

Social Integration of International Undergraduate Students at Penn State

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### **Introduction**

In the 2012-2013 academic year, The Pennsylvania State University was ranked among American Universities as tenth in enrollment of international students (Waldheir, 2013). During that year 6,693 international students studied at the University Park campus alone (Waldheir, 2013). The purpose of this paper is to explore the environmental influences on the social integration of international undergraduate students at The Pennsylvania State University, University Park campus (Penn State).

This population (undergraduate international students) consists of students who have emigrated from their country of origin to the United States for the purpose of attaining a baccalaureate degree in an American institution of higher education. During the 2003-2004 academic year, the United States experienced a 5% decrease in international undergraduate student enrollment, which was the first drop since the early 1970's (Bushweller, 2004). This can be attributed to the real and perceived barriers international students face when considering college or university study in the United States or to the increasingly prevalent perspective that international students are no longer welcome at institutions of higher education in the United States (Bushweller, 2004).

In order to explore the social integration of undergraduate international students at Penn State, we first introduce Cheng's 2004 theory regarding campus community and the concept of social integration as a framework to better analyze this population's experiences on campus. We then review the literature on international students, specifically examining some of the challenges international students face and possible interventions that promote social integration. We also provide an overview of services Penn State

currently offers undergraduate international students as well as insight from interviews and experiences with current students and a student affairs professional from this population on campus. Based on our analysis, we then provide a general discussion of possible interventions and suggest a specific intervention for Penn State designed to socially integrate undergraduate international students. Finally, we conclude with our own personal reflections and closing remarks regarding this project.

### **Background**

When working with or studying international students it is important to remember – as it is with any student population – that each individual student is unique and it is their own lived experiences which will ultimately have the greatest impact on their educative outcomes (Pedersen, 1991). By the nature of being international, these students are from any country other than the United States, and therefore speak many different languages, and come from multiple political, religious, and cultural backgrounds and it is important to consider the disaggregated data on this population when appropriate (Anderson, Carmichael, Harper & Huang, 2009). In this paper, we focus on the aggregated data and research regarding undergraduate international students.

### **Students' Sense of Community**

In their book, Strange and Banning (2001) explain that environments affect a student's success in higher education through a variety of factors, including participation and involvement in a safe and welcoming educational community. These broad concepts of participation and involvement are further discussed by Cheng (2004), who examines students' sense of community and outlines six specific characteristics of a strong campus community. One of the characteristics is especially relevant to the examination of

international students at Penn State. Cheng (2004) notes that a successful campus community “fosters positive relationships among ethnic and cultural groups through programs and student activities” (p. 216) and should be built around the central function of student learning. Moreover, Cheng (2004) asserts that campus communities should support students who feel lonely by valuing them as individuals and treating them in caring ways. As we proceed to discuss literature relevant to the social integration of international students, it is important to keep the premises of Cheng’s 2004 theory in mind. Our suggested intervention, which we present near the end of this paper, directly targets the environment for international students at Penn State as understood through Cheng’s work.

### **Understanding Social Integration**

As these students leave their home cultures, or familiar cultures, they are faced with an enormous amount of change. Based on the shared experience of being an international student, a recent study from Sherry (2009) found that 56% of international students experienced significant difficulties integrating at American institutions of higher education. The various ways that international students react to this dramatic environmental change is referred to as *acculturation*, and *deculturation* is a feeling of loss of identity and feelings of alienation when a student loses contact with their home culture and does not connect with the host culture and environment (Pedersen, 1991). *Assimilation* is when a person relinquishes their cultural identity and transitions into the larger host society (Pedersen, 1991). It is important to note that because diversity is something to be valued in society and in our institutions of higher education, assimilation should not be the goal in programming or counseling. Students should be encouraged to retain their cultural identity and should thus be supported in *integration*, which is the maintenance of home

cultural normativity in conjunction with integration into the social frame of the host culture (Pedersen, 1991). If international students are socially integrated, they have more positive experiences with the greater campus community (Anderson, Carmichael, Harper & Huang, 2009). This also fosters a more successful campus community in congruence with Cheng (2004).

### **Challenges**

There are many factors, as previously articulated, that contribute to challenges international students may face in higher education in the United States. In addition to the challenges directly discussed throughout the literature, there are certainly more individualized challenges experienced by international students based on their own history, lived experiences, and how they experience the institution's campus environment. International students face the challenges of adapting to a new culture, using the English language (including regional and campus slang), increased financial pressures, and a lack of general understanding from the university community at-large (Sherry, 2009). Moreover, international students may need to significantly adjust to the academic, organizational, and social environment of the unfamiliar campus, which can often be understandably overwhelming (Burdette, 2012).

One of the most expansive challenges which international students face is racism (Sherry, 2009). For instance, in the post-9/11 environment, people may identify women wearing veils or men wearing turbans as Middle Eastern and discriminate against these individuals based on a limited knowledge of the culture. These examples of stereotyping and racism are few of many and they certainly qualify as significant environmental stressors for international students. It is important for higher education institutions to work

towards lessening and ultimately eliminating discrimination on their campuses, which can be accomplished by increasing students' exposure to diverse perspectives. Increased exposure to diverse perspectives enhances the campus community (Cheng, 2004) for international and domestic students.

Whether an undergraduate student is international or domestic, social support and integration are critical to postsecondary educational success. However, by moving to a new country and a different culture, an international student is deprived of their existing support systems and typically encounters challenges in creating new support networks (Pedersen, 1991). Sherry (2009) found that 44% of international students did not feel integrated in their local and campus community. Sherry (2009) also found that 50% of international students identified most of their friends as other international students, only 35% of international students identified as having American friends, and 8% identified as having no friends. The international students who were surveyed indicated that one of the primary reasons it felt difficult to make friends with domestic students was because of cultural misunderstandings, which creates additional stress for students seeking social integration (Sherry, 2009; Pedersen, 1991). Sherry (2009) reports that 62% of international students felt that domestic students had little to no understanding of their home culture. This significant level of perceived misunderstanding can easily create additional barriers between different populations of students and inhibit social integration into the existing campus community.

Not surprisingly, international students often look to those from their home culture for social support and to feel a sense of community at the institution (Sherry, 2009; Pedersen, 1991). However, Sherry (2009) found that only 15% of international students

reported making friends with students from their home country. We identify two primary problems with these figures. First, if students only make friends from their home culture, they are missing out on a large part of their educative experience and shortchanging themselves of the benefits of interacting with diverse populations . Second, this strategy may not be an option for students from a country with a smaller presence on campus. For instance, if there are only a few students from a particular country it is unlikely that these students will know of each other on campus, that they will become friends, or even that they will both be interested in associating with each other on campus. However, for students coming from countries with higher international student populations, such as India or China, this strategy may be a more feasible option of finding social support and building social support networks on campus. This information helps us to better understand the process of social integration for international students in the greater campus community. The quality of social and cross-cultural interactions with other students is directly related to how international students experience campus community (Cheng, 2004; Anderson, Carmichael, Harper & Huang, 2009). Therefore, institutions should strive to create opportunities for meaningful interactions among students in order to support the social integration of international students.

### **Penn State**

Due to the fact that Penn State ranks as tenth in the United States in terms of international enrollment (Waldheir, 2013), we expected there to be valuable resources in place for international students who choose Penn State as their home abroad and that Penn State would provide students with a generally welcoming and positive institutional experience. In addition to reviewing the literature, we reviewed publicly available online

materials and interviewed current international students as well as a student affairs professional dedicated to working with international students at Penn State to assess the reality of our expectations. The sections below provide insight to the current experiences of international students at Penn State.

### **Current programs and services.**

The Office of Global Programs coordinates many of the services and programs specific to international students at Penn State. The office coordinates efforts like an annual orientation sessions for international students and provides information and guidance to students regarding logistical issues like admission, pre-arrival, and visas and other complex paperwork (Global Penn State, 2013b). The office does not seem to offer much social or co-curricular support, as its website highlights very few opportunities specifically designed to engage international students in the campus and social cultures at Penn State (Global Penn State, 2013b). Through our research, we found the Global Programs online presence to be difficult to navigate, with the (limited) information dedicated to campus involvement and social integration buried deep within the website's structure.

Ms. Masume Assaf is the Director of International Student and Scholar Advising, one of the divisions of Global Programs. Assaf identified a top concern for international students at Penn State as meeting and building relationships with American students and other students outside of their nationality (personal communication, November 11, 2013). This observed challenge is very consistent with the literature (Sherry, 2009; Burdette, 2012; Pedersen, 1991). Similarly, Assaf noted that international students at Penn State struggle learning and understanding American culture in social and academic situations,



but are not using the resources available through the Office of Global Programs, academic advisers, or other student organizations (personal communication, November 11, 2013).

The main focus of the office which Assaf directs is immigration advising, but she expressed an interest in providing more one-on-one advising and general support to international students (personal communication, November 11, 2013). Upon Assaf's suggestion, we contacted a Global Programs Office staff member dedicated to student programming, but our interview requests went unanswered. Moreover, we observed that the portion of the Global Programs website dedicated to student programs did not offer much information regarding specific engagement opportunities, success strategies, or advice for international students seeking support (Global Programs, 2013b).

### **Student perspectives.**

We interviewed three international undergraduate students for this paper. We feel it is important to note that – coincidentally – all three students identified that they were originally from China and that these opinions only express a small piece of the international experience at Penn State. When asked why they chose to study at Penn State, these students listed a variety of reasons consistent with those in the literature, including a desire to be part of a diverse community, improve their English language skills, as well as the prestige and international reputation of Penn State and specific academic programs (Sherry, 2009; Cheng, 2004; Pedersen, 1991).

We asked these students what Penn State could do to support their needs as an international student. The most interesting part of their responses was that the students seemed to take a significant amount of responsibility on themselves for seeking out the appropriate assistance and all three students stressed some forms of social interaction or

campus involvement. For instance, one student advised incoming international students to, “participate in campus activities...it’s a great opportunity to make new friends and have fun, and by joining you will find the beauty of diversity and culture” (A. Feng, personal communication, November 12, 2013). These suggestions were closely linked to the programs and resources these students identified as potentially useful to current and future international students. Our interviewees felt that partnerships with existing student organizations (e.g. the Chinese Student Association or African American Students Association) would be beneficial in promoting campus involvement in a safe environment. Another student suggested that the Penn State provide more academic support specific to international students (e.g. understanding the American higher education system), similar to the support provided regarding documentation and legal status. Finally, a student suggested connecting incoming international students with current students (both international and domestic) to discuss their own experiences and strategies for success. Each of these suggestions is consistent with Cheng’s (2004) concept of campus community, as they are clearly focused on student learning, building individual respect for diversity, and increasing opportunities for social integration.

In addition to individual interviews, one of the authors attended an informal gathering of five international students. These students were known to this author through other work at Penn State University. The students invited her, in passing, to join them for coffee. During this social time it was clear that one of the bonds these students shared was their difficulty in transitioning to using English, particularly in the academic center. While there were two or three different primary languages among these friends they had that shared experience. Viewed through the campus community framework it is

consistent that these students would share a bond such as this since they come from cultures so different from the one where they are currently studying.

### **Recommendations**

Higher education institutions, particularly those with significant populations of international students, should take action to support the holistic success (academic, social, and otherwise) of international students. In this section, we explore possible interventions as seen in the literature and suggest a specific recommended intervention for Penn State to consider in order to better support the success of their undergraduate international students.

### **Interventions**

When working with international students, institutions of higher education need to be cognizant and sensitive of cultural differences due to the heterogeneity of the population. However, it is equally as important not to overemphasize these differences and thus hamper the ability of international students to integrate into the campus community. Not surprisingly, this overemphasis can be just as detrimental as underemphasizing the cultural differences among students (Pedersen, 1991). Thinking about Cheng's 2004 research regarding campus community, interventions should be specifically designed to appreciate cultural differences, but should not cause international students to feel ostracized.

As we discuss earlier, interactions between international and domestic students can be beneficial and educative experiences. The most effective interactions between students are those that are deliberate and meaningful, as they can actually benefit academic performance and the process of environmental adjustment for international students, and these types of interactions are also extremely beneficial for domestic students (Burdette,

2012). During any interaction or intervention with international students, it is important to avoid placing all responsibility for integration on the student by placing emphasis on the individual's personal journey of social integration (Sherry, 2009). Instead, institutions should focus on interventions that empower students through safe, welcoming, and flexible environments and communities on campus.

In order to assist international students in making the most of their interpersonal interactions in their new environment, student affairs professionals can encourage students to monitor the changes of their values and perceptions, clarify cultural norms, and provide international students with the skills and tools necessary to manage unfamiliar situations. (Pedersen, 1991). Because international students are facing such a complex set of challenges and transitional issues, student affairs and other higher education professionals should remember that integration is a continuous process (Pedersen, 1991).

Ongoing orientation-like activities support new international students as they continue to integrate with the campus community and regular interactions with continuing international and domestic students also provides opportunities for meaningful, cross-cultural interactions among diverse populations (Anderson, Carmichael, Harper & Huang, 2009; Pedersen, 1991). In addition to ongoing orientation programs and campus offices dedicated to international students, Anderson, Carmichael, Harper, and Huang (2009) identify a host of possible interventions geared toward social integration. These suggested interventions include language and conversation partners, regular opportunities cross-cultural interactions, residence hall programming, and flexible opportunities for peer mentoring with other international and domestic students (Anderson, Carmichael, Harper & Huang, 2009).

Practical examples of successful interventions exist across the United States and abroad. Gresham (2011) describes a mentoring program at a university in Australia that focuses on building friendships between international and domestic students. This program's outcomes of success regarding social integration of international students supported Cheng's findings about campus community and the research of others presented throughout this paper. Another program focused on building social connections and fostering respect for international populations is the International Students Coffee Hour at the University of Wyoming. This is a weekly program that brings together international and domestic students along with other interested members from the campus and local community to discuss and grow a personal appreciation of cultural and ethnic differences.

#### **Suggested Intervention for Penn State**

Based on Cheng's 2004 work, our review of the current literature, and our conversations with Penn State international students and staff, we suggest a specific program intervention to assist international students in succeeding at Penn State. Our suggested intervention primarily seeks to support the social integration of new and continuing international students at Penn State, but it also could have positive effects on the academic performance of international students.

We suggest an intervention where the Office of Global Programs hosts a regular weekly "coffee hour" for international and domestic students (as well as Penn State administrators, faculty, and staff members) interested in informally conversing with other students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This intervention is modeled after a similar and successful program at the University of Wyoming, briefly described above. Student affairs staff members should choose an accessible location (e.g. the HUB) and should

provide coffee and light refreshments. The Office of Global Programs should collaborate with existing student groups with an international focus to drive attendance and advertise additional opportunities for involvement at Penn State.

This globally-focused coffee hour meets the needs of Penn State and current international students. First, it supports Penn State's mission and goals of becoming a global institution as it actively engages students, faculty and staff in this aspect of the mission. Second, it allows for international and domestic students to build valuable intra and intergroup connections with each other as well as administrators, faculty, and staff. As an informal but standing activity time, this coffee hour format provides a safe environment for students to build community, find friends, and become further integrated into the greater Penn State community. International groups and other entities with a global-focus could advertise club meetings, special events, and other resources that new and current students may find interesting or valuable. This type of an informal program matches the needs of international students at Penn State, as described to us through our research, interviews, and personal observations.

Alternatively, a coffee hour intervention could also be coordinated by the academic colleges with larger populations of international students, particularly Penn State's Eberly College of Science and the College of Engineering (Global Penn State, 2013a). In these colleges, it may be beneficial to specifically invite international graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, as these are related populations that could benefit from and be an asset to such an intervention. Challenges with this program would likely center around logistics (e.g. securing stable funding for the intervention, finding staff members to coordinate and actively devote the necessary time to ensure the intervention's success) and

building a base of current international and domestic students interested in actively participating in the program. In order to address these challenges and increase the intervention's chances of success, the Office of Global Programs' website should be more clearly organized to directly support international students seeking further information.

Our suggested intervention fits the elements (as outlined earlier in this paper) of Cheng's 2004 theory of campus involvement. This globally-focused coffee hour will allow participants to explore cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds different from their own in a safe, welcoming, and flexible environment. Students will be able to foster positive relationships that emphasize respect for diverse populations and the importance of learning about distinctive cultures, as emphasized by Cheng (2004). Moreover, these positive relationships and opportunities for sustained interactions will support new and continuing international students who feel isolated in the current campus community. These relationships could also exist on a student organization level, as this intervention could foster greater opportunities for different cultural and ethnic groups to collaborate and enhance the campus environment by providing increased events and services that are meaningful and beneficial to the greater Penn State campus community.

### **Reflections and Concluding Remarks**

An individual student's social integration is truly the center of how students experience their campus communities. This integration is an ongoing process for all students, regardless of if they are native to that country or studying in the US internationally. For international students, however, there are additional factors which influence their integration, such as an increased emphasis on social interactions and cross-cultural communication. Overall, the process of social integration requires that

students receive flexible and individualized attention in order to encourage successful integration into the campus community. To be successful, institutions should collaborate among multiple offices on campus and with existing student organizations to create a welcoming environment.

At Penn State we were surprised by the lack of services dedicated to supporting the social integration of international students. Although none of our student interviews revealed overall discontent with the current resources for international students at Penn State, they did not seem enthusiastic or praise the existing resources. Considering the substantial amount of responsibility that each of our interviewees placed on themselves for seeking out resources or resolving problems independently, we feel that this group of students could be better supported and would likely be open to more flexible and independent interventions.

When considering the needs of international students, it is important to be cognizant of the individual student's past educational experiences, cultural, ethnic, and religious background, motivations for studying internationally, and their current experiences at an institution. We feel that it is critical to remember that international students are a group with much diversity and it is important to disaggregate the data and to design flexible and individualized interventions. Our suggested intervention for Penn State is flexible, individualized, and allows for individuals to own their experiences and continue to take responsibility for their own social integration in a more safe and supportive environment. Although relatively simplistic, we feel that this type of an open and welcoming environmental intervention is desperately needed at Penn State to bring to life the institutional focus on global engagement. Through increased meaningful, cross-cultural



interactions, Penn State students can continue to build upon and internalize Penn State's mission as a global institution.

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