

Abstract

International students experience specific stressors that domestic students generally do not encounter on a regular basis. Despite the larger body of research on international students, there has been a lack of attention towards the experience of international students enrolled in faith-based institutions. Hence, this study addressed the gap by highlighting the intrapersonal, interpersonal and spiritual aspects of the international student experience in faith-based institutions. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 participants enrolled in a Christian university located in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Through the Consensual Qualitative Research method (Hill et al., 2005), we identified the domains and some preliminary core ideas. We found several culture-specific aspects of the international student experience in faith-based institutions. Our findings have implications for working with international students in specific contexts.

Introduction

- In the year 2016-2017, **1,043,839** international students were enrolled in U.S. institutions (IIE, 2016).
- Although many international students experience a positive sense of well-being (Russell et al., 2010), they may also experience stressors such as navigating language barriers (Slaten et al., 2016), having a temporary visa status (Wang et al., 2007) and lacking relevant cultural knowledge (Tsai et al., 2017).
- The broader international student experience has received significant attention (e.g., Hirai et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2015). However, the experience of international students in **faith-based institutions**, defined as institutions that (a) specialise in higher education, (b) publicly identify with a specific religion, and (c) integrate the aforementioned, remains mostly unexplored in the literature.
- Although difficult to quantify, there are statistics indicating that the number of international students in faith-based institutions is sizable.
 - » According to the National Center for Education Statistics database, there are **58,989** international students under the categories “private non-for-profit (religious affiliation)” and “non-resident alien total” (IPEDS, 2017).
- Generally, international students have unique intrapersonal (e.g., cultural identity (Jung et al., 2007) and interpersonal (e.g., social support; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002) experiences relative to domestic students.
- However, international students in faith-based institutions might have spiritual experiences that are unique to or amplified in a religious setting, such as:
 - » Expectations versus reality of religious individuals (Wang & Yang, 2006)
 - » Religious support (Hsu et al., 2012)
 - » Religious coping (Chai et al., 2012)
- Therefore, our study sought to address this gap in the international student literature by qualitatively investigating the experiences of international students in faith-based institutions.

Research Aims

- We will explore the **intrapersonal, interpersonal** and **spiritual** aspects of the international student experience in faith-based institutions. We expect to find shared experiences with the broader international student population, but also culture-specific experiences pertaining to faith-based contexts.
- Based on our findings, we hope to provide a voice for international students and better advocate for their needs.

Method

Participants

- $N = 15$ (12 female, 3 male; $M_{age} = 21.13$, $SD = 1.64$)
- Country of Origin: 2 from South Korea, 2 from Vietnam, 1 from: Australia, Canada, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Peru, Taiwan, and Taiwan/England/Hong Kong
- Religion: 11 with a Christian background, 1 agnostic, 1 Buddhist, 1 Muslim, and 1 unknown
- School Year: 2 first-years, 2 sophomores, 7 juniors, and 4 seniors
- Years lived in the United States: $M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.63$

Procedures

- Participants were recruited by email sent out through the International Student Services.
- Semi-structured interviews (30-60min) were held in a quiet room. The 1st author interviewed all participants
- All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.
- All participants received a \$20 gift card.

Qualitative Method

- We used/ will continue using the **Consensual Qualitative Research method** (CQR; Hill et al., 2005) to analyse our data.
- CQR requires the following major steps, completed through discussions among research team members:
 - » Identification of domains
 - » Identification of core ideas within those domains
 - » Cross-analysis for finding common themes across cases
- The 4-member research team met weekly for 1.5 academic terms. We have identified domains in all 15 interviews and a few preliminary core ideas.

Results

Domain	Core Ideas*	Quotes
A Religion & Spirituality	- Conversion experience - Cultural differences in Christianity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I wasn’t a Christian when I came to [school] and I... got baptised” “But in American church, or our school, I feel people they go to church alone or with their close friends... don’t really share their experience” “I don’t see a lot of people reflecting who God is, but also I see very devoted Christians who are very different from others... half and half”
B Reactions Towards International Students	- Preference for one culture over another - One stereotype of a country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “... why don’t people ask me more about my country, but why do they ... show more interest in Japan or like Korea” “... they find out that I’m from Vietnam. They’re more like ‘Oh I really like Pho’ like the most common”
C Cultural Differences	- Communication styles - Common interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I’ve been trying to be as straightforward as I am in my country, but so many people will thought that I was being rude” “they talk a lot about like movie, or songs they... I don’t have that culture and background, so I can’t join their conversation”
D Social Support & Acceptance	- Faculty understanding - Lack of acceptance by domestic students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “my professors know I am a international student... so they help me a lot, they call that grace, so ‘I give you more grace in my classroom” “Yeah I just strongly feel they [domestic students] don’t really care?”
E International Student Identity	- Self-definition of international student status - Preference for host culture identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “What it means to me is someone who come from different countries ... And I’m not from here, this is not my home” “I’m still trying to learn or change myself to be more American? Since in the future time, maybe I still need to meet American, I can’t always be a international student”
F Cultural Adaptation	- Active assimilation - Intentional language acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I mostly try to ask them [domestic students] about their life, because as I’m in their world, so I have to be accepting” “I have this environment, I want to improve my English and learn more American culture, so I refuse to meet international students ”
G Hopes & Expectations	- Integration of global opportunities in education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I don’t know if like the education system get people more opportunity to learn more about small countries... I just feel little bit underrepresented sometimes.”

*These are tentative core ideas as data analysis is still in progress

Discussion

- The present study is a qualitative investigation of international students enrolled in a faith-based institution. We found themes related to intrapersonal (e.g., international student identity), interpersonal (e.g., social support and acceptance) and spiritual (religion and spirituality) factors.
- Although our findings share similarities with the current literature on international students, our study also revealed some culture-specific aspects of the international student experience in faith-based institutions
 - » E.g., several participants perceived Christianity in America to be less strict as compared to Christianity in their home country.
- Future studies should continue exploring the experience of international students in unique contexts, such as faith-based institutions, so that the wider international student population can be better supported.