UNIQUE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH AND PROMOTING THE WELL-BEING OF INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS

A COMISSIONED PAPER FOR THE CGS-JED GRADUATE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING REPORT

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International Graduate Student Mental Health Challenges

The mental health challenges that graduate students face in the US have been well documented. Compared to the highly educated in the general population, graduate students more than twice as likely to have or to develop a common psychiatric disorder (Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017), leading to an urgent call for higher education to address (Duffy, Thanhouser, & Derry, 2019). The unique conditions of graduate school can be demanding and uncertain. Leading stressors can include challenges related to time-based demands, unstructured and unpredictable academic processes, sense of not belonging, lack of finances, self-doubt, work/life balance, and faculty supervisor engagement (Cornwall 2019), to name some. Previous research have also demonstrated that potential issues related to gender (Evans, 2018) and race (Brown et al., 2013; Stewart, 2019), which may create further difficulties. Adding to these challenges are the associated consequences of stress, such as decreased productivity and burnout (Anthony-McMann et al., 2016; Bullock et al., 2017), academic performance resulting in slower or lower completion rates (Tomasz and Denicolo 2013) and illness (Bullock et al, 2017; Waight and Giordano 2018; Wisker and Robinson 2018).

While the hurdles that graduate students experience are serious and many, the trials for those coming from abroad are magnified, placing international students at greater risk for psychological problems compared to domestic students (Mori, 2000; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Research on international student experiences have made clear that along with the problems one may encounter in their graduate studies, there are added burdens in relocating from abroad. International students' experiences upon arrival can differ widely from their expectations (Lyken-Segosebe 2017). Unlike domestic students, international students may not have previously traveled to or be familiar with university's geographic region. Their knowledge may be limited to recruitment materials and university websites that present a partial picture, and may not well prepare students, especially those from distant countries, the potential culture shock as well as how to meet basic living necessities, such as how to navigate local transportation, open a bank account, obtain insurance, etc. For these reasons, internationals are more likely to report homesickness, culture shock, as well as discrimination, all of which impact their well-being (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). In reviewing the existing literature, the leading concerns for internationals are related to language, social isolation, cultural adjustment, and safety/xenophobia, particularly neo-racism. These issues, combined with everyday graduate student challenges, will be the focus of this paper, followed by recommendations to promote international graduate students' well-being.

Language

Among the most frequently cited difficulties for international students relate to language barriers (Lee & Rice, 2007; Li & Kay, 1998; Lyken-Segosebe, 2017; Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Yeh et al., 2003). This issue is particularly widespread considering the majority of international graduate students in the US are from non-English speaking countries (Zhou, E., Mitic, R.R., West, C., & Okahana, H., 2020) and some universities have been known to lower its English proficiency standards in order to enroll more students from abroad (Foster, 2015). However, difficulties may soon arise once the academic term begins. International students whose first language is not English may struggle with fully comprehending lectures and class discussions and thus require more time than primary English speakers in reviewing course texts and preparing written assignments. Among these students, their written fluency tends to be stronger than their ability to process verbal

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instructions and lectures. Oftentimes, instructors and local students may move through the course content quickly, leaving those whose first-language is not English very little time and without written materials to process classroom information. Oral presentations can be especially stressful, as anyone whose primary language is not the same as the host language may be doubtful and apprehensive about their delivery, even more than the substance they intend to share. International students who are less fluent in English may thus be quiet due to their insecurity about speaking out in class, making them seemingly invisible and easily disregarded. When classroom participation is narrowly determined by talkativeness, international students may appear less engaged, which can produce negative repercussions on their performance assessments. Besides English fluency, regional accents and slang expressions also make language a key source of stress for many international students.

For international graduate students, similar limitations may arise, especially in group settings. Graduate school seminars and small group interactions, while usually promote more interpersonal exchanges than undergraduate courses, may be especially stressful with added pressures to engage in open debate and immediate verbal responses with little time to reflect and translate. For those in graduate teaching positions, conveying course information and facilitating discussion can become especially challenging. (Lee & Rice, 2007). Besides any language limitations, particular foreign accents can be a source of discrimination, leading to poor teaching reviews (Cantwell & Lee, 2010; Ramjattan, 2019).

Social Isolation

Language barriers can exacerbate additional difficulties related to a sense of belonging and forging friendships with locals. Loneliness is another leading difficulty for international students (Roberson et al., 2000; Yeh et al., 2003), based on a loss of contacts back home, a loss of networks in the host country and/or a loss of same-culture networks (Sawir et al., 2008). Besides language comprehension hurdles in class, students who feel less comfortable speaking in English may also be less confident speaking freely with local peers outside of class. They have reported being excluded by their US peers in study groups, projects, and social gatherings adding to their feelings of social isolation and loneliness (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Considerable research has examined social networks among international students, indicating that international peers may be perceived as more trusted resources than institutional staff and thus more utilized (Heggins and Jackson, 2003). International students commonly forge friendships and gain most of their peer support among students from their same country of origin or other international students over US peers (McFaul, 2016; Trice, 2007). These patterns can be explained by a shared culture and language that more easily facilitate such informal networks. Furthermore, a lack of welcome and interest from native students, despite international students' desire to build friendships with locals, can be a major barrier (Lee & Rice, 2007; Gebhard, 2012; Pritchard & Skinner 2002). Non-European students, particularly those from East/South East Asia, may especially struggle with intercultural friendships, especially with local peers, and, predictably, with adapting to college (Glass et al., 2014).

Graduate study compared to undergraduate study can be especially isolating, with a heavier emphasis on independent research and fewer opportunities to regularly interact with a wide range of students. Unless an international graduate student is fortunate enough to forge relationships within their lab, cohort, or across campus, they may be especially vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness. Satisfying social relationships are essential to psychological well-being while loneliness can have severe consequences on one's mental and physical health if left untreated, including depression, anxiety, and disease (Mushraq, 2014).

Cultural Adjustment
Despite the vast array of teaching and mentor-mentee approaches throughout the world, students as well as faculty may have very little exposure to other approaches than their own direct experience. US classrooms and faculty-student relationships, especially in graduate school, tend to be less formal compared to many cultures outside the West (Gebhard, 2012). The emphasis on students' verbal contributions in class, open questioning, a "flat" classroom in which all members have equal say, may be rewarded in the US but frowned upon elsewhere. According to one study, some international graduate students may have never experienced open class discussions or be familiar with the practice of attending professors' office hours to discuss grades (Lyken-Segosebe, 2017). Non-native speakers may especially struggle, not just with verbal expressions, but also non-verbal ones as well. Cultural misunderstandings, such as different approaches to making eye contact, physical touch, sense of time, gender roles, and referring to faculty by first names, may not be made clear at the onset and lead to considerable confusion and stress if students are not properly oriented (Lee & Opio, 2011). Students from non-Western religious backgrounds may also be affected. For Muslim students especially, identifying and practicing one's faith in the new environment was found to be a significant challenge (Tummala-Narra & Claudius 2013). Such difficulties can be pronounced in many graduate school settings, where interpersonal exchanges are more common, and misunderstandings may thus be left unchecked.

Safety and Neo-racism
From purely counseling and psychological perspectives, the presumed burden is placed on the international student to cope and assimilate to the host environment. Assumptions based on this medical model tend to be that the structural and cultural environment are neutral locations and constant, leaving all responsibility (and sometimes blame) on the student to overcome. While students certainly bear personal responsibility, their troubles should also be understood within the current political climate for internationals in the US and perceived threats to their safety.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC, 2019), there has been a 30 percent increase in hate groups over the past four years with a notable rise in White nationalist groups nearly 50% in the last year alone. The FBI has noted that hate-fueled violence, including anti-immigrant attacks, is a top national security priority, on par with foreign terrorist groups such as ISIS (Allam, 2020). Fears about violence within the university have also been reported. According to one survey, a fourth of international students reported worries about gun violence at their institution (Mackie, 2010). Those in urban settings and those from Asia and North Africa/Middle East expressed the highest levels of concern. These worries are not unfounded given ongoing Islamophobia and a recent spike in Anti-Muslim violence over the past few years (ACLU, 2020). Past research have also indicated that Black-African international students especially struggle with prejudice and discrimination based on their race, and negative assumptions about their cultural heritage (Boafo-Arthur, 2013).

Over the past several years, the US has proposed and enacted numerous bans on individuals entering the US from particular countries over national security concerns. Muslim-majority countries were especially targeted in the travel bans as well as more recently, proposals to halt flows from China. Although international students from these countries are permitted to continue studying in the US, the American Council of Education (ACE) president warned that the travel ban "creates a climate where it is far more difficult for international students and scholars to view this country as a welcoming place for study and research" (ACE, 2017, para. 5). Negative stereotypes as that suggest international students from certain parts of the world are terrorists or spies would certainly fuel concerns about their personal safety.

While international student fears about the odds of any serious physical danger might

be corrected or dismissed, more subtle forms of hate and discrimination have long been occurring within university walls (Lee & Rice, 2007; Lee & Opio, 2011). Past research has also found that such challenges are not isolated to the US or the Western world (Lee, 2017b; Lee, Jon, & Byun, 2017). Understanding international students' experiences with prejudice and discrimination is critical as they have been directly tied to experiences of acculturative stress (Boafo-Arthur, 2013). Thus, in light of the current political climate, besides asking what international students need to do in order to have a healthy well-being and succeed, we must also ask: What are institutions doing to make it difficult for this population to be healthy and successful? Racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, and xenophobia can occur in classrooms, in research labs, in administrative offices, as well as social settings.

For the purposes of this paper on internationals, the focus of this section will be on discrimination based on a person's country or culture of origin, or neo-racism. Unlike xenophobia, which applies to all so-called "foreigners," neo-racism suggests a hierarchy of nations in which students from certain nations are more welcome and better treated than others (Lee & Rice, 2007). And unlike racism, which broadly applies to one's phenotype, neo-racism also considers nationality. Neo-racism would explain why Asians, for example, might experience different challenges than Asian Americans, thus making the case for targeted support for international students. Neo-racism also makes clear that internationals are not a homogeneous group. Previous research has also well documented that international student experiences can widely vary and that differential patterns can be traced by students' region or country of origin (Lee & Rice, 2007; Cantwell & Lee, 2010; Glass et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2017). International students from predominantly Anglo locations (i.e., European countries, Australia, and Canada), have reported far fewer discriminatory challenges compared to those from Asian, Latin American, and African regions (Lee & Rice, 2007; Lee & Opio, 2011; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Neo-racism against particular international groups can manifest in a range of ways, such as negative stereotyping, verbal assaults, and even physical attacks, both off and across campus (Lee & Rice, 2007). University faculty, administrators, and students have been reported as discriminating against internationals (Lee & Rice, 2007; Lee & Opio, 2011).

Neo-racism concerns for international graduate students in particular can arise when students from particular low-income countries are treated as "cheap labor" on research projects (Cantwell, Lee & Mlambo, 2018). International graduate students have observed differential treatment compared their local counterparts in regard to faculty expectations to more work hours, oftentimes unpaid, but remained quiet because of their financial and residency dependence on their supervisor (Cantwell et al., 2018). In other words, they felt there was little to be gained in reporting any unfair practices compared to the potential risks of cutting ties. It is also possible that some faculty might be postponing their students' graduation date because of their reliance on their international graduate student labor (Cantwell et al., 2018). Similar challenges have been documented as well among postdocs, noting differential career tracks (i.e., technical versus academic) based on faculty supervisors' neo-racist stereotypes about their postdocs' nationality (Cantwell et al., 2010).

Seeking Support

All of these difficulties can be alleviated and addressed with greater awareness and direct support yet oftentimes a graduate student may be reluctant to make their problems known and seek help. According to one study, only a third of medical students with burnout pursue any assistance (Dyrbe et al., 2015). Another indicated more than 40% of graduate students did not consider consulting with a therapist, counselor, or physician even when they felt that their stress was negatively affecting their health (Mousavi, 2020). A leading reason, as

indicated by a third of surveyed medical students, was that nothing offered by the institution as helpful or had not used school resources (Chang et al., 2011).

From the university side, international graduate students' silence may be mistaken for a healthy well-being. The most prevalent effects of psychological distress-- feelings of being under constant strain, unhappiness and depression, sleeping problems due to worries, inability to overcome difficulties and not being able to enjoy day-to-day activities-- are not always so easily observable. A common stereotype is that graduate students, particularly international graduate students, are high achieving students and do not require specialized academic or social integration support and thus left untreated. On the contrary, those who place a high self-conception (i.e., identity as a graduate student or scholar) on their environment (i.e., university) are most vulnerable to stress and poor mental health. As indicated by Thoits (2013), stressors that threaten an individual's most valued self-conceptions are more threatening and, thus, more predictive of psychological distress than those affecting one's less valued aspects of the self. In other words, high achieving students may be especially susceptible to poor mental health when encountering academic setbacks. International students are especially prone to academic-related stress as there tends to a higher financial and personal investment in choosing to study outside one's home country and leaving their familiar support networks. Adding any internal pressures, past research has shown that there are high expectations from families and communities back home and for this reason, returning without their intended degree is not a perceived option (Wang, 2000).

Generally, mental health support services are underutilized by international students (Mori, 2000). The reasons can be infrastructural as well as cultural. Many are simply unaware of the existence of counseling services while among those who do, may not feel comfortable speaking with someone outside their culture (Mori, 2000). Multilingual and culturally familiar counselors would also provide much benefit in at least securing initial trust and making it easier for international students to share their problems. For others, there may be a cultural stigma associated with seeking mental health support. Graduate students have reported observing supervisors negatively judge students who sought care as being weak or inadequate (Dyrbye et al., 2015). For internationals with strong collective (over individualist) values, seeking mental health support might be viewed as "losing face" and shaming their family (Mori, 2000). Other reasons have to do with negative past experiences in the counseling setting and confidentiality concerns (Dyrbye et al., 2015). Meanwhile, the danger of avoidance as a means to cope would likely lead to further distress (Taylor et al., 2007).

Among all members of the institution, the faculty supervisor/advisor plays the most vital role in the graduate student's success but can also be the leading source of distress. They are usually the primary mentor to a graduate student's thesis or dissertation, but for internationals, they may also hold the power in the student's study visa, to reside and continue their education in the US. A unique aspect of international graduate students, compared to international undergraduates or their US graduate student counterparts, is their heavy reliance on their faculty advisors (Cantwell & Lee & Mlambo, 2018). This dependency, however, may make international graduate students especially vulnerable to mistreatment. Among the leading causes for distress for international graduate students and reason for neglecting to seek counseling services is their relationship with their advisor, followed by finances (Hyun et al., 2007). For doctoral students, these issues are highly intertwined. Cutting ties with their advisor might also mean cutting ties to their funding and ultimately, their ability to remain in their graduate program (Cantwell et al., 2018). International students' US visa status is directly tied to their institution, which makes transferring to other US universities cumbersome and risky. Should cultural misunderstandings or worse problems occur, students may neglect reporting any faculty misconduct or seeking professional help given such potential repercussions (Lee & Rice, 2007).

University Faculty and Staff Support Recommendations

Given the many benefits that international graduate students offer, for the host universities, for receiving and sending countries, for the students and their families, and more, attending to international graduate students' unique needs can produce cumulatively positive results. But addressing their challenges must move beyond mere awareness and lead to proactive engagement across the organization.

Institutions certainly can do more to further facilitate international students' help-seeking behaviors. While most of the research cited in this manuscript are based in the US, they are recommended for Canada, the UK, Australia, and other major host destinations with well-developed university infrastructure. For large universities especially, international students may struggle to identify resources in a decentralized campus with varying expertise on international matters. International affairs offices play a significant role in orientations, immigration, social and cross-cultural networks, and more. However, counseling services tend to be located in a separate unit, on another area of campus. Some may also feel embarrassed being seen entering a counseling center and avoid going altogether. Locating counseling and psychological services within a "multi-service center" (i.e., expanded international affairs office) could reduce possible stigma with seeking help (Mori, 2000). Embedded Model Programs are especially gaining increasing attention and being adopted in US universities as a way to extend counseling and psychological services across multiple units. Based on this model, clinicians are placed in academic units, housing, and student support centers as a way to make counseling more accessible and targeted. At the University of Michigan, for example, participating academic programs observed 34-percent increase of students seeking initial consultations (Hummer, 2015). At Penn State University, demand for counseling increased 32 percent in the past five years, leading students to raise about $400,000 to create an endowment for the university's Center for Counseling and Psychological Services (New, 2016). 24-hour support hotlines are also becoming increasingly popular as a way to address urgent mental health concerns (New, 2014).

Beyond counseling services, an integrated support staff network across campus that specializes on international students issues would be especially beneficial. International students' problems are not so easily separable by student support centers. For example, career development is a key dimension of graduate student success but is often not included under the mental health umbrella (Evans et al., 2018). Past research have identified career prospects as a major detriment of mental health problem**s** (Levecque et al., 2017). However, university career services may not support the specific needs of internationals (Li & Lee, 2018). Given the uncertain future of the US' optional practical training (OTP), a popular program that allows international students to work in the U.S. for up to three years after graduating , international students are especially concerned about their next steps in securing employment. Identifying jobs outside the US would be essential for not only internationals but domestic students interested in working abroad. Thus, a centralized international student support unit, or at least a seamless network of university staff who are knowledgeable and trained on international students, is much needed. As another example, international students' academic concerns may have less to do with their study habits and more to do with the stressors of living abroad, such as renewing their visa, feeling culturally isolated, or securing housing, none of which traditional academic advising is equipped to solely handle. A directory of designated international affairs contacts across campus that specialize in housing, career services, scholarships, etc., would be a manageable early step.

Given international graduate students' relative lack of social networks and a greater tendency to not seek help compared to their US counterparts, providing them with knowledge at the onset is especially vital. Most universities already offer orientation programs specifically tailored to international students. An introduction to the US higher education system, including information on various teaching and communication styles, campus resources, and student rights and responsibilities are fundamental. An introduction to how to navigate their life outside the university is equally important and may include how to open a bank account, identify local public transportation, and maintain their visa status are some potential stressors that can be mitigated. Fewer universities offer orientations for international graduate students, who also more likely tend to arrive with their families and sometimes after scheduled orientations due to visa delays. For them and their households, such orientations are especially important because they are more likely to live off-campus and have smaller networks. When friendships become a leading source of trust and support (Mousavi et al., 2020), it is also important that students know where to refer their international peers.

As discussed earlier, discrimination against particular international groups is a leading concern. Negative stereotypes from university members originate from ignorance. Even professors have been reported as lacking awareness and interest in international issues (Lyken-Segosebe, 2017). However, as also mentioned, students may remain silent because they fear negative repercussions. Thus, an ombudsman who is familiar with the legal rights and challenges of international students, particularly minoritized international students, should be designated and known to all international students. Acts of neo-racism should reported directly to university leaders as international student discrimination has direct consequences on future enrollment. International students who perceive unequal treatment tend to less likely to recommend the institution to those back home (Lee, 2010). Additionally, identifying advisors and mentors from a shared country or culture would be a positive partial step, but matching individuals by culture is not a panacea to all international students' problems. Generational, social class, and gender prejudice can still exist. Thus, all faculty and staff should be made aware of ways they may inadvertently negatively stereotype students and the effect of such ignorance on these students. Graduate student advisors especially play a key role in their students' adjustment and thus should learn about their students' backgrounds or at least demonstrate an openness to learn. Given their elevated positions as "experts," faculty may feel uncomfortable admitting to uncertainty. Besides faculty workshops and resources to help them learn about international issues, they should also be encouraged to learn from their own students and ask them questions about their respective countries and personal histories.

While the above recommendations are important, they do not all directly address international students possible feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness, key areas of a poor well-being. More recent research has identified the need for students' agency to more permanently address their stress and mental health (Mousavi et al., 2020). Based on this suggestion, when faculty or staff members simply seek to learn from their international students, the students can feel empowered (Mousavi et al., 2020), which can also help raise their self-confidence. In other words, viewing international students as valuable contributors to knowledge and even institutional change, would help promote a campus that actively values internationalization, including its international students. This suggestion not only applies to academic settings, but also social programming events that consider a wider representation of cultures over US-centric activities (i.e., US pop-culture trivia nights).

More concretely, university leaders can do more besides raising the above concerns and increasing their own international awareness. Among the leading ways is to support their internationals by publicly affirming their value and contributions to the institution and commu-

nity. For example, in light of ongoing accusations from the FBI and other federal agencies that Chinese researchers are spies and stealing intellectual property, university presidents have released statements condemning all discrimination based on one's nation of origin and affirmed their institution's international commitments (e.g., MIT News Office 2019; Christ et al., 2019; Shao 2019). Additionally, university members must be held responsible for xenophobic statements and behaviors. In order to do so, there must be a clear procedure in filing grievances and must reach the highest university ranks. Violations must also have clear consequences. Last year, university officials have stepped down or have been removed from their posts due to discriminatory comments made to or about international students (Redden, 2019). Such actions send a clear message throughout the campus community, including to their internationals, that xenophobia will not be tolerated.

Lastly, ongoing assessment is fundamental to best recognize and address the many challenges that international graduate students encounter. Campus climates vary, as does the many departments within them. International students' cultures and experiences vary even more. There is no one-size-fits-all set of solutions, but by simply seeking to better understand one's international graduate student population concerns, one is better equipped to address today's challenges and prevent future problems. Academic program reviews should pay special attention to graduate student employment conditions and faculty advisee loads, which have a considerable effect on the experiences of international graduate students (Levecque, et al., 2017). Targeted evaluations are also vital. Regularly surveying and interviewing internationals in a safe and confidential manner on their experiences, satisfaction, and recommendations can provide a wealth of useful information, not only for future international recruitment but to also better ensue a positive experience for their international students (Lee, 2017). Questions such as their knowledge of, extent of use, and satisfaction with university services, especially mental health support, would provide valuable information to inform any costly change. Questions about their in- and out-of-class experiences would help identify any discrimination but assess also the campus climate for internationals. Questions asking for their recommendations for improvements would further inform university policies and practices as well as provide them an outlet to feel heard and valued as important members of the university community.

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About the Study

A growing body of evidence indicates that mental health challenges are common among graduate students. Unfortunately, many barriers exist to effective support and care. A collaboration between the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) and The Jed Foundation (JED), *Supporting Mental Health and Well-being of Graduate Students* was designed to address this gap by creating a foundation for evidence-based policies and programs to support graduate student mental health and well-being. The project was generously supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

About the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS)

CGS is an association of 500 graduate institutions that is dedicated to the advancement of graduate education and research. Working closely with our members, we advocate for graduate education, develop innovative research, and establish best practices. Our projects generate information and data that help graduate deans and their institutions better support graduate students and programs.

About The Jed Foundation (JED)

JED is a nonprofit that protects emotional health and prevents suicide for our nation's teens and young adults. We're partnering with high schools and colleges to strengthen their mental health, substance misuse, and suicide prevention programs and systems. We're equipping teens and young adults with the skills and knowledge to help themselves and each other. We're encouraging community awareness, understanding and action for young adult mental health.