RESEARCH BRIEFS

Exploring the Utilization of And Satisfaction with Institutional Learning Support for International Students' Psychological Well–Being

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Summary

Attending postsecondary institutions in the United States is a desired prospect for some international students. However, international students' transition to American colleges and universities yields a discrete set of transitional challenges, which includes, but is not limited to, psychological and social adjustment, interpersonal support, and academic support. Since pursuing advanced education in the United States is the goal of some international students, adequate learning and social-emotional support can be essential to successful adjustment. Therefore, in this study, we examine which commonly available learning supports (e.g., tutoring centers and/or faculty office hours) and social-emotional supports (e.g., Office of International Students or Cultural Center) affect international students' well-being. Findings have the potential to inform and improve organizational support overall for this population.

Background

For over 20 years, researchers have centered international students' well-being within the context of U.S. postsecondary institutions, focusing mainly on the impact of social support (e.g., caring, listening, providing advice, social activities, and helping navigate a challenge) with little focus on organizational support (i.e., systematic structures, offices, and processes to meet students' needs) (Brunsting, et al., 2018; Cho & Yu, 2015). Though social support is widely known to be important for student success, organizational support is also a key factor, as it influences social-emotional outcomes of international students (Cho & Yu, 2015). Potentially navigating a multitude of challenges while studying in the U.S. necessitates an examination of the impact organizational supports have on international students' psychological well-being in order to both address this gap in prior research and to improve

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learning support for this group (Briggs & Ammigan, 2017). Researchers have recommended that universities provide effective orientation and support programs (Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008) to aid international students, who can be "heavily dependent" on the host university in various ways; thus, host the institutional structure and organization are key for student support (Cho & Yu, 2015).

While some international students experience few challenges in their transition to U.S. universities, several undergo multiple challenges with psychological and social adjustment to U.S. academic host settings (Brunsting, et al., 2018). Unfortunately, international students often contend with insufficient support services, which could be assuaged by providing needed information during times of transition (Kiang et al., 2020). While some international student support services offices can provide a range of supports for the social adjustment, like pre-orientations, sponsoring student clubs, and coordinating friendship families, many offices have to prioritize regulatory compliance (e.g., student visa requirements, part-time work, tuition payments, etc.), and, thus, may not have capacity or expertise to support international students with adjusting to a new culture and the community (Briggs & Ammigan, 2017). Since COVID-19, international student and scholar services offices have had to contend with frequent visa and immigration regulations changes. In other instances, these offices are resourced to assist international students in their successful transition to U.S. college campuses (Kwon, 2009), by providing services—often in collaboration with other offices—such as language proficiency, learning strategies, academic support, and relationship building (Martirosyan et al., 2019; Tseng & Newton, 2002).

Additional potential sources of support for international students may exist on campuses and can include faculty office hours, cultural centers, and tutorial centers. As faculty social support is linked with international student well-being (Brunsting et al., 2021), office hours are important opportunities for international students to access faculty and cultivate relationships with them. Moreover, cultural centers have been found to help students of color build community among themselves (Patton, 2010), and they serve as a haven for diverse student populations (Loranzo, 2010). As such, they could yield additional opportunities for international students to further build connections and garner support. Lastly, tutoring centers are widely known for being a valuable resource for learning on college campuses (Cooper, 2010), hence, they too have the potential to be a viable source to support international students' transition and adjustment. As previous research has documented associations between international students' academic adjustment and well-being (Martirosyan et al., 2019), understanding student use and satisfaction across these potential sources of support can be crucial to supporting them throughout their time on campus.

As the body of research on international students' adjustment to U.S. universities increases, it is important to understand students' usage of and satisfaction with campus resources (e.g., tutoring and cultural centers) as well as the degree to which these are linked with their well-being.

Therefore, the current study explored the frequency of use and satisfaction with both learning and social-emotional support: tutoring, faculty office hours, the cultural center, and international student support services. The following research questions guided the current study:

1. How frequently do international students access institutional learning supports?

2. How satisfied are international students with institutional learning supports?

3. Is satisfaction with institutional learning supports in the fall associated with usage in the spring?

4. To what degree are the usage of and satisfaction with institutional supports associated with students' psychological well-being?

Study Design and Method

We invited all international students attending one small private university in the Western region of the U.S. to participate in a two-timepoint half-longitudinal survey study. We conducted the study at multiple timepoints to examine temporal precedence to strengthen the research support for the directionality of associations between services and change in well-being over time. Students received a recruitment email with a link to a Qualtrics survey. Those consenting to participate in the study were invited to complete the Qualtrics survey at two points in time, fall 2017 (Time 1: T1) and spring 2018 (Time 2: T2). The participation rate was 25.14% at T1 and completion rate was 45.45% at T2. Forty-four student participants were included in the analysis. The majority of the students were undergraduate (61.36%), male (52.27%), and a plurality indicated that they were from China (34.09%). Seventeen were graduate students. The age range was 17 to 34.

Measures

We measured students' frequency of utilization of and satisfaction with four campus offices (names and references to entities are pseudonyms to prevent university identification): Multicultural Affairs Center, Office of International Student Support, Tutorial Center, and professors' office hours. For utilization, the same question stem was used for each office; for instance, "How often do you go to the Multicultural Affairs Center?" Response options were on a five-point ordinal scale: *never, 1-3 times a semester, 1-3 times a month, once a week, more than once a week*. For satisfaction, the question stem "How satisfied are you with your interactions with ____" was used for all supports. Response options were provided on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from *not at all satisfied* to *very satisfied*.

We used Ryff's (1989) *Psychological Wellbeing Scale* to capture students' well-being. An example item was: "In general I feel confident and positive about myself." Response

options were provided on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Each subscale demonstrated moderate to high reliability in the larger sample, ranging from .72 to .80 (Brunsting et al., 2021).

Analysis

Before testing research questions, we examined differences by graduate and undergraduate level using a series of independent samples t-tests; only one significant difference (undergraduates visit the tutorial center more frequently, $\Delta M = .65$, $t = 2.50$, $p = .016$) existed across all study variables. Thus, we combined undergraduates and graduates into one sample to increase statistical power of analyses. For RQs 1 and 2, we examined mean scores to provide an initial exploration of student usage and satisfaction with campus organizational supports. For RQ3 and RQ4, given the exploratory nature of this study, we examined relationships between continuous constructs using Pearson's correlation.

Key Findings from the Research

Usage of University Supports

On a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (more than once a week), international students use of International Student Support Services (1.98 to 2.11), multi-cultural center (1.49 to 1.56) increased in the spring, while usage of the tutorial center (1.91 to 1.37) and faculty office hours (2.81 to 2.79) decreased across the year (see Table 1).

Satisfaction with University Supports

International students' satisfaction increased in the spring for the multicultural center (3.00 to 3.06) and faculty office hours (4.02 to 4.17), and decreased for International Student Support Services (3.47 to 3.26), and the tutorial center (3.57 to 2.76).

Table 1
Usage of and Satisfaction with Institutional Supports in Fall and Spring

	Fall (T1)		Spring (T2)	
	Mean (M)	*Standard Deviation (SD)*	*M*	*SD*
Frequency of Use				
International Student Support Services	1.98	.71	2.11	.81
Cultural Center	1.49	.77	1.56	.98
Tutoring Center	1.91	.97	1.37	.97
Faculty Office Hours	2.81	1.14	2.79	1.40
Satisfaction with Support				
International Student Support Services	3.47	.98	3.26	1.15
Cultural Center	3.00	1.04	3.05	.41
Tutoring Center	3.57	.91	2.76	.83
Faculty Office Hours	4.02	.94	4.17	.79

Frequency of use reported on 5 pt. scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (more than once a week). Satisfaction reported on 5 pt. scale ranging from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 5 (very satisfied).

Linkages between Fall Satisfaction with Supports and Spring Usage of Supports

Students' fall satisfaction with the multicultural center shared a medium positive correlation with their spring frequency of use $(r = .51, p = .032)$. Fall satisfaction with other supports was positively correlated with spring use; however, none of the remaining three relationships reached statistical significance (see Table 2).

Associations between Usage or Satisfaction of Supports and Psychological Well–being

We tested the degree to which the usage of and satisfaction with institutional supports were associated with international students' psychological well-being. At T1, results revealed a small yet significant positive correlation $(r = .33, p = .035)$ between students' satisfaction with their visits to the international office and their psychological well-being. Further, students' frequency of attending faculty office hours shared a negative correlation $(r = -.31, p = .049)$ with well-being. Neither the inclusive cultural center nor the tutoring center was associated with international students' psychological well-being.

Table 2

Intercorrelations between Fall and Spring Constructs and Psychological Well-being

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. T1 International Student Support Services Sat.								
2. T1 Cultural Center Sat.	.61***							
3. T1 Tutoring Center Sat.	.24	.44**						
4. T1 Faculty Office Hours Sat.	.38*	.30	.34*					
5. T2 International Student Support Services Use	.17	.28	-.06	-.22				
6. T2 Cultural Center Use	-.01	.51*	-.07	.09	.79***			
7. T2 Tutoring Center Use	-.23	-.35	.37	.12	-.10	.01		
8. T2 Faculty Office Hours Use	-.26	.29	.06	.13	.22	.66**	.44	
9. T2 Psychological Well-being	.33*	.14	-.02	.22	-.17	-.07	.24	.12

$* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.$

Discussion and Conclusion

Finding that faculty office hours were the most frequently used support in T1 and in T2 is counter to existing research (Zhai, 2002), which found international student support services to be the most frequently visited service. Findings that international students' satisfaction was neutral regarding their visits to the Office of International Student Support, the cultural center, and the tutorial center, yet that they were satisfied with their faculty office visits appears to reiterate the importance of faculty-student/advisor-student relationships (Brunsting et al., 2021; Tseng & Newton, 2002). Higher student satisfaction with the inclusive cultural center in the fall meant higher utilization in the spring, perhaps because it offers a sense of community, particularly for diverse student populations (Loranzo, 2010; Patton, 2010). Since little is known about the international students' engagement of cultural centers, this novel finding is illuminating regarding the potential role these centers can play upon their transition to American host institutions; we encourage researchers to replicate this examination across different institutional types. There is alignment between our small, yet significant, finding that there is a positive correlation between international students' satisfaction with their visits to the office of international student support services and their psychological well-being, and the charge such offices should attend to these students' well-being (Briggs & Ammigan, 2017). This new understanding has the potential to inform models for structuring support offices, as recommended by Briggs and Ammigan (2017), to better serve international students, specifically these students' psychological adjustment. Based on our findings, we make the following recommendations to enhance organizational support for international students:

- University administration should provide a clear delineation of responsibilities for international student services and supports between campus life and international student support services, and provide resources appropriately. For smaller universities and those with a high percentage of students living on campus, it may be most efficient for international student support services offices to focus on regulatory compliance and provide expertise on international student well-being to campus life units (e.g., campus recreation, student engagement, residence life and housing) who have responsibility for all students' well-being and engagement as well as frequent touchpoints with students. For larger universities and commuter universities, it may be more efficient to increase resources for international student support services offices to provide more transition programming and social opportunities. Regardless of approach, campus life offices should collaborate with international offices to support international students, and administrators should ensure needed resources are provided.

- Since faculty-to-student relationships are vital to student success, supporting students' cultivation of this relationship is key. Therefore, we recommend faculty members be invited to attend international student orientation and related programming. It could be beneficial to also invite faculty members to international student social and/or cultural events. Additionally, it might be advantageous to invite faculty members to be host families. As faculty have many demands on their time, administrators should consider avenues to incentivize faculty participation (e.g., count participation as service). These are just some of the ways to strengthen faculty-international student relationships.

- Lastly, we contend offices like international student support services help forge faculty-international student relationships to close the gap and better support international students in their transition. Staff should be thinking about how to create opportunities for faculty and international student engagement year around, as well as identify faculty members who have demonstrated themselves to be allies. Another avenue for support includes conveying faculty members' expectations around office hours, including engaging in conversations with faculty during office hours, to international students (Brunsting et al., 2018).

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