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## But You Speak Great English! Challenging the Dominant Narratives of International Students

Musbah Shaheen

*Student affairs scholarship and practice take a deficit-based approach to understanding the experience of international students at U.S. colleges and universities. In this article, I reframe the challenges that international students face from a resiliency-based viewpoint, highlighting the strengths of international students and focusing on what institutions could do better to serve their needs. By challenging assumptions about international students, I hope to inspire student affairs professionals to adjust their programs and services to support the inherent resilience of international students, rather than reinforce stereotypical notions of what it means to be an international student in the U.S.*

I came to study in the U.S. because I was interested in the liberal arts education and academic freedom available at U.S. colleges and universities. Surviving higher education away from my home, friends, and family is an accomplishment that I wear proudly because it was fraught with challenges. Throughout my experience, I often answered questions from my peers like “why is your English so good?” and “how did you adjust so well to America?” My peers expected me to speak broken English, to struggle in classes, and to suffer from debilitating homesickness, none of which were part of my actual experience as an international student. Yes, there are elements of my experience that challenged me. However, those parts should not be the primary lens through which people understand me. Student affairs professionals, my peers, and my professors must also consider the persistence and resilience I practiced as I navigated a system of education that was utterly foreign to me.

As an aspiring student affairs professional, I find that student affairs scholarship and practice reinforce this deficit-based approach to understanding the experience of international students. Instead of putting the onus on colleges and universities to support international students through their academic and social journeys, higher education focuses on what international students could do to navigate college. In this article, I reframe the so-called challenges that international students experience from a resiliency-based viewpoint that centers the phenomenal ability

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of international students to navigate their new environment and to succeed academically. Through this strength-based approach, I hope that student affairs professionals challenge their assumptions about international students and adjust their programs and services to support the inherent resilience of international students rather than reinforce stereotypical notions of what it means to be an international student in the U.S.

### **(Re)framing the Challenges to International Student Engagement**

Before addressing the specific challenges that international students face, it is important to clarify who international students are. The designation of international students includes any student who is not a U.S. citizen or a permanent resident regardless of their social identities or educational backgrounds. The Institute for International Education (IIE) website ([www.iie.org](http://www.iie.org)) shows that the top five countries that international students come from are China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Canada. International student is not a social identity *per se* but a legal category based on immigration status which paints a homogenous image of this population. In reality, international students' experiences on college and university campuses look vastly different based on their educational backgrounds and intersecting racial, ethnic, religious, and other social identities (Nguyen, Stanley, Stanley, & Wang, 2015). International students hold a multitude of identities that create different experiences. However, higher education lumps international students into one group even though they represent vastly different narratives. The bottom line is that there is no such thing as the international student experience.

Regardless of their identities and backgrounds, international students are resilient and successful. Fass-Holmes (2016) asserted that international students have better graduation and retention rates than expected given the challenges of culture and language. Even with emerging proficiency in the English language, international students can (and often do) succeed academically (Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2014; 2015). International students also possess strengths in social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose which contribute to students' resiliency (Nguyen et al., 2015). Literature about international students has emphasized ways in which these students are different, a deficit approach which places the responsibility of adaptation and assimilation on the students themselves (Straker, 2016). In the next section, I reframe the challenges that international students face on U.S. college and university campuses in a way that focuses less on individual deficits and more on the failings of U.S. institutions to help international students achieve their full potential.

## **You Are in America, Speak American: English as a Second Language (ESL)**

Many international students come from countries whose official language is not English, which can impact students' social and academic interactions. Even if they have studied formal English extensively or speak English as their primary language, many international students may be unfamiliar with American dialects in casual social settings (Abu Rabia, 2017; Li, Fox, & Almarza, 2007). Furthermore, many international students speak with distinctive accents, which often leads to inquiries about their national origin. In a way, the accent of an international student becomes the primary indication of their foreignness, and the resultant reactions from American students elicit feelings of dis-belonging, embarrassment, or even shame (Li et al., 2007). Because some accents are more distinctive than others, this effect may be amplified for certain groups or individuals. As a result, international students might opt to disengage from conversations beyond those necessary for their everyday life (Leong, 2015).

In an academic context, international students may have trouble engaging in class conversations which make up a significant component of many university courses (Cheng, Renes, McMorrow, Simpson, & Strange, 2017; Leong, 2015). This disengagement is detrimental to students because they do not get the opportunity to externally process and share their thoughts and opinions with their peers. Also, the lack of participation could affect students' grades if professors and instructors, especially those without experience working with ESL students, interpret their silence as a lack of interest (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010). As a result, international students with emerging English proficiency may miss the intended educational outcomes of class discussions such as faculty mentorship, critical thinking, and identity exploration.

One of the requirements for admissions of international students to U.S. colleges and universities is proficiency in English writing, reading, listening, and speaking. However, research indicates that standardized testing tools (such as TOEFL and TESOL) are insufficient predictors of proficiency because international students continue develop their language skills while studying for their degrees and interacting with their peers (O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009). Although international students may have an excellent grasp on formal or academic English, and therefore would meet the proficiency requirements on a standardized test, they still must learn the nuances of American English. This learning process is challenging, especially since the practicing of the language is a stressor and a reminder of students' foreignness compared to their American peers.

## **That is How We Do It Here: Culture Shock and Acculturation Stress**

The experience of culture shock is well-documented in the research literature about international students from multiple countries and backgrounds (Abu Rabia, 2017; Leong, 2015; Ra, 2016; Sato & Hodge, 2013). Culture shock is the collection of physical, psychological, and behavioral reactions that students exhibit when they face the challenge of acculturation (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2005). Acculturation refers to the changes in one's culture that occur when individuals from different cultures come into contact with one another, prompting them to make social and cultural adjustments (Berry, 2005). Depending on the specific experiences of international students, including country of origin, first language, and religious identity, students may experience varying levels of culture shock inside and outside of the classroom.

Many factors may facilitate the experience of culture shock in the international student population such as the misunderstanding of gender relationships and unfamiliarity with U.S. food and dietary habits (Alakaam, Castellanos, Bodzio, & Harrison, 2015; Leong, 2015). Out of fear of offending others or exposing themselves as different, international students might retreat from campus life and avoid casual social interactions with their peers inside and outside of the classroom, leading to a sense of cultural isolation. Although it might seem helpful to mitigate some of this cultural shock by orienting international students to their new surroundings, the real issue is the cultural rigidity of dominant White American ideologies on college campuses. In such environments, students from different cultures feel pressured to change or abandon their cultural backgrounds and believe that they have failed when their acculturation results do not fit into the dominant expectations of assimilation rather than mutual acculturation. In other words, the dominant culture requires international students to adopt its habits and beliefs without an effort to include and integrate these students' cultural knowledge into a bi-directional acculturative process.

## **You Can't Sit with Us: Social Isolation**

Perhaps the most devastating impact of cultural and linguistic intolerance for international students in the U.S. is the feeling of loneliness and social isolation. When students feel like their voices or opinions do not matter, they are likely to withdraw and avoid situations where their social, racial, ethnic, and religious identities, among others, may become visible to other students (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). Academic difficulties combined with homesickness, cultural shock, and social isolation can cause severe mental health challenges for international students (Prieto-Welch, 2016).

Beyond the immediate impact on student engagement and mental health, the experience of isolation compromises students' connection to the institution, making it less likely that they will regard their college experience positively compared to their American counterparts. International students bring a diversity of cultures and backgrounds to campus that could greatly enrich the university community. Institutions of higher education must pay close attention to the ways in which campus culture, as well as institutional systems and processes, fail to create environments that welcome and nurture students from all cultural backgrounds (Liu & Vogel, 2016).

### **Neo-Racism: Not Just a White People Thing**

International students in the U.S. experience discrimination due to their racial identity, cultural differences, and linguistic abilities (Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Non-White international students, including students from the Middle East, Africa, East Asia, Latin America, and India, face more discrimination than White international students from Europe, Australia, and Canada (Lee & Rice, 2007). Such discrimination is a result of racism in U.S. society that still defines large portions of American history and culture (Yoon & Portman, 2004). International students are strongly affected by what scholars refer to as neo-racism, which is racism that attributes the rejection of others to cultural incompatibility, thereby maintaining racial hierarchy (Bangstad, 2015). Neo-racism and the resulting discrimination can cause many international students to feel further isolated in their communities and unable to relate to others.

Even American people of color are susceptible to neo-racist ideologies because of dominant xenophobic views. For example, as an Arab student studying in the U.S., I did not find a welcoming environment in some communities of color on campus because of the cultural stigma that surrounded my country of origin. I did not feel like I fit into the boundaries of Whiteness because of my racial or ethnic identities, yet at the same time I felt left out of the multicultural discourse on my college campus due to my foreign cultural perspectives and practices. In that sense, international students like me face simultaneous discrimination for not being White and for not being American.

### **Implications & Recommendations**

The challenges I highlight in this article are not unique to international students. International and American students alike navigate similar challenges when adjusting to college life. However, the lack of social support for international students, especially when they come from countries that are not well-represented in the campus population, adds an extra layer of challenge to students' well-being, adjustment, and engagement (Perry, 2016). Supporting international

students includes helping them complete their degrees or receive employment after graduation, and also creating meaningful experiences for them on college campuses. Sadly, higher education commodifies international students and often emphasizes the need for a quick adjustment to campus life. For example, Hegarty (2014) stated the following:

Effective English as a Second Language programs must be instituted to quickly alleviate fears about speaking and writing in English. The sooner the barrier is broken, the quicker students assimilate into college life, and this command of the English language must be aggressively pursued. (p. 231)

Although I agree that we should work to alleviate students' fears about communicating in English, the focus should not be on the speed of the transition, but rather the quality of and motivation for such transitions. The international student experience in the U.S. has its challenges, but it also has the potential to benefit students and institutions. Institutions must strive towards creating more culturally-inclusive campus environments to ensure that international students have a positive experience and engage meaningfully both inside and outside of the classroom.

Within the classroom, instructors can make changes to facilitate international students' learning such as providing recordings of lectures or presenting more information in writing. The accessibility of academic materials is not only important to international students. Students of all citizenship statuses represent a diversity of paces in learning and comprehension, and could benefit from alternative means of accessing course materials. Also, instructors should reevaluate what they perceive as meaningful contributions in the classroom. Not all students, international or otherwise, are equally comfortable speaking in a group setting. Therefore, offering a variety of opportunities to contribute and process class material would create structural change within academic units which could facilitate the transition and development of students, especially international students.

From a campus programmatic lens, campuses and student affairs professionals need to move away from programming for international students toward programming with international students. Campus programs, especially those geared towards diversity and multiculturalism, need to reflect international perspectives. International students need to have opportunities to express their personalities and cultural connections, rather than only having services provided to them. Listening to international students' needs and empowering them to contribute as members of the community will nurture their inherent resilience and help them build stronger connections with the campus community.

I love(d) my experience as an international student, and I had access to many people who helped me navigate feelings of isolation that I experienced throughout my undergraduate career. As institutions of higher education become increasingly internationalized, higher education and student affairs professionals should consider not only how they can help international students acclimate to their new environments, but also how the campus community needs to shift to become more hospitable to students from diverse cultures and backgrounds.

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