilation; language difficulties and perceptions; campus inclusion; financial barriers to sense of belonging; social life engagement; and academic experiences.

Transition and Assimilation

Participants mentioned that their transition and adjustment came in both the form of studying at a university as well as adjusting to the culture of the United States. The participants had varying levels of adjustment, as some of them were from places that resembled a small town like Bloomington, while others grew up in a big city. Additionally, some participants had been exposed to Western culture before whereas others came from traditional backgrounds.

For example, Fiona, a first-year student, said, "I enjoy the small town feel of Bloomington because it reminds me of home... it's easy for me to relate to American students because I watch the same TV shows, and I am familiar with American culture through media." Fiona's knowledge of American culture made it easier for her to connect with American students. On the other hand, Tyler, an Indonesia student, mentioned that he struggled adjusting to Bloomington because he comes from a big city, stating, "it's weird adjusting to life in a small town because there is not a lot of

things here. I have to figure out why Target is so far away." Bert stated, "I am from a modernized city, so many of my experiences are modernized."

Assimilation to American culture was a theme in several of the participants' responses. Tyler felt the need to assimilate to American culture to conform to the way people perceived him. He mentioned, "I was going through this phase of trying to dress like an American... then I realized that it was not me." Because Tyler was perceived by others as American, he wanted to dress the part to fit into this "image" that people had assigned to him; whereas Bruce and Bert wanted to assimilate to the culture to get ahead for personal and academic reasons. Bruce said that he challenged himself to be on the same level as his American counterparts, so that he could be a role model for other Asian international students by being the first Asian in a leadership position or winning an award. Bert felt that assimilating to American culture would improve the likelihood of obtaining job positions for the future and networking with others.

Language difficulties and perceptions

The command and ease of speaking the English language was also an element that was reflected in participant's experiences and contributed to their sense of belonging. Fiona reported that her English limited her interaction with American students because she did not feel confident in speaking. She mentioned, "I am afraid of making mistakes and saying something wrong." As a result of this, she has trouble connecting with others that do not speak her native tongue. John also felt uncomfortable about his abilities to speak English and reproached himself several times during the interview when he did not use proper grammar to describe a concept or situation.

On the other hand, Tyler's proficiency in English led to misconceptions about his status as an international student. Tyler stated, "People assume that I am American because I don't have an accent. They assume that I'm supposed to know everything about American culture." This assumption led to an incident in class where there was a conversation surrounding rape culture in America, and Tyler asked a question about the topic. A student in class turned around and was outraged that Tyler was unaware of sexual assault incidents that had occurred recently, citing the Brock Turner case. Tyler reflected that this situation made him feel uncomfortable because he was not from here, so he should not have been expected to know about the current events happening in America. Instances such as this made Tyler hesitant to engage with domestic peers due to a fear of being misunderstood or saying the wrong thing.

Campus Inclusion

When asked about times participants felt welcomed or accepted on campus, participants cited going to events or joining clubs or organizations. Bert remarked that joining the American Marketing Association and interacting with people that had the same interest in marketing is one of the ways he felt included on campus. Fiona said that she has had a warm reception from people when she has gone to events on campus. She stated, "People are kind and warm-hearted... they reached out to me and I participated in the events." Bruce and John cited becoming an RA as a moment they felt accepted on campus because they felt supported by their fellow staff members and supervisors. However, when it came to engaging with groups on campus that had common interests with him, Tyler mentioned that he wasn't quite sure where to find these groups, especially if they were not

represented at the annual student organization involvement fair.

Financial Barriers to Sense of Belonging

John was the only participant to mention how finances impact his feelings of belonging. In previous years, IUB allowed all students to set up a monthly payment plan to pay for their tuition, but this year, they discontinued this option for international students. This resulted in international students having to pay their tuition all at once or risk paying their tuition monthly with a high interest rate. John tried to talk to the staff at Student Central and the Office of International Services, but they both informed John that nothing could be done about the situation. John also tried sending an email to the president to which he received no response. John mentioned that he thinks that people have a perception that international students are rich because they can afford to study in a different country, when that is not the case at all. He felt that because the university took this privilege from international students and not from domestic students, this showed that the university did not value his presence.

Social Life and Engagement

In general, students reported that they leaned towards their international peers for social and emotional support, but engaged with domestic students while pursuing academic support and professional development opportunities. Students expressed that it was important to develop a community in order for them to feel a sense of belonging. Throughout the study, students used terms such as "support," "care," and "acceptance" in place of sense of belonging. They each discussed a psychological satisfaction in the form of a subjective feeling of integration on campus. One student, Fiona, stated that becoming involved in affinity-based organizations with

a high concentration of Chinese students gave her a sense of affirmation. Jack referenced his experience as an international student in the orientation team as both challenging and rewarding when it came to building confidence and improving his social skills. He stated that there was value in having a cultural exchange with incoming freshman during his time on the team.

However, while some students spoke about their support systems, it was not uncommon for participants to deny the need for social support at all. When asked about who they would go to if they needed help on campus, one student in particular, Jack, stated that he wouldn't ask anyone for help, especially not his friends. Another student, Bruce, mentioned that he would rather go to Google for help than ask another person. Additionally, Bert expressed that his priority was socializing with domestic students specifically for the purpose of social networking in relation to his professional pursuits.

The social circles in which students interacted were different for each participant. Tyler and Fiona were more comfortable when primarily interacting with other international students, whereas Bruce and Bert had more social interaction with domestic students. However, Bruce's circle of friends was mostly international peers with a few domestic students, whereas Bert's circle was exclusively domestic peers. Regardless of the identities among their social circles, one trait that was consistent was their peers' demonstration of inclusivity and willingness to learn about their international experience at IU. This is an example of their peers exhibiting cultural familiarity because participants' peers either had shared experiences, or had some knowledge to what it might feel like to be an international student in the Midwest.

Bruce mentioned that while there were times where his domestic friends and

international friends would hang out together, more often than not, he would spend time with each group separately. Bert specifically mentioned intentionally seeking opportunities for socialization more with domestic students stating, "I don't need any more international [friends]. I have a lot of them back home. I want to be able to network and connect with more domestic students." Bert was planning on staying in the United States upon graduating from the university, citing this as the reason why he wanted to connect with more domestic students.

Several of the students mentioned that they felt excluded from college social life because of its emphasis on drinking and partying. Some participants also mentioned that they rarely went to events alone. For instance, Fiona said that she usually asks her friends to come along to social events. Jack said, "these parties are not for us. Our culture is different from theirs." Tyler, however, was comfortable going to events like off-campus parties. He would usually go to these parties with his roommate and friends from his residence hall, who were all domestic students. Bruce praised 'Camp Kelley' for its influence on helping him get connected to other students and the IU community.

Academic Experiences

Overall, the students interviewed perceived themselves to be generally academically successful. When asked about ways that they have struggled in the classroom, most participants were unable to recall specific instances in which they may have struggled, but some participants noted that their English classes were challenging. Additionally, there was an understanding that if they were to struggle, their professor would be willing to help them overcome that struggle. This understanding came from a general positive perception of professors as

the person responsible for a students' learning, and the professor's demonstration of willingness to work with students outside of the classroom setting, mainly through being available for office hours. Although this has the potential to develop into a proactive philosophy if the professors provided information and support services rather than waiting for students to seek them out on their own, the research team did not actually interpret there to be proactive philosophies currently present in the way professors interact with students.

The most common academic resource identified by students was their professors' office hours. Some stated that they sought help from the professor rather than peers because the professor is the expert on the topic. Additionally, tutoring and writing help was utilized by a few students. Bert, however, served as a tutor for other students but had never taken advantage of tutoring himself. Students who had leadership positions on campus that required them to serve as a resource for others, such as a resident assistant or orientation leader, had a strong awareness of the academic resources available to them on campus.

English classes were mentioned by multiple students, and for Fiona, language was said to be the biggest barrier to her success. For Tyler, there was a frustrating situation in an English class that stemmed from miscommunication. Tyler explained that he was struggling with writing a paper that focused on Native American history. This paper was especially difficult for him because, being from Indonesia, he had never taken an American history class before and did not have much background surrounding Native American history. After scoring well, Tyler's professor decided to move him to the "multilingual" section of the course, which he explained was for international students who scored less than 550 on the English portion of the SAT. He expressed

his frustration with the way this decision was handled because his English is strong, but he was being treated as if he struggled with the language simply because he was an international student from Asia.

In regard to their experience within the physical classroom space, most students explained that they were more comfortable interacting with both their peers and their professors in smaller classroom settings. Bert mentioned that for smaller classes, he usually goes to class an extra five minutes early each day to speak to the professor before class. Additionally, Bruce explained that if he was in a larger lecture style class, he was far less likely to raise his hand and would go to office hours if he had a question. Many students mentioned that they commonly had small group assignments and projects in their classes, and these were the situations in which they interact most with peers in the classroom.

All students interviewed were highly academically motivated, and many mentioned that their main priority while at Indiana University was their academics. When discussing his time spent on campus so far, Jack mentioned that, "I have pretty high expectations of myself in terms of academics." Because of the high expectations that Jack set for himself, he expressed that he felt unsuccessful in his academics, which led him to quit the basketball club. Tyler said, "I'm here to study, not to get a vacation." John expressed that he was never a studious person, but when he received a letter that said he was on the dean's list, he felt proud and wanted to push himself to continue to succeed academically.

Discussion

Based on the findings, the experiences that Asian International students had with their peers, staff, and faculty

shaped the ways in which they felt accepted in the community. Students who were able to establish community within a student organization or student employment reported having a greater sense of belonging at IUB than those who had not found an affinity group or some form of community on campus. For example, Tyler reported that he did not know where to find relevant student organizations on campus and said that he did not quite feel a sense of belonging at IU. This supports Strayhorn's (2012) claim that students who find community opportunities for engagement on campus are more likely to develop a sense of belonging on campus.

Additionally, the findings from this study show that sense of belonging can take a while to develop, as several of the participants who were upperclassmen mentioned that they did not feel like they belonged during their first year in college. Wu et al. (2015) stated that international students face additional challenges compared to domestic students, such as adjusting to a new place and culture, language difficulties, and misunderstanding in communication, which impacts the development of belonging. Navigating these challenges can make it even more difficult for Asian international students to feel connected to a university. The difficulty in adjustment to a new culture as mentioned by Wu et al. (2015) was referenced by multiple students. For example, Tyler referred to his "Asian mannerisms" that were out of place in Indiana, and Jack spoke about his discomfort with the fact that American college fraternity culture was not for him.

Strayhorn (2012) mentioned that sense of belonging continually changes and is dependent on the experience's students have in their environment. The participants in this study encountered experiences that resulted in either an increase or decrease in their sense of belonging. The culmination of

the situations that participants dealt with contributed to their feelings of belonging, suggesting that there is not a single factor that impacts sense of belonging, but rather a multitude of factors. This study shows that students experience sense of belonging in different ways, as some indicated that they felt a sense of belonging through their social groups, whereas other participants felt that they belonged because of an environment that stimulated their academic pursuits. John's experience with the university policy regarding finances made him question his sense of belonging here because of the increasing difficulty in paying for tuition. This indicates that university policies that negatively impact international students can make students question whether the university values their presence on campus.

Strayhorn's (2012) Sense of Belonging Theory indicated that social support and engagement directly influence sense of belonging for students, but that sense of belonging influences the academic success of a student rather than the other way around. However, the data from this study showed that participants' academic experiences actually contributed to their development of a sense of belonging on campus. Multiple students stated that they felt highly stimulated by their academic environment, and their academic successes fostered a sense of pride that made them feel like IU was home. Additionally, since academics was the highest priority for all students interviewed, their focus while in college was not on the two concepts (social support and engagement) that Strayhorn (2012) identified. Because of this strong connection to academics for the international students interviewed in this study, academics was directly connected to their sense of belonging.

Museus's (2014) idea of *cultural familiarity* was referenced clearly in Fiona's experiences with the Chinese Calligraphy

Club, in which she was able to engage with other Chinese students as well as American students while focusing on an aspect of her culture that was familiar and enjoyable for her. Fiona discussed her positive experiences with the Chinese Calligraphy Club multiple times throughout her interview. This indicator also mediated John's sense of belonging because he lived in a residence hall that had a high population of international students that were able to understand his experiences and also had a supervisor that was an Asian international student. This finding corroborates with Museus's (2014) assertion that cultural familiarity can be a mediator for sense of belonging. The description of these students' experiences further highlights how cultural familiarity as a cultural relevance indicator helps to create environments on campus that are relevant to diverse students' backgrounds.

Although the *proactive philosophies* indicator from Museus's (2014) CECE Model was a key point in the theoretical framework of this study, there were few examples of these philosophies found directly in the interview data. Proactive philosophies are listed as a responsiveness indicator, which involves understanding the ways in which support systems on campus take into account and respond to the norms and needs of diverse students. Students interviewed felt generally supported by faculty and staff on campus; however, most students had trouble recalling any specific instances in which a professor or campus staff member made the effort of directly reaching out to them. This was illustrated by interviewee Tyler explaining that he wanted to join student organizations, but was unsure of where to find ones that would be relevant to his interests. In situations like these, Tyler's engagement on campus (a key factor in sense of belonging) could have been improved if a staff member had practiced a

proactive philosophy and presented Tyler with resources for student involvement.

Limitations

Although this study was able to gain insight into the factors that contribute to sense of belonging, there were several limitations that hinder the study's ability to fully capture how Asian international students experienced a sense of belonging at IUB. First, the results of this data cannot be generalized to other Asian international students on this campus because of the small sample size. Furthermore, the home countries of participants that were interviewed were not representative of the Asian international student population as a whole. Within the sample, there was an apparent gender disparity, since five participants identified as male and one identified as female. Because student experiences in a college setting can often be gendered, this disparity in representation would limit the generalizability to the larger international student population. Moreover, a majority of participants in the study were students in the Kelley School of Business. The experiences of students from one school to another at Indiana University can differ greatly, and this lack of representation from other majors and colleges also limits the generalizability of the findings. This may be due to the fact that 52% of this population is studying in the field of business on this campus (Office of International Services, 2018).

Implications for Practice

This study offers implications for practitioners and scholars, which should be considered within the context of the limitations in the study. First, when enacting policy changes, universities should consider the repercussions that the changes may have on international students, not just domestic

students. Due to recent policy changes in the United States government, international student enrollment is declining for many universities, and in order for universities to retain these students, they need to be intentional about providing support and care for international students (Johnson, 2018). Additionally, policy makers must begin to view international students as more than just a way to increase revenue for the university. Universities that increase fees on international students without transparency on why the increase is being made run the risk of alienating their international students and disrupting the affinity those students may feel.

As examined by Museus (2014) within the CECE Model and exhibited in the findings of the study, cultural familiarity in campus environments is positively associated with sense of belonging. For Asian international students, this cultural familiarity can be manifested through opportunities for students to share interculturally with those who come from similar backgrounds and from different backgrounds. This can be done on a campus-wide scale through large events and programming, or on a smaller scale through casual events such as conversation tables, not only at IU, but also throughout campuses in the U.S. looking to be more inclusive of this population. Increasing the frequency of these events creates a campus environment that is culturally aware.

While such programming may already exist in some form on IU Bloomington's campus, the findings of this study show that it is not uncommon for the messaging surrounding these events to not be relatable to Asian international students. Since campus events were described by Asian international students as being something that was not meant for them, it is important for offices on campus to make their advertising inclusive of those who are

not domestic students. Departments should consider the images as well as the text they put on their flyers, handouts, and posters. Having images that international students can easily recognize and relate to is one step towards inclusive marketing. References to American pop culture are also something that should be taken into consideration when attempting to convey important messages, since Asian international students may not have the prior exposure to understand them. Another method of becoming inclusive is by making translated materials of the same quality available for international students.

Moreover, marketing and outreach regarding both cultural events and resources on campus that foster student involvement that is directed specifically towards international students would allow for better awareness of opportunities for engagement. For example, promotion of the online system called that provides an organization and event directory that is meant to help students find involvement opportunities across campus specifically towards international students could be beneficial in allowing them to find their community here at IUB.

As previously discussed, there is a positive correlation between the time an individual has spent at university and the level of sense of belonging they experience. With many of the older participants citing a lower feeling of belongingness in their first years at university and younger participants mirroring this feeling, the research team recommends that greater first-year programming and outreach needs to be focused on the support of international students. Currently the Office of First Year Experience Programs (FYE) participates in events like the IU World's Fare, a program hosted by the Office of International Services to celebrate and appreciate international cultures from around the world. Additionally, more events like "Camp

Kelley” that focus on providing an additional resource of support for first-year students need to be prioritized. Events like these are favorable environments to include domestic students and faculty members and offer them a chance to learn and engage in dialogue; increasing cultural competencies for all parties.

Finally, there is opportunity for the university to create a course with the specific intention of helping international students establish meaningful relationships and connections with the campus environment and their domestic peers. Indiana University already provides alternative courses for international students, but these courses are exclusively for international students. These existing courses also focus on the same curriculum as their counterpart with less emphasis on U.S. culture. Providing a classroom space

for domestic and international students to share their intercultural experiences allows them to increase their cultural familiarity. As a General Education credit, the course would be more likely to garner interest from both international and domestic students. Designating this course as a General Education credit also shows international students that their presence and knowledge are important to the university and that the university is proactive in addressing the needs of those students.

Taking into consideration the challenges faced by Asian international students while studying in the United States, and specifically at Indiana University Bloomington, the research team hopes that this study can help increase awareness of the experience of these students, while also helping to mitigate these challenges through the suggestions for practice.

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