"We're Building Our Little International Community": A University-Sponsored Program for International Students

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural competence is an outcome of the internationalization of higher education institutions, directly impacting international students' experiences in the receiving country. An exploratory case study was used to investigate the perceptions and experiences of participants of a university-sponsored program designed to integrate and acculturate international students in a Southwest Florida university. The participants were six newly arrived international students and eight student-ambassadors. Multiple data sources were collected and analyzed using content analysis. Findings reveal the importance of student-led initiatives in fostering campus inclusion and community-building, as well as enhancing cross-cultural interactions. Yet, significant challenges persist in sustaining engagement and bridging cultural divides between domestic and international students. Additionally, the study's findings highlight the importance and challenges of university programs in facilitating meaningful exchanges between these groups, underscoring the need of institutional support in improving the experiences of international students in higher education settings.

Keywords: international students, intercultural competence, internationalization, higher education, case study

INTRODUCTION

Nearly one million international students worldwide have chosen the United States to advance their education and improve their career prospects despite recent travel bans and the COVID-19 pandemic (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2022). Financially, international students contribute immensely to the United States economy with 33.8-billion-dollar expenditures in the 2021–2022 academic year and supported around 335,000 jobs nationwide. For example, in Florida, the seventh leading state receiving international students, 39,622 students contributed over 1.2 billion dollars to the state in the same academic year (IIE, 2022; NAFSA, 2022). In addition to economic contributions, international students bring the United States intellectual and cultural capital, a vast array of life experiences, and skills that significantly expand domestic students' intercultural awareness and cross-cultural understanding (Alghamdi and Otte, 2016; Martirosyan et al., 2019).

However, international students face numerous challenges transitioning to the receiving country's education system and culture, significantly impacting their social integration and academic success (see Alghamdi and Otte, 2016; Halpern and Aydin, 2021; Perry et al., 2017; Urban and Palmer, 2016). Social challenges commonly include feelings of homesickness, isolation, depression, experiences with cultural intolerance, and hostile attitudes from their domestic counterparts (Akhtar, 2011; Paltridge et al., 2012; Yuan, 2010). Also, international students' visible cultural and linguistic differences add to their negative social experiences, resulting in difficulty making friends and

interacting with domestic students (Alghamdi and Otte, 2016; Constantine et al., 2004; Lee and Rice, 2007; Perry et al., 2017; Poyrazli and Lopez, 2007; Poyrazli and Kavanaugh, 2006; Olivas and Li, 2006). Thus, international students experience discrimination manifested in microaggressions and racial/ethnic labeling and report feelings of otherness and exclusion, particularly in predominantly White higher education institutions (Halpern and Aydin, 2021).

Consequently, international students tend to establish stronger relationships with other international students, finding mutual support to alleviate stress related to negative experiences on campus (Urban and Palmer, 2016). Therefore, to address the social transition and acculturation challenges, higher education institutions committed to internationalization (Knight, 2004) must foster programs and activities that promote integration, social support, friendship formation, contentment/satisfaction, a sense of belonging, and, ultimately, a welcoming campus to international students (Aaron et al., 2018; Chai et al., 2020; McFaul, 2016).

Knight (2004) defined internationalization as the "process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education." (p. 11). This definition emphasizes that internationalization is not just about cross-border activities but also about integrating international and intercultural perspectives into teaching, research, and service functions of higher education institutions.

Previous studies explored cross-cultural interactions between students, how they develop friendships, and the cultural learning outcomes of such interactions (Belford, 2017; Chai et al., 2020; Hendrickson, 2018; Li and Zizzi, 2018; McFaul, 2016; McKenzie and Baldassar, 2017). However, limited research was conducted on university-sponsored programs designed to promote friendships and cross-cultural interactions. Thus, this study investigated the benefits of a peer-to-peer program sponsored by a Southwest Florida university in promoting cross-cultural awareness, integration, and acculturation of international students in the United States. Specifically, these benefits were assessed by investigating the perceptions and experiences of arriving international students and student-ambassadors who participated in the program in the 2021–2022 academic year.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies on the experience of international students in the U.S. focused on friendship development (or lack thereof) with domestic students, co-nationals, and other international students and how they impact oral communication skills and cultural learning (see Belford, 2017; Chai et al., 2020; Hendrickson, 2018; Li and Zizzi, 2018; McFaul, 2016; McKenzie and Baldassar, 2017). For example, Quiñones et al. (2021) conducted a comprehensive study on the adaptation challenges faced by international students in both on- and off-campus settings, focusing on issues of autonomy, housing, discrimination, and stereotyping. The study highlighted the students' struggles with communication barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and difficulties in social integration. Additionally, it pointed out the challenges international students face in adhering to academic conventions, meeting the expectations of faculty and peers, and establishing trust-based relationships. Relatedly, Belford's (2017) research concluded with a recommendation for universities to enhance intercultural communication skills and foster friendships among students from diverse cultural backgrounds, underscoring the importance of supportive measures in facilitating successful intercultural adaptation.

Chai et al. (2020) conducted an analysis of the impact of familial and community resources on the academic success and social integration of international students, emphasizing the significance of on-campus socialization in enhancing students' sense of belonging and adjustment beyond the confines of formal education. McFaul (2016) further explored this domain by examining the influence of cross-cultural friendships and campus engagement on the acculturation processes of international students, highlighting the diverse cultural connotations of friendship and love. However, the limited scope and qualitative nature of McFaul's study restrict its applicability to a wider demographic, despite providing detailed insights. This issue of generalizability is echoed in McKenzie and Baldassar's (2017) critique, which underscored the potential misalignment in the understanding of friendships between international and domestic students, attributed to deep-rooted cultural variances. This discrepancy suggested a possible Western bias in the conceptualization of friendship, indicating a need for more nuanced, culturally sensitive research in this area.

Aaron et al. (2018) addressed the deficiency in substantive interactions between domestic and international students in higher education institutions by implementing a conversation partner program, underscoring the imperative for university-endorsed initiatives to bolster international student support. In a similar vein, Arthur (2017) posited that social integration is pivotal for the academic success of international students, advocating for the involvement of faculty, counselors, and domestic students as vital social support mechanisms. Hendrickson (2018) emphasized the role of educators and administrators in creating conducive environments for fostering interpersonal relationships between international and local students, a need echoed by numerous studies. Furthermore, it has been recommended that university administrators should acquire cultural knowledge to enhance their advisory capacity and develop effective strategies for the academic and social integration of

international students. Ammigan (2019) suggested that the responsibility of universities extends to facilitating interactions between international and domestic students, necessitating the integration of such initiatives within both curricular and extracurricular frameworks, as well as in social contexts both within and beyond the classroom setting.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that, besides the possible differences in conceptualizations of friendship in Eastern and Western culture, the typical weak friendship ties between international and domestic students reported in numerous studies can be explained by an increase in fragile, distant, and superficial relationships that characterize the current era, which Bauman (2001) conceptualized as liquid modernity. The liquidity of relationships, according to Bauman (2004, 2005), is expressed in short-term, less committed, weak ties, with an overemphasis on individualism, where relationships between self and others are defined less based on their moral content and solidarity than their utility and ability to provide any form of gain. Therefore, we, the authors, acknowledge that liquid relationships in liquid-modern times might have impacted international students' challenges in establishing friendships in the receiving countries despite this element not being problematized or discussed in previous studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Intercultural competence is complex and has multiple definitions and models (Deardorff, 2006). It refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds; it involves understanding and appropriately responding to the cultural context and perspective of others (Deardorff, 2006). This competence is increasingly important in our globalized world, where interactions across cultures are commonplace in both personal and professional settings. Most importantly, it entails cognitive skills that allow individuals to adapt and adjust their behavior when interacting with others in cultural situations (Association of American Colleges and Universities [AACU], 2010). Deardorff (2006) viewed intercultural competence as a process rather than an end state. This means that it is something individuals continually work on and develop throughout their lives. She proposed a pyramid model for intercultural competence where the base is attitudes, followed by knowledge and comprehension, then skills, and at the top is the desired external outcome of effective and appropriate behavior and communication.

Zhang (2015) focused on the communication aspect of intercultural competence and how university advisors could consider international students' different signifiers and perspectives. Similarly, Liu (2019) and Moradi and Ghabanchi (2019) highlighted the importance of building intercultural communication sensitivity to the adaption of international students in higher education institutions, as it helps reduce cultural barriers between individuals from different cultures. Despite the relevance of intercultural competence aiding individuals to develop "knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self" (Byram, 1997: 34), there are not many institutions that apply, document, or measure intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006).

It is important to consider that the concept of intercultural competence itself is not universally defined and can vary significantly across different cultural contexts. This variability raises questions about the universality of the models and frameworks proposed (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). It is crucial to acknowledge that these models, while insightful, might carry inherent biases reflective of their cultural and academic origins. A critical examination would involve exploring how these frameworks align or clash with non-Western perspectives on intercultural interactions and competence.

Furthermore, the implementation and measurement of intercultural competence in educational and professional settings also require scrutiny. Often, institutions adopt these models without adapting them to their unique cultural and organizational contexts, potentially leading to superficial or ineffective implementations (Sierra-Huedo and Nevado-Llopis, 2022). The assumption that intercultural competence can be universally taught, measured, and applied overlooks the nuanced nature of cultural interactions and the influence of individual experiences and identities. Critical analysis should also question the efficacy of current educational strategies in genuinely enhancing intercultural understanding rather than merely ticking off administrative checkboxes.

Intercultural competence, nevertheless, means acknowledging and understanding other cultures, being empathic by expanding one's linguistic barriers and applying one's attitudes and skills to one's career (Lambert, 1993). Putting intercultural competence into practice is an essential factor in the integration of international students. Previous studies suggest that most postsecondary institutions in the U.S. fail to provide their students and faculty with proper international experience and intercultural support and funding, such as a global curriculum, international studies workshops, and study abroad opportunities (Wickline et al., 2020). It is imperative that higher education institutions committed to internationalization nurture strategies to attract and retain international students and faculty by introducing immersive study-abroad programs and global curricula (Som, 2015; Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018; Zenner and Squire, 2020).

Furthermore, the concept of internationalization in higher education is intrinsically linked to the development and application of intercultural competence (Knight, 2004). As institutions strive to become global hubs of learning and research, the emphasis on cultivating a deep understanding of diverse cultures becomes paramount. Knight (2004) underscored the need to infuse an international and intercultural dimension into the very essence of post-secondary education. This not only enhances the academic experience but also prepares students and faculty for a world that is interconnected and interdependent. However, the journey towards comprehensive internationalization is multifaceted. Beyond offering international programs and partnerships, it requires an approach that integrates intercultural competence at every level, from administrative strategies to classroom interactions. As the global landscape of higher education continues to evolve, institutions that prioritize internationalization and intercultural competence will undoubtedly lead the way in shaping globally aware, empathetic, and skilled future leaders.

Research Questions

This study explored international students' and student-ambassadors' perceptions of and experiences participating in a peer-to-peer program that aims at promoting cross-cultural awareness, integration, and acculturation of international students on a Southwest Florida university campus in the United States. Therefore, we aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions and experiences of the participants of a peer-to-peer university-sponsored program designed to integrate and acculturate international students?
2. In what ways does the program contribute to the integration and acculturation of international students to campus and the local community?

METHOD

We used an exploratory qualitative case study (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2005) to investigate international students' and student-ambassadors' perceptions of and experiences participating in the Welcome to America program[1] (WTA), a university-sponsored program designed to promote the integration and acculturation of international students on campus. Our goal was not to problematize the purpose of the WTA program but to use the case as grounds for the exploration of participants' perceptions and experiences that can, ultimately, serve as lessons (Stake, 2005) that might indicate the need to challenge or revise the program's purpose.

The nature of this case study is also intrinsic as the WTA program is unique among universities in Florida (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The case is real-life and contemporary, bounded by time and space, as the investigation occurred in the 2021–2022 academic year at a Southwest Florida university.

The Case: Welcome to America Program

Established in 2010 and sponsored by a Southwest Florida university's International Services Office, the Welcome to America (WTA) program seeks to integrate arriving international students enrolled at its campus. The program is described with the aim to enhance cross-cultural awareness and skills for all participants and to facilitate global learning. Each academic semester, the WTA program leaders recruit students across campus to host the newcomers (i.e., international and exchange students). The recruitment message is shared throughout campus, asking for volunteers to serve as cultural ambassadors to the newcomers for one academic year. The volunteer student-ambassadors are selected based on their responses to an online application survey that identifies their experience as students on campus and their interest in discussing and reflecting on the experience of international students living in the United States. Next, they participate in an online interview with the program leaders and a remote or in-person training session that highlights the objectives and expectations of the program and the needs of international students arriving on campus.

While the volunteer student-ambassadors are selected, the new international students are sent messages advertising the benefits of having a cultural ambassador on campus in their integration, acculturation to campus life, and as a way to build friendships. Typically, two to four new international students are paired with one volunteer student-ambassador based on information collected on a survey that inquiries their academic interests as well as cultural, linguistic, and personal preferences (e.g., hobbies, desire to be connected to a student who speaks a specific language, similar majors and/or field of study, others). During one academic year, the student-ambassadors are expected to communicate with their designated students regularly, including before they arrive in the United States, to assist with pre-arrival information (e.g., information about the campus and dormitories) and welcome them to the Southwest Florida region and the campus (e.g., pick them up at the airport, tour the campus, help them buy groceries, and register for classes).

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[1] Welcome to America is a pseudonym created to maintain the anonymity of the program and their participants.

Moreover, the student-ambassadors must attend bi-weekly meetings with the program leaders to discuss their relationships with their assigned students, converse on their experiences, and plan social-cultural activities. Thus, student-ambassadors become responsible for organizing mixers and participating in a minimum of four events with the arriving international students, including touring the region, participating in on-campus activities, traveling to neighboring cities, visiting farmers markets, karaoke, ice skating, barbecues, and an international student reception hosted on campus.

The benefits promoted to student-ambassadors entail cultural learning, making global friendships, developing leadership skills, and earning service-learning hours. Service-learning hours are a graduation requirement for all students enrolled in four-year programs at the university. Altogether, the duty of a student-ambassador is to support arriving international students in their integration into campus and the local community; therefore, ideally, the student-ambassadors are American students that join the program interested in cultural learning, worldwide friendships, leadership development, and completing service-learning hours (required by four-year undergraduate students).

Participants Selection

Before the participants were selected and data were collected, we got approval from their university's Institutional Review Board (Protocol #S2021-38). A purposive sample of 14 participating students of the Welcome to America (WTA) program from the 2021–2022 academic year volunteered to participate in the study. Six of them were arriving international students, while eight were student-ambassadors; four were male, and ten were female; 12 were undergraduate students, and two were graduate students. The international student participants were diverse concerning their countries of origin and cultural backgrounds from Germany, France, Italy, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti. Although the WTA program leaders recruit students to become student-ambassadors campus-wide, the students who volunteer are typically senior international students. Thus, in the 2021–2022 iteration of the WTA program, the student-ambassadors were international students from Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Jamaica, and Venezuela; only one was from the United States. All participants but one (from the United States) spoke at least two languages fluently, and their average age was 22 years old.

Data Collection and Analysis

Multiple data sources were collected to ensure a detailed description of the case, exploring the perceptions and experiences of the participating students in the WTA program. The goal was that the multiple sources of data would elicit the "whys" and "hows" (Yin, 2018) of participants' perceptions and experience in the program and its purpose of integrating and acculturating them to campus and the Southwest Florida region (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Specifically, the data were collected through documents, participant observations, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, journal/reflections, and field notes (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018).

The documents collected about the WTA included the program's internal documents (e.g., reports, recruitment forms, and pairing information), public documents (e.g., website, recruitment folders, and marketing materials), and artifacts (e.g., emails, demographic and academic information of the participants of the program, and records of events offered) (Patton, 2015). Gathering the previous WTA years' documents was crucial to evaluate the program's previous iterations, to identify where participating international students, both in the position of the hosts or newcomers, were from and their goals, academic interests, and reasons for joining the program, and to discover which events and activities were offered. Analyzing internal reports also facilitated an understanding of how the office views and runs the program and how the program is advertised to the campus and potential participating students.

The participant observations occurred mainly during the events hosted twice a month during the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 semesters. As volunteer program leaders in the 2021–2022 academic year, the first and second authors were responsible for pairing the incoming international students with the student-ambassadors, training them, and supervising the biweekly meetings. These opportunities allowed them to participate in the activities while observing the students interact in real time. These opportunities offered invaluable first-hand accounts of how the student-ambassadors' and international students' cultural backgrounds impacted their social choices. Thus, the participating students became used to our presence, creating rapport and promoting a naturalist environment between them (Gibson, 2007; Yin, 2018), and contributed to their wanting to participate in the interviews. Furthermore, the observations allowed us to "learn things that [the students] would be unwilling to talk about in an interview" (Patton, 2015: 501). In other words, the observations identified behaviors, relationships, and interactions between the ambassadors and international students that would not be visible to us during the interview. Each observation lasted an average of two hours.

The semi-structured interviews explored the participants' perceptions, experiences, feelings, opinions, and attitudes about being student-ambassadors and international students participating in the WTA (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The semi-structured format allowed the interviews with the participants to be molded by their comments,

in which we adapted the questions and the direction of the interview based on the responses and reactions of the participants. Although we facilitated the pace and direction of their reasoning, at the same time, they helped them avoid steering the conversation off-track. Essentially, the semi-structured interviews facilitated communication between us and the participants to elicit information on their experiences and perceptions as participants of the WTA program (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015). Therefore, despite participating in biweekly or monthly social-cultural events and observing them for a full academic year, the interviews were crucial to allow the participants time and space to elaborate further and qualify their perspectives and feelings about their experience in the program.

In addition, we used the focus groups to gain understanding through the "eyes and hearts" of those directly involved in a specific scenario (Krueger and Casey, 2015: 39). Among the many types of group interviews, the evaluation focus group type was chosen because it best fitted the purpose of this research. The focus group sessions were conducted biweekly, and the participants were the program's ambassadors. Since one of the primary goals of the WTA program is to encourage participants to engage in self-reflective dialogue, which allows them to express their thoughts and experiences, it was important for us to understand how these dialogues occur as well as the language used to discuss them (Patton, 2015).

Journal reflections were a valuable tool for both us and participants. For the latter, journals function like a reliable and regular vehicle for the various thoughts, reflections, ideas, and transformations that might have happened to them through the experience. For researchers, the journals became the evidence that permitted a timely examination of what went on in the minds of the participants during their experience. Thus, to ensure participants would complete them, journals in the WTA program were tied to the service-learning hours they would be granted at the end (Janesick, 2011). Finally, we used field notes extensively to aid them in their participant observations, provide greater insight and depth to their analysis, and increase the trustworthiness of the case study (Patton, 2015).

The data analysis involved several steps to ensure the credibility, trustworthiness, and accuracy of the findings. First, the audio-recorded focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Initially, we condensed the data into organized written texts to strengthen the content analysis (Miles et al., 2014). Then, the data were organized and coded to find patterns to "understand behavior, issues, and contexts" (Stake, 1995: 78). Next, the data were triangulated from different viewpoints, analyzed separately, and compared to check for inconsistencies and minimize interpretation bias (Denzin, 1989). Finally, member-checking and experts validated the consistency of the findings. These measures ensured the findings' credibility, trustworthiness, and accuracy (Patton, 2015).

Researchers' Positionalities

It was important that we were aware of how our positionalities impacted the construction of this study, from its conceptualization to the interpretation of findings and conclusions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Holmes, 2020; Malterud, 2001). The disclosure of our positionalities ensured trustworthiness and transparency to the research process (Patton, 2015). By providing context about our positionality in the study, such as our cultural backgrounds, language skills, and academic interests, we may help readers understand the potential impact of our perspectives and the potential limitations of the study (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

At the time of the study, the two first authors were international doctoral students who had had personal experiences with the WTA program when they first started their educational journeys in the United States eight years ago. Although the third author was an international professor at the same university, he also had experience being an international student in the United States, making him familiar with the participants' experiences. Therefore, we recognize that our personal experiences with the phenomenon may have affected our methodological decisions, views, and understanding of the data collected in the study. In addition, we may have had certain assumptions or expectations about the program or acculturation process that affected our construction of the themes in the study. Additionally, the combination of our personal experiences and research expertise studying international students may have made us more aware of certain aspects of the participants' experiences in the WTA program and less aware of others.

It is also important to state we inadvertently carried with us assumptions that shaped our initial perspective of the role of this program as well as participants' place within it. We initially overlooked the pervasive neoliberal tendencies that influence both higher education and society as a whole, specifically within the context of funding and assistance for international students. This happened because, despite having had experiences as international students and faculty, we are immersed in a society and education system pervaded by neoliberal, positivist rationalities that put a higher emphasis on individualism and place the burden of seeking support and a sense of belonging on the individual international student. Therefore, we acknowledge that, initially, we fell into the trap of studying the WTA program and searching for prescriptive solutions to everyday educational and societal issues instead of challenging these taken-for-granted assumptions about international students' experiences in the receiving country and the role of higher education institutions in this process. More so, we focused on the micro-

level experiences of the participants, overlooking the structural responsibilities of higher education institutions and political policies that foment anti-immigrant sentiments at different societal levels.

FINDINGS

The content analysis of the data collected in this study identified four main themes, namely,
(1) university-sponsored, student-led,
(2) empowerment and service,
(3) building a little international community, and
(4) shallow connections.

Overall, the themes indicated that participants felt that the program empowered them to make a positive impact on international students on campus and that it helped them to feel more connected to each other and to the institution.

Theme One: University-Sponsored, Student-Led

The first emerging theme emphasized the WTA program's leadership aspect, which encouraged the participants to take the lead in planning, organizing, and conducting activities to promote the integration and acculturation of international students on campus. One participant said, "it's great that the program let us ambassadors organize events that make sense to us" (Ambassador 1, Venezuela). They felt like planning their own events would ensure their success and attendance of domestic and international students; "we didn't feel like going to events that the [International Service] office planned. We didn't feel like we had to [attend]. But when one of us plans it, we feel we have to go to support our friend" (Ambassador 6, Ecuador). In this sense, the participants highlighted the program's leadership aspect and the comradery among them, knowing that the ambassadors were organizing the events and encouraging them to attend.

Another crucial aspect that the participants pointed out was the International Services Office's support of participants' leadership in planning the events: "it makes all the difference to know that the university is backing us up. If it weren't for their support, we wouldn't feel encouraged to continue" (Ambassador 5, Colombia). Another added, "We feel like the university sponsors us to take the lead and help create something meaningful for the international students on campus" (Ambassador 8, Bolivia). They highlighted the financial support and infrastructure the International Services Office provided to pay for decorations, food, beverages, and rent spaces on campus to conduct the events and activities.

However, one international student from Germany commented, "I thought Americans would have been the Ambassadors, but I was surprised to find that there were barely any Americans participating in the program." Despite the international service office's support and divulgation attempts, U.S.-born students rarely participated as ambassadors in the program. This student added, "All of us [international students] talked about it, wondering why this happens. It seems like Americans don't really care about internationals" (International Student, Germany). Nonetheless, participants emphasized the value of having students take the lead in promoting integration and acculturation events on campus and discussed to which extent this contributed to a sense of ownership and empowerment among the ambassadors.

Theme Two: Empowerment and Service

The second theme featured the participants' reflections on their decision to become ambassadors. They described their empowerment as serving newcomer students to overcome issues they experienced when they first started their journeys on campus. In other words, the ambassadors who were senior international students became ambassadors to help new international students avoid having similar negative experiences as they had as freshmen. For example, Ambassador 2 from Brazil said:

> When I first started, it was so hard to find information about jobs on campus! I was literally on my own to find answers and help myself. Now, as an ambassador, I want to be the person to make the experience of finding on-campus jobs easier for them [newcomers].

Others echoed the need to become ambassadors to help alleviate the burden of first-year experiences of new international students. For example, Ambassador 4, from Jamaica, said: "I'm always reaching out to [international students] to make sure they don't feel alone or left out as I did in my first year. It was very hard, and I even got depressed." Similarly, Ambassador 7, from the United States, mentioned: "I decided to become an ambassador because I had experiences abroad in professional figure skating, and I know how hard it is not to know what to do, where to go, and simply make friends." Therefore, they emphasized the value of service and the empowerment felt by helping prevent newcomer international students' experiences with isolation, lack of sense of belonging,

and other challenges on campus. Generally, most of the participants highlighted that the program offered them the opportunity to impact international students' lives positively and expressed a sense of responsibility.

Theme Three: Building a Little International Community

The third theme highlighted the ambassadors' perceptions that the WTA program served to build a little international community on campus, bringing together international students in friendship. They emphasized the importance of pairing ambassadors and newcomers before their arrival in the country to help them navigate the beginning of their educational journeys in the United States. In particular, the participants emphasized the importance of newcomers having a friend to turn to and help them overcome the initial challenges and cultural shock: "When I first got here [the United States], everything was so new that it is overwhelming to even think of grocery shopping. But we [ambassadors] are here for them to make this process easier" (Ambassador 1, Venezuela).

Moreover, the participants viewed the WTA program as an opportunity to build an international community on campus, in which the events and activities would promote global cultures, languages, and customs across campus. For example, Ambassador 3, from Guyana, said: "[international students] are pretty invisible on campus. So, by sticking together, we can help each other and make ourselves visible to others." Ambassador 4, from Jamaica, added:

> Even though we're building our little international community, it still makes us feel secluded from them [Americans]. It's like we live in a little bubble where we stick together and stay away from those who don't want to be near us.

The participants unanimously regretted the absence of more American ambassadors in the program that would enrich international students' cross-cultural experiences and support on campus. However, instead of ideally having more American ambassadors, the senior international students felt they had to step up and become ambassadors to serve and help the newcomers acculturate to an American campus. Moreover, all participants—ambassadors and international students alike—mentioned having few American friends. An international student's viewpoint exemplified this matter:

> None of us or the Ambassadors have American friends, at least not close friends. We all tried in the beginning, but it didn't really work out. [Americans] seem really nice at first, doing small talk, but not interested in a tight connection at all. I guess they lack a sense of community or are just not interested in having a big group of friends. But I am not sure. (International Student, France)

Conversely, participants felt like they were at least building connections and friendships with people from different cultural backgrounds through the WTA program. They talked about how the program helped them to create a sense of belonging and to feel more connected to the international community on campus.

Theme Four: Shallow Connections

The fourth theme highlighted international students' difficulties establishing meaningful social connections with American peers. Most noted the prevalence of shallow connections in their relationships and how that impacted their perception of Americans and their culture. The findings further indicated that international students often feel ignored and perceive their interactions with American students as superficial or assignment-oriented. As a result, they tend to rely on other international students for support and friendship, which can impede their proper integration and limit opportunities for cross-cultural exchange.

Furthermore, the findings also revealed a shift in international students' perspectives of their home countries compared to their expectations of the American experience and the concept of the "American Dream." The students identified various social, cultural, and political issues in the U.S. that were dissimilar to those in their home countries, which impacted their academic performance and overall satisfaction with the experience of studying abroad.

An international student from Italy noted that "the lack of socialization [in the United States] has been something that I was very shocked [about]." She explained that Americans do not seem to experience the concept of "il dolce far niente," which translates as "the pleasure of doing nothing" in Italian, emphasizing that "all Americans seem to think is about work and money rather than connections and friendships" (International Student, Italy). Another international student added, "In terms of American friends, I will say that what I have are acquaintances. I think this is the American way. Everybody is independent, individualistic. They don't rely on others" (International Student, Haiti). When asked to choose adjectives to describe his experience with Americans versus the international students he met, an international student added, "Americans: busy, superficial, and fake. Internationals: caring, interested, and open-minded" (International Student, Dominican Republic). Ultimately, this theme highlighted the importance of promoting cultural exchange and creating opportunities for meaningful connections between international and American students. The prevalence of shallow connections in relationships

is a broader societal issue that needs to be addressed to build a more inclusive and welcoming community on and off campus.

DISCUSSION

This study's findings yielded important reflections on the perspectives and experiences of participants of a program that aims to promote the integration and acculturation of international students on a SWFL university campus. Despite the well-intentioned efforts of the WTA program in aiming to foment meaningful interactions between international and domestic students—regardless of how successful these turned out to be—there was a persistent lack of American students' participation in the program to establish cross-cultural interactions and, ultimately, fulfill the university's internationalization and intercultural initiatives at the institutional level (Halpern et al., 2022; Ammigan, 2019; Deardorff, 2006; Hendrickson, 2018; Wickline et al., 2020; James, 2018). This might be related to liquid-modern relationships, where individuals avoid sustained interactions with the Other, preferring to establish less committed, short-term, superficial relationships based on individual gains rather than moral solidarity or living with difference (Bauman, 2001, 2004, 2005).

The liquid (Bauman, 2001), shallow connections experienced by the participants of the WTA program materialized in student-led initiatives to promote events and activities that aimed to engage newcoming international and exchange students on campus. On the one hand, the student-led initiatives could be regarded as positive, where students could become agents of change in their communities and develop a sense of civic responsibility. After all, it yielded the sense of empowerment and dedication that senior international students, serving the role of student-ambassadors, had in assisting new international students in their needs and preventing them from having similar negative experiences as they did when they started their educational journeys in the United States. Moreover, building an international campus community helped promote cross-cultural understanding and foster a sense of global citizenship among students.

On the other hand, the fact that the WTA program encouraged student-led initiatives could be contested as a manifestation of neoliberal tendencies of placing the burden of fostering their sense of belonging on the individuals. This could be why ambassadors and new international students felt the WTA program was an opportunity to build their little international community on campus. It was a way to find mutual support and build resilience in the face of isolation they experienced in the broad campus community. Therefore, the little international community could be regarded as a coping mechanism for international students to deal with the feeling of otherness and to seek some agency within the university (Halpern and Aydin, 2021; Tavares, 2021).

The support offered by the WTA program to fund the student-led initiatives is commendable, particularly considering that previous studies indicated that international students tend to be seen as sole sources of revenue rather than integral parts of the campus community (Ammigan, 2019; Wickline et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the fact that any support for international students came solely from the WTA program and the International Services Office that sponsored it was alarming. It may reveal a broader issue, where investments toward internationalization and inclusion of international students on campus are not priorities (Halpern et al., 2022). Once again, it seems like engaging in relationships with international students and integrating them into campus are seen by different campus constituencies as a matter of profit and personal gains (Bauman, 2004, 2005), disregarding the cultural capital, skills, and unique lived experiences these students bring (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Instead, higher education institutions, their leaders, educators, and scholars must push for investments in programs such as the WTA and its potential to reap several benefits of internationalization and intercultural development, such as better academic performance, personal growth, and cultural diversity and enrichment (Halpern et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, this study also promoted a relevant discussion about the voices of international students. Despite the recognized economic, cultural, and academic assets brought by international students to the receiving countries, Abdullah et al. (2014) pointed to the relative invisibility of the "voice" of international students, who tend to be labeled and framed as a "problem" in the United States and other parts of the world. However, international students are a crucial part of the student population in the U.S. higher education system, as their enrollment is considered an important indicator of a university's prestige (Lee, 2010).

This study contributed to the body of literature on international students' experiences by shedding light on the perspectives and experiences of those enrolled in a peer-to-peer university-sponsored program at a Southwest Florida university. The significance of addressing the experiences of international students in higher education was highlighted by the specific problems and possibilities these individuals faced, including the lack of American student participation in the program or its events. We understand that the lack of American students engaging with international students could be a symptom of a broader liquid-modern tendency of individuals who avoid interactions with the Other and prefer to engage in fast-paced, superficial relationships (Bauman 2004, 2005). As a consequence, American students miss the opportunity to interact and build meaningful cross-cultural relationships with international students, and this could be one of the reasons why cultural understanding and

cross-cultural relationships have declined over the decades in the United States (Arnova et al., 2013; Olivas and Li, 2006; Salinas et al., 2022).

For this reason, the university should adopt a more proactive stance in promoting intercultural competencies, thereby highlighting the potential advantages of a more inclusive and global-oriented educational experience accessible to all students. For instance, several researchers recommended that university authorities and faculty arrange projects and programs to develop collaboration between international and domestic students in which students of different cultural and religious backgrounds could participate and exchange their beliefs, customs, and knowledge (Glass et al., 2015). The collaboration programs must provide cross-cultural relationship training programs encouraging cross-cultural sensitivity among domestic and international students to decrease discrimination and prejudice and increase respect for foreign cultural values and customs. After all, experiences of social isolation and disconnection from the campus community can be exacerbated if U.S. higher education institutions do not have culturally relevant spaces, counseling, and programming for integrating the international student population into college communities (Chen et al., 2019; Salina et al., 2022). Thus, this research underscores the importance of probing higher education institutions about their efforts to promote inclusivity and diversity within their programs and initiatives. It prompts reflection on whether more proactive recruiting strategies are needed and whether administrators should be approached for additional resources and support. It also raises questions about how to encourage American students to recognize the benefits of engaging in intercultural activities and what incentives could be created to foster their participation in such programs (Halpern et al., 2022).

The research provided valuable insights for professionals working in the field of international education and student services. The findings emphasized the importance of universities taking a proactive approach to addressing the needs of international students and creating opportunities for them to increase their sense of belonging to the university community (Halpern et al., 2022; Altbach and Knight, 2007; Leask and Carroll, 2011; Spiro, 2011). It particularly highlighted the importance of the institution's International Services Office in this regard. The findings pointed out the need for universities to welcome international students and actively support them throughout their stay, creating opportunities for their integration into the campus and using strategies like the WTA program to promote this goal; otherwise, they risk isolation, and the desired cross-cultural exchanges among international and domestic students will never occur (Alghamdi and Otte, 2016; Bourke, 2016). Therefore, this study's findings emphasized the importance of grounding programs on intercultural competence to increase students' cross-cultural experiences and promote global awareness on campus (Deardorff, 2006). Consequently, other internationalization efforts on campus would reap the benefits of intercultural competence at the institutional and interpersonal levels, contributing to international students' sense of belonging and improving their academic and social experiences (Halpern et al., 2022).

The main limitation of this study is its small sample size. On the one hand, the sample allowed for an exploration of the participants' perceptions and experiences; however, it was not representative of the experiences of every international student on campus or of the broader population of international students across the United States. Future research could explore the potential for expanding or replicating the WTA program at other universities, particularly those with large international student populations, and a study that questions similar programs. Additionally, future research could investigate the long-term effects of the program on the integration and acculturation of international students and the impact on their academic and personal development. It could also be helpful to study the effectiveness of different program models or approaches to student-led initiatives in promoting integration and acculturation and the potential for leveraging technology and other resources to enhance these efforts. Additionally, other researchers could focus on identifying best practices for recruiting, training, and supporting student ambassadors in these types of programs, as well as exploring ways to measure the impact of these programs on the broader campus community.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the WTA program—and the university it is inserted into—fell short of properly welcoming international students, placing the burden of integration and sociability on them instead of providing the necessary support to have them interact and exchange with American students (and vice-versa). While the student-led nature of the program was seen as a positive factor in the overall lukewarm experience of students, as it contributed to a sense of ownership and empowerment among the ambassadors, the fact the students must take a leadership role to make the program function is a symptom that the program is not working. Nevertheless, the participants also emphasized the importance of positively impacting the lives of the international students and supporting them as they adjusted to life on campus and in the local community. Despite its shortcomings, participants felt the WTA program was seen as a valuable resource for building connections and friendships with people from different cultural backgrounds, which helped the participants to create a sense of belonging and feel more connected to the larger international community on campus. One may wonder how much

better their experience would have been if the university had dedicated more time and resources to help international students.

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