

International Graduate Students' Sense of Belonging at an Elite Higher Education Institution: The Case of Teachers College, Columbia University

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to better understand the factors that impact a sense of belonging among international students in the International Educational Development (IED) MA Program at Teachers College (TC), Columbia University. This research involved interviews with eight international students in the program. The concept of a sense of belonging was broken down into sub-domains based on the literature: academic sense of belonging, social sense of belonging, satisfaction with university services, and overall sense of belonging. Several factors were found to influence sense of belonging. Academic factors, such as relationships with professors and classmates, were found to be crucial. Social engagement, including interactions with peers and involvement in student organizations, also played a significant role. This research suggests potential policy changes to enhance support for international students, emphasizing the importance of addressing diverse needs and promoting cultural sensitivity within university services. Overall, the research highlights the interconnectedness of academic, social, and institutional factors in shaping the sense of belonging and well-being of graduate-level international students at TC.

Introduction and Background

The number of international students attending American higher education institutions has steadily increased over the past few decades. This trend is fueled by factors such as globalization, English as a common language, and the desire for increased career opportunities. While international students contribute significantly to higher education institutions and to the United States, they face challenges including different academic expectations, social and cultural adaptation, and isolation, leading to a need to understand their sense of belonging on campus. Research focusing on graduate-level international students, particularly at elite universities like TC, is not abundant. Therefore, this study aims to explore the factors influencing international graduate students' sense of belonging at TC. The findings inform stakeholders such as professors, students, and university offices dedicated to fostering inclusivity and supporting international students.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do international students in the Master of International Educational Development Program at TC, Columbia University, feel a sense of belonging to the TC community?
2. How does this sense of belonging differ between first- and second-year students in the program? In what areas?
3. What factors (life events, university services, etc.) impact international student's sense of belonging?

Conceptual Framework and Methods

- Research approached using World Systems Theory (Wallerstein, 1974), Human Capital Theory (Schultz, 1970; Hanushek, 2016) and Social Identity Theory (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) frameworks.
- Interviewed 4 first-year and 4 second-year international students from the TC MA International Educational Development Program.
- Interviews were conducted over Zoom and lasted about 30 minutes each.
- Semi-structured interview protocol.
- Participants were recruited through word-of-mouth, aiming for diversity in backgrounds and home countries to represent the international student population.
- Interview questions were organized into four categories:
 - Academic Sense of Belonging, Social Sense of Belonging, University Services and Satisfaction, and Overall Sense of Belonging

Discussion

This study investigates the factors influencing international students' sense of belonging at TC. Participants expressed a strong academic sense of belonging attributed to positive relationships with professors, English proficiency, and academic-related services. Social belonging was facilitated by involvement in student organizations and friendships with co-nationals. Participants were overall dissatisfied with university services, suggesting improvements in academic support and cultural adaptation resources. The study aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of social and institutional support for international students' emotional well-being and overall sense of belonging. Suggestions for improvement include enhancing university services, providing workshops on U.S. culture and academic expectations, and offering more informal meetings for international students to socialize with each other and with domestic students.

Results

- Participants reported a strong academic sense of belonging attributed to positive relationships with professors, interactions with peers, and the use of academic-related services (such as the Graduate Writing Center).
- Social belonging was fostered through involvement in student organizations, class discussions/group work, and friendships.
- Participants expressed dissatisfaction with university services, suggesting improvements in areas such as communication and support for everyday struggles.
- Participants had a strong sense of belonging to TC and the MA Program, but less so to Columbia University and New York City.

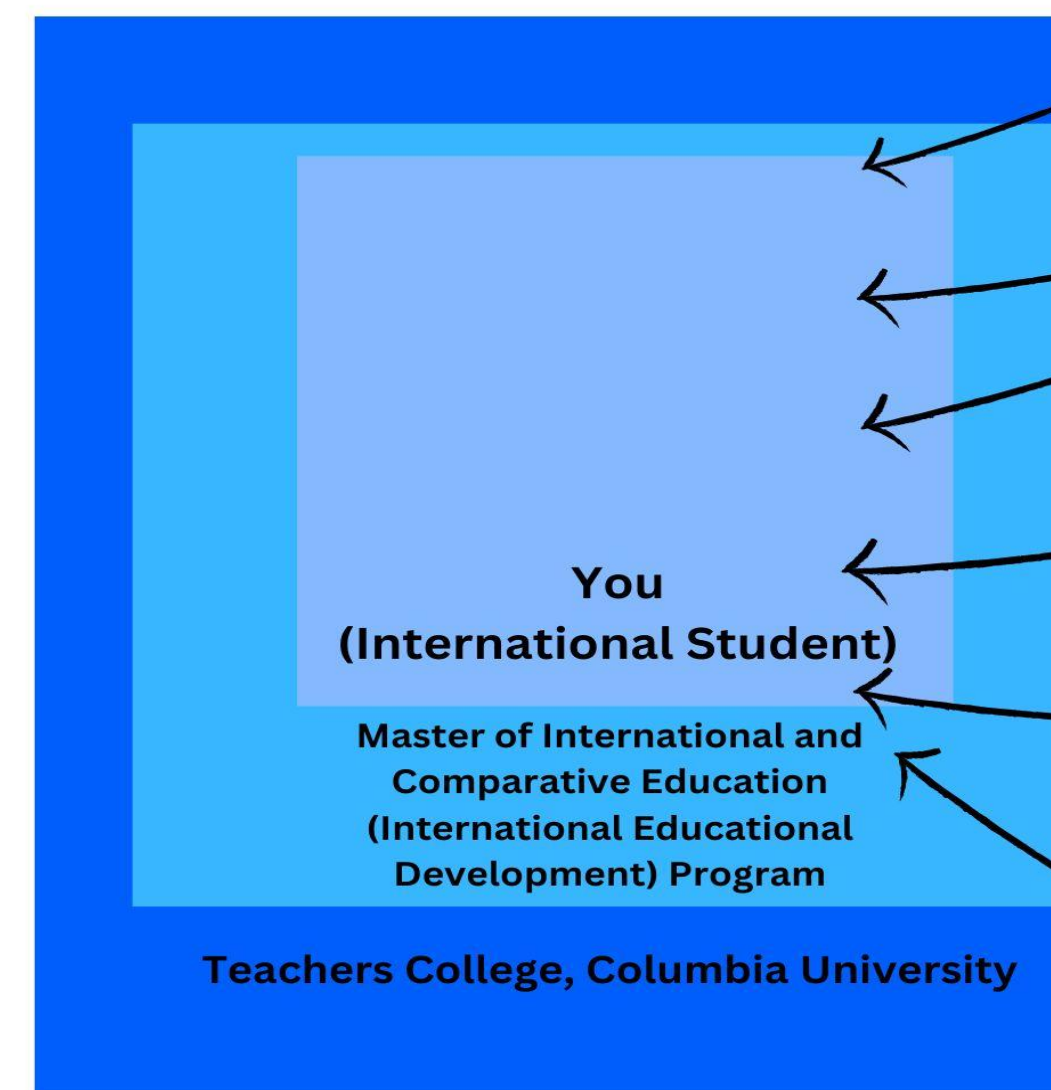
Conclusions

This study on the sense of belonging among international students in the MA of IED Program at TC reaffirms existing research findings on the factors influencing international students' sense of belonging in the US. It emphasizes the importance of academic factors such as relationships with professors and classmates, as well as social engagement through peer and co-national interactions and involvement in student organizations. The study also examines the evolution of students' sense of belonging over time, noting that first-year students typically face initial adjustment challenges that may improve by the second year as they develop stronger social and academic connections. Additionally, the study suggests policy considerations for enhancing university services to better meet the diverse needs of international students and foster a more inclusive environment. Overall, this research contributes to understanding international student experiences and highlights the interconnectedness of academic, social, and institutional factors in shaping their sense of belonging and overall well-being.

Limitations and Future Considerations

Limitations included the researcher's positionality as a peer of the participants and the small sample size of eight international students. The study was conducted at TC, a small, elite graduate school in New York City, limiting the generalizability. Further research could include different degree programs and a larger and more diverse pool of participants. Additionally, individual personality traits may have influenced participant responses, regardless of background or culture.

Internal and External factors influencing sense of belonging



1. Offering of and participation in social events (looking at on-campus events only)
2. Hobbies and clubs on-campus
3. Student and international student services
4. Legal issues such as visas
5. Personal relationships like with parents/distance and romantic partnerships
6. Academic support from university offices, professors, and peers



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