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Assessing International Student Perceptions of the Classroom Environment at a U.S. Business School

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The number of international students on college campuses has sharply increased in the last decade. Although several studies have explored the topic of international students from the perspective of faculty, little research has been conducted on the classroom experiences of the international students themselves. This qualitative study examines the business school classroom environment from the perspective of international students, specifically focusing on instructional methods, international student-faculty interactions, and the effectiveness of instructional tools.

Introduction

According to a survey by the Institute of International Education (Davis, 2002), the number of international students studying in the United States rose to 582,996 in 2001, a 6.4% increase over the previous year. Enrollment of international students increased by nearly 100,000 in the 1990s (Tomkovich & Al-Khatib, 1996). Several authors (Coleman, 1997; Tomkovich & Al-Khatib, 1996) have attributed these increases to the active recruitment of international students by colleges and universities, for both educational and utilitarian purposes. International students often represent the top-tier students of their native countries and bring diverse perspectives to the classroom; they also bring in greater tuition revenues since they typically pay closer to the full cost of their education than domestic students (Tomkovich & Al-Khatib, 1996).

Despite the growing number of international students in the United States, studies exploring their unique needs and perceptions of the classroom environment are lacking. Although there is a useful body of literature on faculty perceptions of international students (Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Trice, 2000, 2001; Young, 1998), little exists to indicate how well these students feel their educational needs are being met and what pedagogical techniques they consider most effective.

Because business and management continue to be the most popular fields of study for international students (Davis, 2000, 2002), this study focuses on students in these majors, specifically those for whom English is not their primary language. Students who must overcome this language barrier face a variety of challenges, making an examination of their needs all the more critical. The purpose of this study is to explore international student perceptions of the classroom environment, with a special emphasis on the

professor's instructional style and techniques. Specifically, what instructional methods do international students perceive as most conducive to their learning? What aspects of the classroom environment created by the instructor are perceived as welcoming and supportive to learning by international students? Furthermore, what additional resources (overheads, PowerPoint, handouts, etc.) do international students find effective in enhancing their learning?

Literature Review

The researchers reviewed three dimensions of the classroom environment: faculty perceptions of international students as learners, how international students view various instructional and communication styles, and how international students believe faculty perceive them as learners. These areas were selected because the researchers believe that they best embody the most salient parts of the classroom experience for international students.

Faculty Perception of International Students as Learners

Although student expectations of faculty vary, several studies indicate the role of faculty to be an important part of the educational environment for international students. Trice (2001) found that faculty's ability to interact with international students is a key dimension contributing to the satisfaction of international students. Trice's (2001) study found that faculty's perception of non-English speaking international students consists of various elements: (1) international students face unique academic issues, (2) international students face adjustment to a new culture, (3) international students are greatly affected by the language barrier, and (4) international students face problems such as integration with American students as well as financial difficulties. Faculty members also underestimate international students' desire to integrate with American students as they often believe that international students tend to self-segregate (Trice, 2001).

Faculty perception of international students can influence the way in which they instruct a course and respond to individual student's needs. Several studies indicate that many faculty members feel they should not have to alter their instructional style to meet special needs of international students. Omar (1985) asserts that such faculty attitudes may cause international students to feel faculty are not concerned about serving their needs, although some faculty do try to adjust to international students' special circumstances (Trice, 2000). Nonetheless, a commonly shared faculty perspective is that international students should be expected to achieve the same level of classroom performance as their domestic student counterparts (Ladd & Ruby, 1999). Further, when considering whose responsibility it is to ensure intercultural adaptation in the classroom, faculty participants often take a middle of the road approach, arguing that it is "everyone's" responsibility (Young, 1998).

Faculty Instructional Style and Classroom Communication

Trice (2000) found that faculty who had spent some time overseas were more likely to modify their instructional style for international students. Adaptations mentioned by these faculty included "using less jargon, incorporating more visual aids into lectures and being cognizant of whether international students comprehended class discussions" (p. 22).

Multiple researchers (Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Matthews, 1994; Yuen & Lee, 1994) have concluded that faculty should adopt a flexible instructional style that accommodates the diverse learning styles of both domestic and international students. Without flexibility, a faculty member's instructional style can become a barrier to student learning. Johannesen (1983) notes that this may require "some measure of adaptation in language choice, supporting materials, organization and message transmission to reflect the specific nature of the audience" (p. 5).

Young (1998) also identified several adaptations that faculty use as "day to day operational strategies" for assisting international students (p. 13). Examples mentioned in the study include using a student's native language in class for reference or greeting, inviting international students to discuss papers and asking them about ways to help them learn the material, as well as allowing dictionaries in class, time extensions for tests, extensions of deadlines for essays, or taking alternative tests. However, Young (1998) stated there is no formal evidence that such adaptations by faculty members actually assist international students in learning.

Becoming familiar with a student's native culture and educational system can allow faculty to better assist students discover their learning style and ways to more effectively navigate classroom dynamics. Depending on a student's native culture, participation in classroom discussion may be difficult and intimidating (Lu, 2001). For example, students from Southeast Asian countries may feel impolite or that they are wasting the instructor's time if they interrupt the class with a question (Tanaka, 2002). Furthermore, in their qualitative study of Turkish and U.S. graduate students at a U.S. university, Cagiltay and Bichelmeyer (2000) found that culture has an effect on the way students perceive power relationships in the classroom.

Even when faculty and international students actively attempt to work together, communication between international students and professors may still be hindered at times by the linguistic challenges of international students. For example, Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth (2000) examined e-mail messages of twenty-eight American and international students to an American professor's electronic office hour consultations and found that the international students' messages lacked negotiation skills. The authors

suggest that this deficiency relates to cultural differences and less-developed English language skills. This lack of negotiating skills may make it difficult for faculty to interpret students' needs and appropriately respond, putting these students at a disadvantage for completing coursework successfully (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2000).

How Students Believe Faculty Perceive Them as Learners

One deficiency in the literature regarding international students was a lack of studies exploring how students believe faculty perceive them as learners and how this affects their educational experience. Ladd and Rudy (1999) and Tomkovich and Al-Khatib (1996) found that many international students place a high value on understanding their American professors and developing warm interpersonal relationships with them. However, in some cultures students view the instructor as an unquestioned figure whose authority on instructional matters is final, making relational expectations between faculty and students low (Ladd & Ruby, 1999).

Further research on the international student perspective is necessary in order to understand how to optimize the faculty-student relationship. The intention of this study is to contribute knowledge to the research base that could be used to enhance pedagogical methods and develop instructional resources for faculty instructing international students. Toward this goal, the purpose of this study is to explore international student perspectives on the classroom learning environment, specifically investigating their beliefs of how faculty perceive them as learners and their assessment of the effectiveness of various instructional styles and tools.

Methodology

Participants

The sample comprised nineteen undergraduate international business students at a highly competitive and prestigious business school at Central University, a large, public, research university in the Midwest. According to the business school's Academic Counselor for International Students, there are 382 international students within the business school, comprising 9.7% of the total number of students in the business school. University-wide, there are 3,284 international students, comprising 8% of the total student population according to Central University's International Services website. Participants in this study were from Austria, Burma, India, Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Yugoslavia and have spent varying amounts of time studying English and living in the U.S. The gender balance was 42% men and 58% women.

The sample was limited to business students to help ensure consistency of prior classroom experience by participants. Noting Selvadurai's (1992) finding that use and comprehension of the English language is one of the

most significant obstacles in the classroom for international students, the researchers chose to focus this study on students for whom English is not their primary language. The researchers' intent was not to select a sample that represented the full breadth of international student experience, but rather to determine the themes common to one group of international students within the context of the Central University business school.

Procedure

Students were contacted through e-mail and classroom solicitation and provided a description of the study's purpose, information on the format of the interviews, and how the researchers intended to use the information participants provided to ensure informed consent (Kvale, 1996; Manning, 1992; Merriam, 1997).

Previous research indicates that international students may interpret their educational experiences differently than domestic students (Davis, 2000, 2002), leading the researchers to select a constructivist approach. A constructivist approach emphasizes the importance of recognizing and understanding the unique perspectives and perceptions of each participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Manning, 1992; Merriam, 1997). The researchers developed a written interview protocol comprised of open-ended questions (Kvale, 1996; Lofland & Lofland, 1992; Manning, 1992) drawn from previous literature in the areas of "instructor related" and "course related" experiences. Students were also asked to respond to four questions using a Likert-type scale. The total time of each interview did not exceed forty-five minutes.

Data Analysis

Written notes from the interviews were entered into a database with cells representing each item on the interview-recording instrument. Responses from all participants were summarized on one worksheet, with each comment identified by participant number. Each researcher analyzed the full data set to identify common themes. After individual analysis, the researchers discussed all the themes that were identified and narrowed them down to five.

Limitations

Although the researchers strived to account for numerous perspectives within the planning of the study, a few limitations do exist. First, the wording of one question was confusing to participants, requiring the researchers to only use the results from the question as supplementary data. Concerning demographics, the sample was primarily Asian and of senior class level, possibly limiting the applicability of the findings to other groups. Comparative data on domestic business students would have added an additional dimen-

sion to the findings. In addition, a limitation of all interview-based research is that researcher bias may steer the conversation, therefore biasing the results (Kvale, 1996; Lofland & Lofland, 1992; Merriam, 1998).

Results

In analyzing the interview data, five general themes emerged from comments made by participants. These themes include: the caring or approachable nature of faculty; the use or lack of inclusive examples and illustrations used by instructors; the preference for visual instructional tools; the view of group projects as both challenging and valuable; and students' assertiveness in the classroom.

Caring Faculty

The warmth and friendliness associated with an instructor was most often the determinant of whether a professor was ultimately viewed as "approachable." Most students described their instructors as "open to students" or "easy to approach." Jnatri, a student from India, described professors as "welcoming, really pleasant, and friendly to speak to." Examples of the means through which faculty members presented themselves as approachable included their availability to students through office hours, after class, and via email. How instructors utilized associate instructors (AIs) in the course and in responding to student questions also informed how approachable the faculty member appeared to students. For example, Amah from Indonesia shared an instance of a professor whom he found particularly inaccessible because the professor insisted that students direct all of their questions regarding the course to the AI. Describing his instructor, Amah stated, "he is indifferent, and I am not certain that he even likes students."

In regards to grading, most participants brought up "fairness" of the instructor. With one exception, "fairness" was defined as allowing students to re-write an assignment or correct grammatical mistakes. Erlyinda, an Indonesian student, described such a professor when he stated, "He allows international students and other hardworking students a chance to do assignments over...[he] recognizes effort in students." Similarly, Batuta, another Indonesian student, mentioned the notion of "fairness" describing one of his favorite classes. Batuta stated, "[The professor] allows us second chances to rewrite and looks at our effort."

Inclusiveness of Examples and Illustrations used By Instructors

Participants frequently mentioned the use of descriptive examples and illustrations as particularly helpful to their learning. For instance, Amsia, a student from Indonesia, explained that professors were easy to understand if they "tell jokes and provide illustrations, such as real life situations." Participants, however, stressed the importance of examples being relevant to their

individual experience and cultural background. Relevancy allows them to easily make meaning of and connection with the example. Teungku from Indonesia explained, "It is sometimes difficult to understand examples that are based on American TV shows not familiar to international students." Vrishni from India provided an example of this issue. He stated, "In my Business Culture class the professor used examples of the O.J. Simpson trial and I was at a loss but all the Americans were comfortable with it." Eight students similarly noted that culturally-based content, including jokes, slang, and television and movie references, sometimes placed them at a disadvantage in their ability to grasp the material. Several students said they wished professors would teach from an international perspective and use more examples from other countries. Hei, from South Korea, said he particularly appreciated faculty who have worked or taught overseas and used examples from those experiences.

Visual Instructional Tools

Commenting on various instructional tools, all but one participant mentioned the visual aspect of instructional tools as being beneficial for their learning. Particularly, all but four participants indicated that PowerPoint slideshows were most helpful, with handouts and videos also frequently noted as aiding their learning. Participants stated that these types of tools helped to organize the instructor's main points of discussion and helped them highlight key concepts. PowerPoint slideshows were viewed as most helpful to students, especially when handouts of the slides were shared with students at the beginning of the lecture so that students could add their individual notes during the class discussion. Jnatri, from India, summarized this sentiment when he explained, "PowerPoint and handouts combined [together] highlight the most important points the students need to learn."

The caveat to these favorable views on instructional tools was found regarding the use of overheads and videos. Some students expressed frustrations with faculty who remove the overheads too quickly and that simply include too much information on overheads making the points impossible to copy down. In these cases the students expressed their preference for take-home handouts that could be used for future reference and for study purposes. Finally, a few students noted their dissatisfaction with the use of videos because the rapid dialogue sometimes makes it difficult for them to keep up with the English.

Group Projects: Challenging, but Valuable

The topic of group and team projects, common to the business curriculum, surfaced in almost all of the interview conversations regarding assignments. Consistent within comments was the belief that group projects were both challenging and valuable. Immad, a student from Pakistan, explained,

"Although group projects can be hard, I learn the most from them." In fact, 47% of participants agreed, making positive comments about their experiences and how it greatly benefited their learning. Aiko, a student from Japan, explained, "I like having lots of group projects because they teach you to work as a team." Other benefits of participating in group projects identified included: group members helping each other review and reevaluate course content; the sharing of new information and perspectives; learning how to work as a team; learning how to deal with other people and help one another; having a support network; and learning new cultural perspectives. Bao, a student from Taiwan, further explained the benefits when he stated, "With group projects [I] can share information and get new perspectives."

Nine of the participants also cited specific challenges they associated with working on group projects, such as difficulties communicating with native English speakers. Bon-hwa, a student from South Korea, explained, "It is difficult to communicate in groups because of different background[s] and language[s]. Team projects make me nervous." Some challenges expressed by participants seemed typical of any student working in a group project. Participants remarked about the difficulty in coordinating several students' schedules and group members' unwillingness to put in the necessary time to complete the project, challenges potentially inherent to all group work. However, other challenges seemed specifically related to international student experiences with group work. For instance, participants mentioned the feeling of being excluded, as if one's comments are not being heard or are being ignored, and dealing with American students who procrastinate and don't understand that an international student cannot perform as efficiently at the last minute because of his/her language skill differences. Aiko, a student from Japan, explained, "Team projects are difficult because the team will wait until the last minute and because I don't speak or write English well I need more time." Despite these challenges participants also expressed benefits they gain from working in groups with American students. These benefits include pressure to think creatively in English and an opportunity to work as a team and forge relationships with their American peers. One participant referred to the collective rewards and risks of group work when he stated, "If you go down, all of us go down."

Assertiveness in the Classroom

Statements about varying degrees of assertiveness within the classroom were common. Moreover, they seemed to derive from two areas with cultural undertones: the American educational environment and the student response to that environment. In reference to the American educational environment, students articulated differences from the educational environments of their native countries. Students regularly mentioned the less formal

U.S. educational environment and the higher emphasis placed on student participation in class, characteristics contrary to the guiding methods and protocols used in some of their native countries. For example, Immad from Pakistan explained, "Professors should explain the expected classroom behavior to international students so we know that it is okay to go to the restroom during class or to address the professors by their first names." Important to this point is that these actions would be viewed as unacceptable or disrespectful in some other cultures.

When describing differences in their native educational systems, ten participants either described an expectation that students would be passive in the classroom, or said they had a much more formal, distant relationship with instructors in their home countries. "Many times [American] professors are concerned because we do not raise our hands in class and often wonder if we understand what's going on; we do, it's just that in our own country we are not allowed to ask questions in class, so we do not do it here," said Lian from Taiwan. Aiko, a Japanese student, further explained that she was uncomfortable speaking in the large lecture classes because Japanese culture promotes self-consciousness and the need to not make mistakes.

Responding to the American educational environment, students shared stories of their hesitancy to approach and ask questions of faculty members or to address them by their given name, even though they had been encouraged to do so by faculty members. Sabir explained that because of his native Pakistani culture, he "would need to be approached (by a professor) to open up." Although participants said professors at this institution were generally very approachable and available for questions, they still generally felt more comfortable asking professors their questions after class or during office hours than in the classroom. Others said it was easier to ask assistant instructors in the smaller discussion sections, or peers in their classes.

Further commenting on their classroom participation, several participants expressed discomfort with professors who posed questions directly to specific students in the class. For instance, one student mentioned that she told her professor outside of class that calling on her made her uncomfortable. Other participants criticized the large lecture format of many business school courses, using the following descriptors, "It's not encouraging to participate," "I feel nervous to speak," and "I have to sit at the front to feel like I am there." Unrelated to cultural or language differences, some participants shared that their lack of classroom participation was simply due to general shyness. One Indian student, Jnatri, stated simply, "I'm not the kind of guy who would lift his hand up in class." Paradoxically, although participants described feelings of discomfort and difficulty participating as much as domestic students, they expressed preference for the higher level of interaction in U.S. classrooms. As Markus, a student from Austria stated, "I

like the interaction in U.S. classrooms. Professors in the U.S. try to help out students."

Despite the challenges expressed, participants, especially those who had been studying in the U.S. for a significant amount of time, seemed well adjusted. The majority of participants spoke very positively about their experience. As Erlyinda, an Indonesian student expressed, "I feel very comfortable here." In addition to being positive about their experience, many participants needed to reflect back to their first semesters studying in the United States to describe struggles, suggesting their current level of adjustment to be high.

Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to explore international student perceptions of the classroom environment, with a special emphasis on professor instructional style and techniques. Although a sizable body of literature regarding faculty perception of international students exists (Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Trice, 2000, 2001; Young, 1998), the international students' perception of faculty instructional style, use of instructional tools, and how faculty perceive them as learners were notable omissions in previous researchers' treatment of this topic. As the number of international students in U.S. universities continues to increase (Davis, 2000, 2002), understanding how best to help these students learn is of vital importance to universities interested in attracting and serving these students. Although Young (1998) found that faculty members do try to accommodate the perceived special needs of international students through use of instructional tools, there was no existing evidence that such accommodations are effective. This study addressed these gaps in the research by investigating international students' feelings and perceptions regarding faculty instructional style and the effectiveness of instructional tools.

The researchers' use of constructivist inquiry in the form of open-ended interview questions allowed the nineteen participants to express their feelings and perceptions of the classroom environment. The analysis of the results of these interviews revealed the previously mentioned emergent themes. Both the existing body of literature and the findings of this study support the following recommendations for institutions and faculty desiring to better serve international students.

Faculty's Role in the Enhancement of International Students' Learning Experience

The findings of this study confirmed Trice's (2000) research on the faculty role as significant to the international student learning experience. The results revealed that faculty attitude, teaching style, and appreciation of the native cultures of international students are critical elements within the

learning environment. Faculty-initiated efforts to establish relationships may be necessary with international students from certain ethnic or regional backgrounds as such students may be accustomed to more formal classroom relationships than those found in the U.S. Consistent and repeated outreach to these students may be needed to assist them in overcoming their unfamiliarity with U.S. classroom norms. Faculty who make the additional effort to build rapport with international students will be rewarded by appreciative students who feel that they matter as learners (Omar, 1985; Trice, 2001). As a result of these findings institutions should consider developing comprehensive orientation programs to help faculty become familiar with the needs of international students, their learning styles and expectations, a need Ladd and Ruby (1999) previously advocated.

Group Projects

Group work was a consistent theme throughout the inquiry as well. Similar to previous domestic business student research (Diessner, 1993), participants acknowledged that group work is particularly challenging for them, but that it provides recognizable benefits. Respondents cited language differences and limited previous exposure to group work as primary reasons for this challenge. To help minimize these challenges faculty should purposefully design assignments and group membership in ways that encourage and support the full participation and contributions of international students. Components of the assignment could include international or comparative perspectives.

In order to ensure that each group member feels valued, it may also be necessary for faculty to facilitate mutual understanding between international students and domestic students in group projects by clarifying basic principles that foster positive group dynamics. Participants in this study stated that they often feel outnumbered in groups, making it important for faculty members to encourage groups to be inclusive of all members. Finally, while it is important to remember that heterogeneous groups generally maximize the broadening of student horizons, there may also be times when homogenous groups can allow for more thoughtful conversations, such as projects that require the discussion of sensitive topics. Until student-peer rapport is established, faculty must be cognizant of these challenges when assigning group work and try to structure them such as to mitigate these differences (Diessner, 1993; Nowak & Miller, 1996).

Classroom Participation

Trice's (2001), research on faculty perceptions of non-English speaking international students found that many may face unique academic issues, such as challenges in adjusting to a new culture, language barriers, and finding ways to participate within a new environment. Tanaka (2002) and

Lu's (2001) research on students of Southeastern Asian countries found that these students rarely participate in class because in their native classrooms it is considered impolite or a waste of an instructor's time to ask questions and to clarify points. Participants from regions with similar faculty-student interaction models also found it difficult to participate and ask many questions in the American classroom setting even when they recognized that the U.S. classroom environment is more open, participatory, and one in which a more equal relationship with professors is encouraged. Another factor that could contribute to international student passivity in the classroom is self-consciousness about their English language skills. Uncertainty about words, difficulty in phrasing questions and the fear of possible ridicule from classmates should they make mistakes are all factors that may also contribute to the reduced participation of some international students.

Faculty members should continue to encourage international students to ask questions and participate in the classroom setting. As previously mentioned, the hesitancy to be more assertive may be cultural and the efforts of faculty members to include international students are appreciated (Ladd & Ruby, 1999). Despite consistent hesitancy to openly participate in the classroom, participants stated that faculty's attempt to encourage their participation increases their comfort in the classroom.

Faculty Instructional Style

Participants indicated that the use of examples and illustrations increased their ability to understand class material, but it was important that the examples be relevant and reflective of both American and international student experiences. The use of examples and illustrations from U.S. popular culture was sometimes a hindrance to international student learning and excluded them from fully sharing in the common understanding and enjoyment of the class. This finding lends credibility to research (Ladd & Rudy, 1999; Matthews, 1994; Yuen & Lee, 1994) that indicates that without flexibility, a faculty member's instructional style can become a barrier, rather than a bridge, to student learning. Given that international students may not be familiar with U.S. popular culture references, faculty members should attempt to use alternative examples in conjunction with pop culture references, or use multiple global examples that reflect the culture of other countries. When U.S. pop culture illustrations are used, professors should explain the context. This background information, while essential for international students, might also enhance the understanding of domestic students who may have misperceptions or a limited understanding of the topic being discussed. The use of American slang, idioms, or other complex vocabulary should also be limited and the pace of presentation should be moderate with all points clearly organized. A final enhancement to the international student

learning environment is achieved through the use of an international students' native language in classroom for reference, greeting purposes, or when inviting international students to discuss papers.

Visual Instructional Aids

The use of almost all visual instructional tools in the classroom was regarded positively, with particular preference for Power Point presentations and handouts. The only exception is that the use of videos are only helpful if the videos are short and pertained directly to the course content in a straightforward manner. The study revealed that when faculty combined these tools it not only enhances the student's ability to understand and keep up with the class conversation, but also serves to compensate for the language barriers by providing a clear framework into which individual notes can be recorded. This helps international students organize the material and focus on salient concepts. To facilitate international student learning, faculty members should endeavor to use these types of instructional tools.

Conclusion

In general, the findings of this study support previous research and give a stronger voice to the experiences of international students. Participants indicated that they perceive the American classroom and educational system as supportive, democratic, and progressive. While students did not always actively respond to faculty invitations to participate or meet with them individually, they appreciated the faculty who made deliberate efforts to engage them in and out of the classroom. Students recognized the benefits that they gained from group work and, accordingly, faculty should continue to structure learning in similar interactive formats, while remaining aware that group work sometimes needs guidance to assure that all members are able to participate in a fulfilling way.

Researchers interested in pursuing an even stronger understanding of international students' perceptions of the classroom environment may want to investigate the role of peers. Participants in this study did occasionally note that peers are an important part of the classroom experience, but the researchers did not focus questioning or analysis on this issue. Another important issue not addressed by the researchers is the effect of the international students' cultures' gender norms on their perceptions of the classroom environment. Researchers did discern some gender differences in terms of assertiveness in the classroom, but were unable to reliably connect these differences to the students' native cultures.

As American higher education broadens into an increasingly global system, efforts by institutions to be more inclusive of international students will be increasingly imperative. While this increased diversity may result

from a variety of changing factors (Coleman, 1997; Tomkovich & Al-Khatib, 1996) the implications for faculty members are evident: clear and organized communications, globally-based illustrations, and a willingness to reach out to international students are essential elements for maximum student participation and success.

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