Campus Social Infrastructure for International Students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK)

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DEDICATION

To all my international student friends—from my very first teammates, Stefy, Patricia, and JP, to the many I've met over the years. Thank you for introducing me to the international student experience. You've inspired me and opened my eyes to the incredible importance and weight of what it means to be an international student.

You are courageous, strong, and deeply inspiring.

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ABSTRACT

The trend of greater international student mobility has become a flourishing industry for many universities in today's era of migration, globalization, and transnationalism. An increasing number of students are seeking opportunities for higher education and work-study programs abroad. What systems of care are in place for students who migrate across borders, adjust to new cultures, and create a new home? What space on campus is available for international students to adjust and connect? What responsibility does the university have in helping students process through the precarity of migration? Universities are marketing themselves as places that offer growth and advancement opportunities, and they are developing new departments that focus on student success, health, and engagement. However, international students, a numerical minority and historically marginalized group on campus, face unique challenges. The goal of my research is to establish a connection between the felt needs of international students, the perceived needs of the campus departments that are responsible for aiding international students, and the social infrastructure of the university that can bridge the gap in aiding with retention, resiliency, and holistic support. My research aims to work collaboratively with international students and service providers to identify effective strategies that can be employed to promote a welcoming and inclusive environment and supporting spaces for international students on campus. Through ethnographic research, photo journaling, and embodiment mapping methods, I aim to learn from student experiences and the realities of department capacities. Universities have the opportunity to provide international students with the supportive infrastructure they need to succeed through achieving their desired degrees and accessing job opportunities.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The phenomenon of international student mobility has evolved into a flourishing industry for many universities in the current era of migration, globalization, and transnationalism. A growing number of students are relocating outside their home countries to pursue opportunities for higher education and work-study programs abroad. In the same moment, universities worldwide are marketing themselves as distinguished hubs for research, education, and socio-economic advancement. These opportunities and invitations come with significant responsibilities, necessitating accountability on the part of both the universities and the host countries.

On average, international students constitute six percent of the total student population on university campuses in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2024). Universities position themselves as nurturing environments that foster personal and professional growth, facilitating intellectual development and the pursuit of progress. They are also consistently evolving by establishing new departments with a specific focus on student success, health, and engagement. However, international students, constituting a numerical minority and historically marginalized group on campus, encounter distinctive challenges that many staff, faculty, and administration do not fully comprehend. As migrants, international students navigate the complexities of straddling multiple cultures, adapting to new cultural norms while preserving their own. Beyond acclimating to new environments, these global students maintain connections transcending national borders and intricately linking sending and receiving nations.

Globally mobile students possess the potential to shape the future trajectory of international politics and policies (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood, 2024). Historical data

models suggest that the presence and impact of international education and foreign students have a direct influence on global markets and economies (Bevis and Lucas, 2007). In the contemporary era of globalization, international students have become an enduring and integral facet of future society. Consequently, there is a pressing need for these students to be strategically cared for and supported within the institutional campuses that extend invitations and host them.

My research aims to establish and explore the connection and identify the gaps between the felt needs of international students, the perceived needs of the campus departments responsible for aiding international students, and the university's social infrastructure that can bridge the gap in aiding with overall well-being and holistic support. The goal is to work collaboratively with international students and service providers to identify effective strategies that can be employed to promote a welcoming inclusive environment and supporting spaces for international students on campus. Through ethnographic research methods, photo journaling, and interviews, I learn directly from student experiences and the realities of department capacities. Universities have the potential to provide international students with supportive infrastructures and the necessary support to help them achieve their desired degrees and access job opportunities. My thesis work seeks to realize that potential fully by putting the experiences of students in conversation with the perceptions and priorities of university service providers.

As a graduate student researching the geography of international students at my hometown university, I bring a unique perspective to my work. Although I have not been an international student myself, I have personally experienced relocating internationally solo within a similar timeframe to most international students. Moreover, I possess over eight years of professional experience assisting globally mobile students in their adjustment to studying abroad.

My interest in this field was sparked by being a collegiate athlete on a team comprised of students from around the world. Living and working alongside my teammates gave me insight into the challenges faced by international students, including navigating complex processes and adapting to new environments and perspectives while maintaining academic and athletic performance. Being an internationally mobile student is an impressive and significant position that requires skillful navigation and negotiation. Currently, I work as a graduate assistant for the International House in the Center for Global Engagement at the University of Tennessee. This department functions as a global community center that welcomes international students and connects them to broader campus communities and resources through intentionally curated programs. It also provides a physical space for students to meet, work, and rest.

My research applies and advances the concept of social infrastructures and infrastructures of care to address the well-being of international students on university campuses. Throughout his research portfolio, Klinenberg (2018) emphasizes the significance of *social infrastructures*, which "is not 'social capital'- a concept commonly used to measure people's relationships and interpersonal networks- but the physical conditions that determine whether social capital develops." These physical places as part of intentional campus design play a crucial role in fostering interpersonal connections and a sense of community, which ultimately contribute to the overall resilience and well-being of students. In a similar manner, *infrastructures of care* refer to systems that provide support, resources, and practices aimed at fostering the emotional well-being of students, staff, and faculty (Aithal and Aithal, 2023). As a geographical researcher, I am especially drawn to this idea that the places and spaces of interaction and community-building create an infrastructure of care and play a key role in student well-being.

Research Objectives

- Employ qualitative methods to discern the social infrastructure requirements of international students at the University of Tennessee. Evaluate these needs in light of the students' lived experiences and the objectives of university leadership. Engage with relevant stakeholders to formulate recommendations for addressing unmet needs, with the goal of creating transferable insights for the support of international students across diverse university campuses.

Research Question

- What are the inherent roles and responsibilities of universities towards their student body, especially in the context of international students, and is there an imperative to establish infrastructures of care?

Sub-objectives:

- Identify international students' felt needs in terms of campus social infrastructure.
- Identify institutional perceived needs of international students and campus infrastructure.
- Identify the gaps and discrepancies between the international students' felt needs and the perceived needs of the institution.
- Identify which agencies, initiatives, or infrastructural models could be responsible for filling in the gaps.

Literature Review

International Students

Across the United States, universities welcome international students from around the world to study and contribute to their academic programs. These students are a valuable and sought-after addition to universities and countries worldwide. Their presence in academia

significantly boosts research and development programs and provides substantial economic benefits, as they contribute billions of dollars to local and national economies. Moreover, the experience of studying abroad is a marketable commodity for the international students, as it offers unique attributes highly valued by global employers who seek a skill set that includes cross-cultural competency, language proficiency, adaptability, and a global perspective. As such, international students are not only an asset to universities but also to the global workforce (Bevis and Lucas, 2007).

It is essential to establish a clear definition of the term "international student," as there exists varying discourse surrounding its meaning, and the terminology is often employed in various contexts. The Institute of International Education (2024) delineates international students as those "who undertake all or part of their higher education experience in a country other than their home country, or who cross a national boundary to a country different from their home country to engage in educational pursuits." Similarly, the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (n.d.) defines international students as "individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective of participating in educational activities in the destination country, where the destination differs from their country of origin." At the University of Tennessee, the definition of an international student is specifically articulated as a student who requires a visa to pursue their education. This nuanced understanding of the term is crucial for both academic discourse and policy formulation regarding international education.

The enrollment of international students in American universities has witnessed a substantial increase from 1950, when a mere 1% of all university students in the US were of international origin. However, by 1990, this percentage climbed to 3%. As of 2023, the number of international students in the United States has increased significantly, with a current

population of 6% of all university students, which translates to over a million international students studying at American institutions (Institute of International Education, 2024). Further, the United States is currently the primary host country for approximately 25 percent of all international students globally, positioning it as the largest host nation on a global scale (Bevis and Lucas, 2007). For these students, the campus becomes their educational workplace, and a foreign city becomes their new home.

International students immediately step into the vulnerable status of immigrants, and they are expected to transition smoothly into their new positions in academia. While university campuses are evolving to meet the diverse needs of their students by establishing new departments aimed at the overall betterment of the student body, certain minority student groups, such as international students, may find that their specific needs are not fully addressed by these broad initiatives. These students have unique requirements that necessitate cultural sensitivity, understanding, and specialized support. Upon entering campus, international students often grapple with unfamiliar cultural practices, etiquette, and logistical challenges, along with concerns about potential discrimination based on their differences. International students are a resilient and determined group, and their courageous pursuit of progress should be met by institutions' preparedness to welcome, support, and establish infrastructure for their well-being.

Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions attract students from around the globe to participate in their academic programs, yielding for the host university significant benefits in terms of research opportunities, educational support, and economic advantage. According to Bevis and Lucas (2007), an estimated two-thirds of international students in the United States pay full tuition expenses throughout their studies, directly contributing to the financial resources of these

institutions. Moreover, universities leverage the presence of these students as research and teaching assistants, to fill specialized class roles, and to secure research grants and funding for academic endeavors. Consequently, the financial stability of higher education institutions is intricately linked to the active recruitment and engagement of globally mobile scholars.

The process of bringing international students to campus can be long and complex, especially when it comes to visa applications. It can take months, or even years, for international students to receive their visas after being accepted into academic programs. Usually, the international student compliance department is the first point of contact for international students on campus. These departments are crucial in ensuring that both the students and the university comply with legal obligations, facilitating a smooth transition and ongoing adherence to regulations throughout the students' academic journey. Once all the necessary documentation is finalized and students have arrived on campus, it is essential to consider the structures implemented to address the unique needs of foreign students.

The role of universities is multifaceted and includes the care of its students, staff, and faculty. The University of Tennessee, in its strategic vision, states that it is “commit[ed] to excellence, equity, and inclusion within the university, across the state, and in all our global activities” (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2022). As well as sustaining a goal to “develop and sustain a nurturing university culture where diversity and community are enduring sources of strength” that “implement structures and practices that attract and retain a diverse community of faculty, staff, and students and that support a culture where everyone matters and belongs” (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2022). To realize their visions, universities must strategically design their campuses to provide sufficient social infrastructure as well as infrastructures of care to meet the needs of all students, including those who are globally mobile.

An Infrastructure Approach

Eric Klinenberg (2018), in his book *Palaces for the People*, discusses the need for *social infrastructures*, which he defines as "the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact." During his doctoral research, he discovered the key difference between neighborhoods that were resilient in the 1995 Chicago heatwave and the neighborhoods that experienced great loss was the presence of social infrastructure. He would argue that in these spaces, social capital develops: "When social infrastructure is robust, it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbors; when degraded, it inhibits social activity, leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves" (Klinenberg, 2018). Social capital is usually the emphasis when discussing building a community, and Klinenberg (2018) explains that social capital needs a physical place to develop, and social infrastructure offers communities spaces where "people engage in sustained, recurrent interaction, particularly while doing things they enjoy, relationships [social capital] inevitably grow." Grum and Grum (2020) add to the concept of social infrastructure by describing its role as "facilitating living elements, such as physical home characteristics, safety neighborhood, proximity to schools, public transports, parking and green spaces in neighborhoods, that increase peoples' satisfaction and affect their quality of life" (2020).

To help with the balance of academic life, universities can offer students a variety of *third spaces* on campus that contribute to the formation of social infrastructures. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989) coined the term *third spaces* as places "where people are welcome to congregate and linger." These spaces could be coffee shops, pubs, libraries, community centers, gyms, or parks. He would debate that these spaces "draw people out of their homes and into the streets and sidewalks, where they create cultural vitality and contribute to the passive

surveillance of shared public space" (Klinenberg, 2018). According to Klinenberg (2018), the strength of a neighborhood's resilience is closely tied to regular, informal interactions between community members. When neighbors are supportive and familiar with one another, having connected through shared social spaces, they establish networks of accountability and care. In the midst of the scorching Chicago heatwave, the strength and resilience of certain neighborhoods shone through organic networks of caring residents, who would check in on each other and offer assistance as needed. This display of neighborly love and support truly highlights the power of community in combating precarious and vulnerable circumstances.

As suggested above, a key part of campus infrastructure is the creation of *third spaces*. Open access spaces on campus offered as free third spaces provide a place more accessible to the wider community, not controlled by the requirement of paying for the privilege of occupying the space. There is a particular type of third space that can be categorized as "counter publics". Klinenberg (2018) quotes the work of political theorists Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner as he explains that counter-publics "are essential tools for civic engagement in unequal societies because they give marginalized groups the private forum they need before engaging other groups." Some historical safe spaces, third spaces, for marginalized groups include mikvahs for Jewish women, barber shops and hair salons for black Americans, and places of worship catering specifically to minority communities. These "safe spaces" offer communities that are subject to prejudice, discrimination, and violence, who would typically be isolated due to extreme social and economic pressures, a place to find stable, enduring relationships (Klinenberg, 2018). Creating spaces on university campuses that reflect the characteristics of these safe spaces can provide systems of care and enhance the resiliency of students grappling with precarious situations.

Another term that is used in this context is “affinity space,” which is “a place or set of places where people can affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class, culture, ethnicity, or gender. They have an affinity for a common interest or endeavor.” (Gee, 2004). Personal identities (race, class, culture, ethnicity, or gender) are not central but can be expressed strategically if individuals choose. Affinity spaces welcome people across all levels of experience—from beginners to experts—without strict separations. Everyone can engage in their own way, learn at their own pace (even by observing), and interact with others based on their own interests and needs (Gee, 2004).

On university campuses and in higher education institutes, it is crucial to provide spaces, facilities, and structures for all students that support their well-being. Thus, it is my intent to intergrade a focus on social infrastructure with an understanding of infrastructures of care. These infrastructures of care could be considered as systems of “support, resources, and practices designed to nurture the emotional well-being of students, staff, and faculty” (Aithal and Aithal, 2023). Similar to Klinenberg’s verbiage, Aithal and Aithal (2023) explain: “A robust emotional infrastructure is crucial for creating a positive learning environment, enhancing student engagement, and ensuring that individuals within the institution feel valued, supported, and equipped to thrive academically and personally." Peter Goodyear (2022) contributes to this conversation and suggests that for academia to be sustainable, “each university needs to be several things to many people, offering congenial spaces for diverse communities, networks and groups, with distinctive but overlapping needs and interests." Grum and Grum (2020) introduce the critical vocabulary of *social sustainability,* which is where social infrastructure intersects with care infrastructures.

Aithal and Aithal (2023) further talk about infrastructures of care as *emotional infrastructure* that enhances campuses to holistically support students, faculty, and staff's well-being. Their research aims to "examine strategies, practices, and policies aimed at enhancing emotional support, mental health services, and community-building initiatives to create an inclusive and conducive atmosphere for learning, personal growth, and academic success." Ultimately, the goal is to "create higher education environments where individuals can thrive emotionally, academically, and socially, leading to improved student retention, satisfaction, and overall institutional success in competitive educational landscape" (Aithal and Aithal, 2023). Stratford et al. (2021) furthers our definition and understanding by referring to "various embedded structures, substructures, and systems by which people enact the labors of caring practices and aptly describes them as *infrastructures of care.*"

Universities, public and private, are small governments that create their own microcosm of society. University campuses serve multifaceted roles as the workplace, home, and social arena for students. The campus design is a way of communicating and facilitating the goals of the institution. The social infrastructure that is created "reveals who we were and what we aspired to become at the time that we built them. The systems we build in the coming years will tell future generations who we are and how we see the world today" (Klinenberg, 2018). Richard Dober, a world-renowned campus planner and scholar who served at Harvard, MIT, and many campuses around the world, wrote in his book *Campus Design* (1992): "Campus design is a civic art that resonates with meaning and significance for our culture. The Greeks had their agora, the Romans their Forum, the Middle Ages their cathedral and town square... The campus is uniquely our generation's contribution to communal placemaking and placemarking." When designed well, campus spaces and infrastructures should "promote community, allegiance, and civility,

while at the same time encouraging diversity in discourse and vision" (Dober, 1992). Hence, with careful consideration and strategic planning, universities can effectively showcase their goals and objectives by designing and curating their campus. The buildings, open spaces, and support systems serve as a medium to convey to the community the priorities and visions for the present and future.

Case Study

Building upon this important work on how the spatial layout and resources of university campuses matter socially in terms of interaction and community-building, my thesis aims to examine the campus social infrastructure for international students in the context of international students at the University of Tennessee. As suggested above, a key part of campus infrastructure is the creation of third spaces. Open access spaces on campus offered as free third spaces provide a place more accessible to the wider community, not controlled by the requirement of paying for the privilege of occupying the space. At the University of Tennessee, there are many open spaces offered to students, staff, and faculty; two spaces in particular are the Student Union and the International House. The Student Union is described as the living room of campus, as "the college union enhances the student experience and cultivates an enduring connection to the institution" (University of Tennessee Student Union, 2024). The International House is envisioned to be the campus global community center with resources, programing and space for all students to participate in a global community (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-c). Much like Klinenberg (2018) describes open public places as "saturated with strangers, people whose bodies are different, whose styles are different, who make different sounds, speak different languages, give off different, sometimes noxious smells. Spending time in public social infrastructures requires learning to deal with these differences in a civil manner." The

International House vision is to offer an open space to all students on campus to be exposed to the campus's global community, therefore preparing students to be a part of the global society (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-c).

The application of a social infrastructure approach to international student services and well-being represents a relatively underexplored domain within higher education research. The University of Tennessee serves as a compelling case study in this context. As of the fall semester of 2024, the total student population at this institution is 38,728, comprising 30,564 undergraduate students and 7,352 graduate students (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2024). Among this population, international students account for 1,416 individuals, with 294 enrolled at the undergraduate level and 1,103 at the graduate level (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2024a). This distribution reflects a broader trend observed across the United States, wherein graduate students constitute the majority of the international student population.

Moreover, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, holds the distinction of being the flagship university of the state, thereby carrying the responsibility to serve and enhance the public good within Tennessee. Its funding from both state and federal sources further underscores its role as a significant educational institution. As an R-1 institution under the Carnegie Classification, there is a pronounced emphasis on graduate education and research, distinguishing it as a pivotal environment for international scholars (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). The university's established partnership with Oak Ridge National Laboratory further elevates its status, creating myriad opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and research.

Collectively, these characteristics position the University of Tennessee as a compelling subject for investigation into the ways in which social infrastructure influences the experiences

of international students and shapes their interactions within the campus environment. Moreover, the examination of social infrastructures and their capacity to foster systems of care and resilience is increasingly critical, particularly in light of the current precarious and convoluted social and political climate surrounding immigration, especially pertaining to international students.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

Pursuing my research objectives, I employed innovative techniques and methods to examine the perspectives of both international students and higher education administrators. I employed photo journaling and photo elicitation interviews as alternatives to conventional surveys and interviews to gain a more profound understanding of the students' perspectives and experiences. The primary aim of my inquiry is to investigate the influence and effectiveness of intentional social infrastructure and infrastructures of care in assisting international students in upholding their academic ambitions while pursuing education at foreign universities. Moreover, through the application of ethnographic methods such as participant observation, field notes, and interviews, leveraging my role as a graduate assistant, I was able to gain deeper insights into the university leaders' objectives and capacities to serve international students.

Photo Journaling Method

The photo journaling method is a specialized technique of photo elicitation that was initially crafted for public health research (Wang and Burris, 1997). This approach involves equipping individuals with cameras and providing them with prompts to capture images of locations, experiences, or events that mirror their perspective or feelings on a particular subject. For my international student research participants I gave them two different prompts for their photos:

1. Sense of Belonging: Take photos of places or spaces on campus or in Knoxville where you feel a strong sense of connection, comfort, or belonging.
2. Sense of Alienation: Take photos of places or spaces where you feel out of place, disconnected, or unwelcome.

I invited students to interpret these prompts in ways that are meaningful to them and their experience.

Once the photos were developed, an interview was arranged to gain insight into the student's motivation behind taking the photos (Guelke, 2021). Guelke (2021) discovered through her follow-up interviews that "the images helped access more emotional and embodied experiences, often related to pride in their work as well as to concerns over changes in their community." Also, through photo journaling and the participants catching a moment in time, the pictures led to conversations about broader, long-term changes and challenges.

Employing ethnographic research methodologies and engaging with the community at the International House has facilitated opportunities to meet and foster relationships with international students. Through these established connections, I extended invitations to join the research project, ensuring that participation was entirely voluntary following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved protocol. I conducted follow-up photo elicitation interviews with the eleven international student participants to gain deeper insights into the locations and motivations behind their picture-taking. By understanding the emotions and explanations behind these photos, I was able to identify patterns among the broader population of international students (Bell, 2016). This data offer valuable insights into the areas where students feel the greatest sense of connection and separation. It provides an essential understanding of the social infrastructure and support systems that either bolster or impede a sense of belonging. Through the utilization of photo journaling and photo elicitation interviews, we acquire tangible evidence of students' needs and perspectives, offering more comprehensive information than conventional conversational surveys.

In order to ensure a diversity of international student experiences in my research, it was essential to work with a range of international students. Fortunately, the University of Tennessee Knoxville offers a multitude of options for international students, including the English Language Institute, undergraduate and graduate programs, Ph.D. programs, and visiting scholars on temporary J-1 visas. International students can be found in a variety of clusters across campus, with the largest concentrations in engineering, biology, and agriculture sciences. While the College of Arts and Humanities and Business School has fewer international students, it is important to have representation from all areas of campus if possible. To achieve the most comprehensive results in the study, I needed a mix of new and veteran students, majors from popular and less popular departments, younger and older students, and individuals from a wide range of backgrounds and degree programs. With eleven international student participants, these students represented by the data in **Table 1**.

Table 1: International Student Participants

Sending Country	**Departments**	**Program**	**Duration at UTK**
Brazil	Agricultural Economics	6 Month Intern	6 months
Caribbean Island Nations (2)	Bio Chemistry	Undergraduate	1 year
Germany	Biomedical Engineering	Masters	2 years
Guatemala	Chemical Engineering	PhD	3 years
India	Civil Engineering	Masters + PhD	4 years
Nigeria	English Literature		5 years
Norway	Food Science		6 years
Saudi Arabia	Geography		
	Mechanical Engineering		
	Nutrition		

It is imperative to recognize that this small research group does not fully encapsulate the extensive diversity of the international student population on campus. Given the constraints of time and resources, efforts were made to ensure a sample that is as diverse and representative as possible. However, it is important to acknowledge that some of the largest international student populations, such as those from China, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Iran, are not adequately represented within this sample size. Additionally, it is noteworthy that a connection was not established with students currently enrolled in the English Language Institute. Therefore, these underrepresented populations must be recognized as a limitation of this study.

Administration Interviews

There are various departments at the University of Tennessee that play a critical role in supporting international students. I communicated with representatives from several key offices directly interacting with this demographic, including the Center for Global Engagement, International Student and Scholar Services, the International House, the English Language Institute, Multicultural Student Life, International Recruitment, and the Thornton Athletic Student Life Center. Following Institutional Review Board procedures, I extended invitations via email for these representatives to participate in my research through semi-structured interviews, each lasting no longer than one hour. Depending on the preferences and availability of the administrators, some interviews were conducted via Zoom, while others took place in their respective on-campus offices. The insights gained from these conversations were instrumental in illuminating the services and support mechanisms available to international students within the university community.

Ethnographic Methods

To complement insights from the photo journaling and photo elicitation interviews, I employed ethnographic research methods and participant observations to leverage my experience at the International House in the Center for Global Engagement. I used methods of participant observation and journaling to document and analyze the functioning of the International House as globally oriented social infrastructure at the University of Tennessee campus. Hannah Appel (2019) characterizes ethnographic research as a method wherein researchers immerse themselves in the community they are seeking to learn from. This approach allows for the exploration and firsthand experience of the community's activities, behaviors, attitudes, and social networks. Further, this methodology offers an avenue for how "communities are organized, and how people form clubs and associations, discuss common interests, and resolve disputes. And they investigate the relationship between the people and their larger institutions" (Appel, 2019).

The University of Tennessee is an ideal study site due to its documented commitment to global engagement through the establishment of a division solely dedicated to extending outreach beyond national and campus borders. This division, known as the Center for Global Engagement, comprises six departments that offer various opportunities and connections worldwide. Of particular significance are the International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) and the International House (I-House), which cater to the needs of international students. ISSS handles visa applications, social security matters, and equips students with the necessary skills for visa transitions and job applications after graduation (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-h). Meanwhile, the International House serves as both a physical building and a programing department, providing a space for students to interact, study, and hold gatherings. Its mission is

to “educate, engage, and support all students to help them participate as members of a global, culturally diverse society” (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-c).

As a graduate assistant at the International House, I used ethnographic methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the institutional viewpoint on supporting international students. These connections offer me the opportunity to gain insight into the university's perspective, objectives, and constraints. This experience offers a complementary perspective to the student interviews. By synthesizing these perspectives, I was able to develop a comprehensive understanding of the infrastructures of care for international students and identify areas for improvement to enhance their overall experience and sustainable integration into campus.

Institutional Review Board Approval

Before beginning any data collection for this study, I completed the Institutional Review Board approval process through the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. This process, which spanned nearly five months during the Fall 2024 semester, ensured that all elements of my research complied with ethical standards for working with human subjects. Given the mixed-methods nature of this study—including photo journaling, photo elicitation interviews, ethnographic participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with both students and administrators—I submitted a detailed protocol outlining participant recruitment, data collection procedures, and consent processes. The IRB required comprehensive documentation for both the international student participants and the university staff members, including interview scripts, photo prompts, and informed consent forms. The length and complexity of the approval process reflected the layered and innovative aspects of my project, particularly the use of visual methodologies and my dual role as both a researcher and a graduate assistant working within the International House. Once approval was granted, I proceeded with all components of the research in alignment

with the IRB-approved protocol, prioritizing voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the ethical treatment of all individuals involved.

CHAPTER 3

Institutional and Administrative Perspectives

The journey of international students typically begins with communicating with potential departments and advisors at prospective institutions. Initial conversations and emails with potential advisors and researchers set the stage for evaluating whether this university aligns with the student's academic aspirations. Following this, the acceptance and admission processes mirror those experienced by domestic students. However, once these processes are completed, international students embark on a distinctly different journey that involves navigating paperwork, securing visas, and transitioning to campus life from abroad.

On the University of Tennessee's campus, various spaces and departments cater to the well-being of the broader campus community, like the Tennessee Recreational Center for Students (TRECS), the Student Union, the Pedestrian Walkway, and the many green spaces and plazas. There are also spaces that provide guidance, opportunities, and support intentionally designed for international students. My research has explicitly concentrated on departments specifically designed to create systems of care for international students beyond the common and shared campus spaces. I have engaged in discussions with administrators who work directly in these departments, preparing resources and initiatives tailored to international student needs on campus. It is often those departments that are responsible for fashioning social infrastructure for international students.

The Center for Global Engagement

At the University of Tennessee Knoxville, the Center for Global Engagement (CGE) serves as the dedicated administrative division for the support and integration of international students within the university community. The responsibilities for the welfare of international

students originate from the CGE and are consistently exercised within its areas of influence. CGE is committed to the conceptualization and realization of a globally engaged campus, embodying the participation of students, staff, faculty, and international partners. The overarching aspiration for fostering a more globally integrated environment is to create a welcoming and diverse atmosphere that allows global scholars to embrace and express their differences and identities. This vision encapsulates the strategic goals of the department.

On a day-to-day operational basis, the leadership of the CGE prioritizes the establishment of robust policies and protocols at the systemic level, with the intention of supporting, rather than impeding, the experiences of international students. Leadership in CGE communicated that, “on a much more transactional level, we make sure that we [as a university] have policies and protocols in place. Or that policies that are being developed at the system level are not negatively impacting [international] students and scholars. When they are, then we become the advocate.” In this capacity, CGE acts as a proponent for both international students and the advancement of international scholarship.

CGE is composed of six distinct units that are tasked with "leading, coordinating, and supporting the university's initiatives in global education, research, and engagement" (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-a). As delineated on their official website, their responsibilities include "developing and managing international partnerships, aiding international students and scholars, offering education abroad opportunities for students, and fostering international and intercultural programs for the university and the broader community" (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-a). A pivotal component of their mission is the commitment to international students, which is realized through three dedicated units: International Student and Scholar Services, the International House, and the English Language Institute.

International Student and Scholar Services

Upon gaining admission to the University of Tennessee, students are first introduced to the International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) unit within the Center for Global Engagement . This office bears primary responsibility for ensuring institutional compliance with federal immigration regulations pertinent to participants of the F and J visa programs at the University of Tennessee. The F visa facilitates entry into the United States for individuals pursuing full-time study at an accredited academic institution, stipulating that students must enroll in a program or course of study that ultimately confers a degree, diploma, or certificate (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.-b). Conversely, the J visa represents a nonimmigrant classification designated for exchange visitors intending to engage in sanctioned scholarship and/or training programs, thereby promoting educational and cultural exchanges between the United States and various countries globally (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.-a).

ISSS is dedicated to providing comprehensive immigration advising and support services tailored to the international student and scholar community at the university (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-h). Their range of services effectively addresses an extensive spectrum of immigration-related needs throughout the duration of students' participation in the F or J visa programs. In the current political climate, characterized by frequent changes in policies and executive orders, as well as modifications to the statuses of certain students by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the International Student and Scholar Services emerges as a crucial resource of care for international students. This entity addresses the myriad questions and concerns related to their security and legal standing. To this end, ISSS has developed a dedicated webpage that provides timely updates on immigration policy changes

(University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-h). Furthermore, they are expanding their availability by creating opportunities for students to schedule appointments and engage with advisors regarding their personal concerns. The complexities surrounding immigration status, particularly at this juncture, contribute significantly to the daily stressors experienced by international students.

The ISSS unit is responsible for international orientation and actively engages with students during the onboarding process, which encompasses the introduction of visa requirements, logistical preparations for their arrival in the United States and on campus, as well as orientation sessions following their arrival. The ISSS staff acknowledged that "our goal is supporting the on-boarding of international staff, students, scholars, and faculty, to try and alleviate the inherent friction that comes was just getting established... It's hard enough just to come and do a good job in your program; however, when you have all these extra sorts of required things to do, it just adds additional stress and pressure. We can't circumvent doing those, but we try to make it as manageable as possible."

Throughout their academic tenure at the University of Tennessee, ISSS upholds the legal immigration status of each student while concurrently ensuring compliance with federal regulations applicable to the institution. As students approach the conclusion of their academic journey, the ISSS unit also facilitates preparations for employment applications and relevant work-related visa sponsorships. This unit may maintain visa-related relationships with students, initiating visa applications and extending to post-graduation employment opportunities and the potential for employment-based visa sponsorship, which can encompass a duration of nearly ten years.

The offices of ISSS are spatially situated within the International House facility. They facilitate regular online drop-in advising sessions via Zoom four days each week. Additionally, advisors are accessible for in-person consultations by appointment, and have designated secure and private spaces in the International House to engage in discussions pertinent to various matters arising within the academic framework, particularly those related to status, visas, and immigration. This unit constitutes a fundamental component of the systems of care established for international students on campus, as it addresses significant and personal concerns pertaining to immigration matters for both students and staff.

International House

Upon arriving at the university campus, the International Student and Scholar Services coordinates a comprehensive new student orientation. This orientation serves as a foundational introduction to campus life, procedural norms, and an introduction to the International House (I-House). The I-House is the second international student-facing operational unit within the Center for Global Engagement, focusing on creating a welcoming environment that aids in the transition and acculturation of international students.

The International House not only refers to the physical facility that accommodates both ISSS and the I-House programming unit, but it is also conceptualized as a global community center for all students and an affinity space tailored to the specific needs of the campus' global community. The design and purpose of this facility aim to cultivate intricate systems of care and a community that both celebrates the vibrant global diversity of campus and understands the diverse challenges faced by international students. While the unit does not claim to offer all the answers to international students' questions or concerns, it is strategically established as a

resourceful environment where students can pose inquiries and receive appropriate guidance toward solutions.

With its always free coffee and tea bar and its open spaces for studying and gathering, this building operates as a space for students to engage in sustained, recurrent interaction that naturally creates networks of care by simply being aware and around during the daily and mundane flows of life in academia. The I-House frequently is characterized as a "home away from home," the facility embodies the sentiment captured by the phrase “Home Sweet Home Away from Home,” which playfully links the International House to the university's anthem of Rocky Top.

The I-House operates as the programming arm of CGE, functioning as a bridge to the broader campus community while striving to establish a global community center that fosters relationships between domestic and international students. The mission of the International House is articulated as an endeavor “to educate, engage, and support all students to help them participate as members of a global, culturally diverse society” (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-c). The professional staff of the I-House articulated the vision of, “creating an ecosystem within the International House community, but also outside of this community across the campus at large [especially with domestic students]. So that it's not just CGE who are the support system. We're just a part of the support system. Facilitating connections between American students and international students is a huge part of the overall student experience, and it is a huge part of how we're supporting international students. Through this avenue, there is a connection to the local culture, which is a huge factor in a person's cultural adjustment. So again, [we are] just a part of creating an ecosystem where international students feel supported.”

To fulfill this mission, the I-House is committed to aiding the transition of international students into the University of Tennessee and the Knoxville community through a series of carefully designed programs aimed at creating a sense of home and a meaningful community. The unit emphasizes the importance of cultivating a welcoming and constructive environment for all students to relax, study, and learn together. This includes offering practical training and resources to enhance individual understanding of various cultures and languages, developing cultural events that celebrate international traditions and customs, providing high-quality facilities and event support to the campus community, and organizing programs that raise awareness of current international events and issues (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-c). Ultimately, the overarching objective is to create an ecosystem, or social infrastructure, in which international students are afforded the necessary support to thrive. The International House operates under the conceptual framework of establishing infrastructures that prioritize and facilitate fostering supportive environments that promote the well-being of individuals within the community.

English Language Institute

The English Language Institute (ELI) represents the third unit of CGE that is directly oriented toward international students. This department is dedicated to enhancing the proficiency of students in the English language, offering specialized instruction tailored to the diverse needs of its learners. ELI serves a broad spectrum of students, including traditional international students who arrive directly from their countries of origin to advance their linguistic capabilities (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-e). Additionally, pathways exist for students who have been admitted to the university but require further development of their English skills prior to engaging in coursework on the main campus (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-e).

Furthermore, ELI caters to local residents and U.S. citizens who wish to enhance their English proficiency. Another significant demographic served by ELI includes international students who hold graduate teaching assistantships, who are required to attain certification in their language skills to effectively contribute to campus classrooms (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-e).

ELI provides targeted courses designed to prepare these individuals for their teaching responsibilities. The Institute underscores the advantages of its smaller class sizes, which facilitate individualized attention from instructors and foster a more personal language-learning community. As a relatively compact department, ELI has the unique potential to cultivate one of the most diverse educational environments on campus, ultimately enriching the academic experience for all students.

In the preceding calendar year (January – December 2024), ELI welcomed 176 students from 28 different countries, underscoring its role as a global educational hub. The Center for Global Engagement's operations extend across various locations on and off campus, with its three primary departments—including ELI—distributed across distinct buildings. Notably, the English Language Institute is located in the UT Conference Center, approximately half a mile from the main campus, and it lacks direct transit connections to the university. It is the only unit physically separated from the university's main campus, and therefore, this unit's students are disconnected from the easy access to the resources and infrastructures of the main campus. Meanwhile, the International Student and Scholar Services and the International House are housed within the International House building that is centrally located on campus. While CGE administration is currently situated in Melrose Hall, although plans for future relocation off-campus are underway due to new construction and the impending demolition of Melrose Hall.

Division of Student Life

The Division of Student Life at the University of Tennessee comprises twenty-one distinct units, including the Center for Basic Needs, Center for Care and Resilience, RecSports, University Housing, the Student Union, and Multicultural Student Life. This division articulates its mission by asserting, "when students know they have a community, a support structure, an inclusive learning environment, and faculty and staff who are invested in their well-being, they flourish in their development and learning" (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-b). This commitment exemplifies a robust framework of care for students, facilitated through facilities designed to serve as social infrastructures. Within this division, the Multicultural Student Life (MSL) unit is a place where international students can seek guidance and support, thereby MSL plays a critical role in fostering an inclusive campus environment.

Multicultural Student Life

The Center for Global Engagement, in conjunction with the Division of Student Life, plays a pivotal role in facilitating the transition and integration of students into campus life. Among the various units within Student Life, Multicultural Student Life is particularly dedicated to the needs of the multicultural and diverse student body and is located in the Frieson Black Cultural Center. This facility, campus social infrastructure, is purposefully designed to accommodate large-scale events as well as individualized tutoring sessions, featuring essential amenities such as an art gallery, library, lounge, conference room, study room, tutoring offices, and dedicated spaces for meditation and prayer.

Similar to the International House, the Frieson Black Cultural Center serves as a resource and connection hub, fostering engagement among students from diverse backgrounds. This building, enhanced by the presence of MSL offices, functions as an affinity space that promotes

inclusivity, care, and support. The mission of MSL is articulated as a commitment to cultivating a welcoming and inclusive campus environment. It advocates for traditionally marginalized students through the provision of academic support, multicultural education, identity exploration, leadership development, and diverse programming achieved through collaborative partnerships (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-i). MSL regularly supports international student organizations by acting as their advisor and offering guidance on innovative ways to utilize campus and community resources.

Furthermore, the values articulated on the MSL website, particularly the directive to "Be Seen," underscore a strong ethos of authenticity and belonging. The MSL staff eloquently explained that “Our ultimate goal is for any student to show up to UTK as their authentic self, find community, and find a space where they feel like they belong, are supported, are empowered, and celebrated.” It is a department-wide commitment to creating a space and atmosphere where students can express their true selves without the necessity of adopting masks or engaging in code-switching. This dedication not only fosters a sense of community but also aims to empower students to thrive academically while positively impacting a global society (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-i).

Unique Undergraduate Departments

The University of Tennessee has two smaller populations of international students, each with its own unique experiences. According to the International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) Fall 2024 report, there are 294 undergraduate international students on the Knoxville campus, in contrast to 1,103 graduate international students. Notably, many of these undergraduate students are also student-athletes competing in various sports for the university. Two departments play a key role in attracting undergraduate international students: the

International Recruitment Department, part of Enrollment Management, and Tennessee Athletics, which manages the Thornton Athletic Student Life Center.

International Recruitment Office

The International Recruitment Office is a part of the Division of Enrollment Management, that "focuses on undergraduate recruitment and admissions, student services, retention and graduation" (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-f). This particular unit exhibits a deficiency in establishing a robust physical presence on campus, primarily due to its intrinsic role in facilitating the admissions process for students. Nevertheless, the Global Ambassador Program serves as a notable exception; this initiative provides scholarship opportunities for undergraduate international students, who function as cultural liaisons between the campus community and their respective home cultures, thereby fostering potential pathways for prospective students. However, apart from participation in the Global Ambassador Program, international students typically do not require further engagement with this office upon the completion of their admission process.

Thornton Athletic Student Life Center

The Thornton Athletic Student Life Center is designed to serve as a pivotal resource hub and infrastructure that addresses the diverse needs of student-athletes. Similar to other support facilities, such as the International House and the Frieson Black Cultural Center, this facility functions as an affinity space for university athletes. The Thornton Center is specifically tailored to foster the academic and social integration of all student-athletes.

The facility features designated areas ideal for studying, meetings, and private tutoring, thus creating a structured environment that fosters academic success. Additionally, trained staff members are readily available to assist student-athletes with a variety of academic challenges.

Importantly, a specialized team concentrates on the well-being and academic progress of international students, ensuring their distinct needs are assessed and addressed. While all student-athletes receive regular support and check-ins from staff, this dedicated team plays a crucial role in tackling the unique challenges faced by international student-athletes, providing tailored resources and guidance that meet their specific needs in the context of both their athletic and academic endeavors. The facility and the staff strive to offer holistic support for each student, "Our initiatives also emphasize community involvement and personal enhancement, which encompass health and wellness programming, as well as financial education. Unlike organizations that check eligibility or manage class registrations, we focus on holistic support, helping individuals define their aspirations and providing the necessary resources to achieve them."

Administrators' Perceived Needs of International Students

The administrators have recognized specific needs that arise within the context of the international student experience; however, several of these needs extend beyond the purview of their respective units. These units operate under clearly defined roles and responsibilities by the institution, which are articulated in their mission statements and objectives. Consequently, certain needs exist that fall outside their capacity to address or manage effectively.

New Universities Priorities

In September 2023, the University of Tennessee announced a significant initiative aimed at enhancing accessibility to higher education for in-state students. This initiative includes a guarantee of admission for applicants who meet specific criteria, such as ranking within the top ten percent of their graduating class, provided they submit their applications by early action deadlines (Boone, 2023; University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-g). The implications of this

policy were discussed in a CGE all staff meeting, where it was noted that these new standards are expected to substantially alter the demographic composition of the undergraduate student population on campus.

An anticipated influx of several thousand additional undergraduates, predominantly from Tennessee, will necessitate the development of new initiatives and departments to accommodate these students. This shift is particularly noteworthy, as the demographic profile of incoming students diverges significantly from that of international scholars, indicating a strategic pivot in the university's priorities. An administrator in CGE voiced a concern that "we [as a university] create this sort of separate bucket that we kind of throw different small, nonsystematic, non-holistic attempts to support [international students], instead of a top-down approach. International students are UT students who are predominantly graduate students. But of course, we [UTK] are configured for domestic undergraduate students."

Concurrently, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) maintains its classification as an R-1 institution, or a Doctoral University, underscoring its commitment to research excellence (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). This classification imposes an increased expectation on graduate students, a substantial portion of whom are international students, thus amplifying the pressures they face. Leadership in CGE sees possible issues, "The counter to that priority limitation is that we have departments on this campus that have communicated if we don't have international students in our department, we will not be able to keep up with the research that's occurring." An example is electrical engineering, which currently has over 170 Chinese students enrolled. The administrator elaborated, "If we walk away from our ability to be able to partner and recruit from China, then we're going to have to come up with a whole new strategy for that department in terms of meeting their research needs,

because they're not getting enough domestic students." This is additionally heightened when the governor strongly approaches the Tickle College of Engineering, communicating the need to graduate 10,000 more engineers a year just to meet the needs in our state. CGE leadership asks, "Where is the university planning on recruiting those students?"

In light of this evolving focus, interviews with administrators at many departments expressed concerns regarding the alignment of institutional priorities with the specific needs of international students. Resource allocation appears constrained, with funding diverted away from initiatives that support these students. Long-standing requests for housing access for international students have been denied by ISSS, ELI, and I-House, suggesting that meaningful change can only be enacted through a top-down directive. As the university's focus shifts toward the newly prioritized undergraduate population, the attention and resources dedicated to international students appear to be more limited, according to the interviewed service providers. Furthermore, new infrastructure aimed at enhancing student success and career development has resulted in the reallocation of office space previously designated for CGE administration, with no concrete plans for replacement facilities on campus, leading to their relocation off-site. Thus, the trajectory of university policy seems to prioritize in-state undergraduate experiences while potentially marginalizing the needs of international students even further.

The recent shift in emphasis and prioritization has the potential to significantly impact the social infrastructure and support systems for international students by reallocating resources and modifying facilities to accommodate the growing population of in-state undergraduate students. While there are certain spaces and initiatives that could serve the needs of both demographics, it is essential to recognize that the overall requirements of in-state undergraduate students are

likely to diverge from those of international graduate students. This distinction underscores the necessity for tailored approaches in addressing the diverse needs of these student populations.

Equity

A recurring theme emerging from my interviews with service providers is the imperative for enhanced equity for international students within this higher education institution. While these concepts frequently permeate political discourse, there exists a pressing need for university administrations to cultivate a nuanced understanding of and support for the international student demographic in actionable ways.

One example of an issue pertains to the inadequate access to transportation for students enrolled in the English Language Institute, who typically number between 30 and 50 per 8-week term. The absence of reliable transit options necessitates that these students navigate extensive walks, incur significant expenses through rideshare services, or contend with the unpredictability of municipal bus services to reach the main campus, university resources, and community engagement spaces. Despite ongoing appeals for the establishment of a dedicated campus shuttle service, such proposals have been consistently rejected and delayed. This persistent denial raises critical questions regarding institutional priorities: Would transportation access be reevaluated if domains such as engineering, architecture, or business were to be relocated to the same off-campus venue?

In addition to transportation challenges, my observations and interviews with administrative offices reveal that systemic barriers within university records management significantly affect international students. Complications arising from administrative systems, such as Banner, have recurrently resulted in the misclassification of international students due to their distinctive academic status, thereby limiting their access to essential institutional resources.

An institutional lag in updating policies further exacerbates this issue, signaling a troubling lack of prioritization regarding the needs of international students. Genuine equity necessitates not only equitable treatment but also systemic modifications to ensure that international students are afforded the resources, care, and access indispensable for their academic and personal success.

Moreover, the responsibility for creating supportive systems of care for international students is often erroneously perceived as the sole purview of the Center for Global Engagement. One example was given that, “frustrations arise from folks outside of CGE who think if a situation involves an international student, they [CGE] ought to be able to take care of it. Many times the answer is, no, that's not what we do, or that is outside our scope of work. It's not because we don't want to do what needs to be done, but rather it's because there is another office, unit, or person who needs to practice inclusion.” However, fostering an inclusive environment is not simple and should be a collaborative institutional effort that stretches into all aspects of the designed social infrastructure for the student body. Many university offices appear to assume that CGE is exclusively equipped to address the myriad concerns of international students, rather than actively integrating inclusive practices within their own operational frameworks and system of student care. Absent broader institutional engagement, international students are likely to encounter ongoing difficulties in navigating campus life, which can exacerbate the inherent stresses associated with acclimating to a new educational environment.

Housing

Interviews with representatives within various service departments highlight concerning trends related to isolation, initial adjustment, and the vulnerability experienced by international students during their transition period. A particularly critical challenge faced by these students, especially those pursuing graduate studies, is securing suitable housing. Many international

students must navigate the complexities of finding accommodations remotely, placing them at increased risk of falling victim to scams or encountering overpriced rental options. In stark contrast to incoming undergraduate freshmen, who benefit from guaranteed on-campus housing, international students are often left to manage this daunting process with minimal institutional support. While the English Language Institute (ELI) endeavors to coordinate a limited array of housing options, available accommodations cannot be guaranteed.

In response to these challenges, a proposed solution is the establishment of a structured short-term housing program specifically designed for newly arrived international students, akin to existing freshman housing initiatives. The provision of temporary on-campus accommodations would facilitate students' acclimatization to Knoxville, enable the establishment of interpersonal connections, and enhance their access to vital campus resources, including dining and transportation services. Furthermore, it would alleviate the immediate financial burden associated with acquiring essential furnishings, such as beds and desks, thereby easing the transition into their new environment. This proposal aimed at enhancing critical infrastructure for international students is currently in its initial stages of development. A housing task force is being organized to systematically refine and analyze pertinent data, which will subsequently be communicated to the housing department. This effort will focus on outlining the specific housing duration and frequency requirements of incoming international students in an effort to ensure their needs are adequately addressed.

In addition to housing, the issue of transportation serves as a significant barrier for many international students. A considerable number rely on public transit, often enduring commutes that exceed one hour each way. The limited availability of housing in proximity to campus exacerbates this challenge, negatively impacting students' time management, overall well-being,

and their capacity to balance academic and personal responsibilities. Interviews with service providers and my own observations while working at the International House suggest by addressing housing accessibility, we can simultaneously improve transportation access—both of which are vital in enhancing the overall experience and success of international students.

Conclusion

A significant concern within academic institutions is the inconsistent comprehension of the complexities associated with the international student demographic. There exists a persistent array of misconceptions regarding the profile of international students at the University of Tennessee. Predominantly, many campus departments concentrate their efforts on supporting undergraduate students, thereby neglecting the considerable presence of fully funded PhD candidates, who constitute the majority of the international student population.

Alongside these doctoral candidates, the international student group features a diverse range of academic backgrounds. This population includes exchange students who engage with the university for a single semester, as well as individuals categorized as “interns” who undertake research within a six-month timeframe. Furthermore, students enrolled in the English Language Institute may participate in multiple eight-week terms, while master’s students adhere to distinct academic schedules. Global and exchange scholars also occupy varied roles within the university framework.

The departments and service providers engaged with international students who participated in my research interviews exhibited a profound understanding of cultural dynamics and a notable depth of cultural competency. This expertise arises from their commitment to serving international students effectively. A pervasive passion for international education and recognition of its intrinsic value is evident among these departments. These units, dedicated to

the care of international students, transcend mere administrative functions; they embody a commitment to international education and global scholarship. They aspire to provide competent and compassionate support for international students, underpinned by a consistent desire for the entire campus community, including faculty and staff, to be accommodating and helpful. It is understood across these international student-facing departments that to effectively address these disparities in support and service provisions, university policies must adopt a more nuanced and inclusive perspective. This approach ensures that all international students receive the comprehensive assistance and access to the systems of care they require.

CHAPTER 4

International Students Perspectives

Each individual international student who arrives on campus embodies a distinct narrative and possesses a specific motivation for pursuing a degree and furthering their education abroad. The challenges faced by students, particularly those transitioning to a new academic environment—whether it be a new country, university, or campus—are inherently diverse, reflecting their unique backgrounds and circumstances. Despite the variability in these personal stories, several overarching themes consistently emerge.

Through a series of conversations and interviews with international students who participated in my research, noteworthy patterns have surfaced, revealing insights into the international student experience within specific campus environments. When juxtaposed with theoretical ideas about the significance of robust social infrastructure and infrastructures of care, these findings yield valuable perspectives on the multifaceted challenges faced by these students and the need for an intentional and responsive approach to campus spaces and services.

The prevailing sentiment among participants is a profound awareness of the stakes involved in their pursuit of higher education in the United States. Many express that they see their opportunity as a one-time shot, with minimal room for error in their academic and social processes. Consequently, they must navigate their academic journeys with meticulous care to ensure compliance with institutional expectations and maintain their visa status. The dialogues presented here encapsulate the lived experiences and viewpoints of eleven international students at the University of Tennessee, contributing to a deeper understanding of their unique challenges, aspirations, and how the campus environment has affected their experience. The findings derived from the photo journaling interviews have been compiled into a graduated circle map of the

campus (**Figure 1**). In this representation, the frequency of mentions of a location is directly proportional to the size of the circle. Locations associated with positive experiences of belonging are indicated by green, whereas those connected to negative experiences of alienation or vulnerability are represented in red. Locations with a complex array of associations regarding a student's experience are depicted in blue. Additionally, I have constructed a chart illustrating the frequency of photographs taken at each location alongside the corresponding positive or negative experiences associated with those locations (**Table 2**).

Social Infrastructures that are Working

The examination of Klinenberg's (2018) theories about social infrastructure in conjunction with data derived from international students' photo journaling provides a compelling framework for analyzing the significance of the role of common spaces and third spaces within the campus environment. According to existing literature, third spaces are defined as locations distinct from both the home and workplace, where individuals gather and engage in social interactions. Klinenberg (2018) identifies various forms of social infrastructure that exemplify third spaces, including coffee shops, pubs, libraries, community centers, gyms, and parks. In the context of campus life, spaces such as the Student Union, International House, Engineering Quad Courtyard, and the 21st Mortgage Plaza serve as relevant examples of these third spaces. Notably, these locations emerged as significant touchpoints for research participants, who articulated a sense of belonging and shared positive experiences within these communal areas. These spaces also foster and strengthen a community and support network. The care systems in these environments assist in linking students to resources and offer help during challenging times, promoting resilience when faced with adversity. This highlights the vital role of such environments in fostering social connections among diverse student populations.

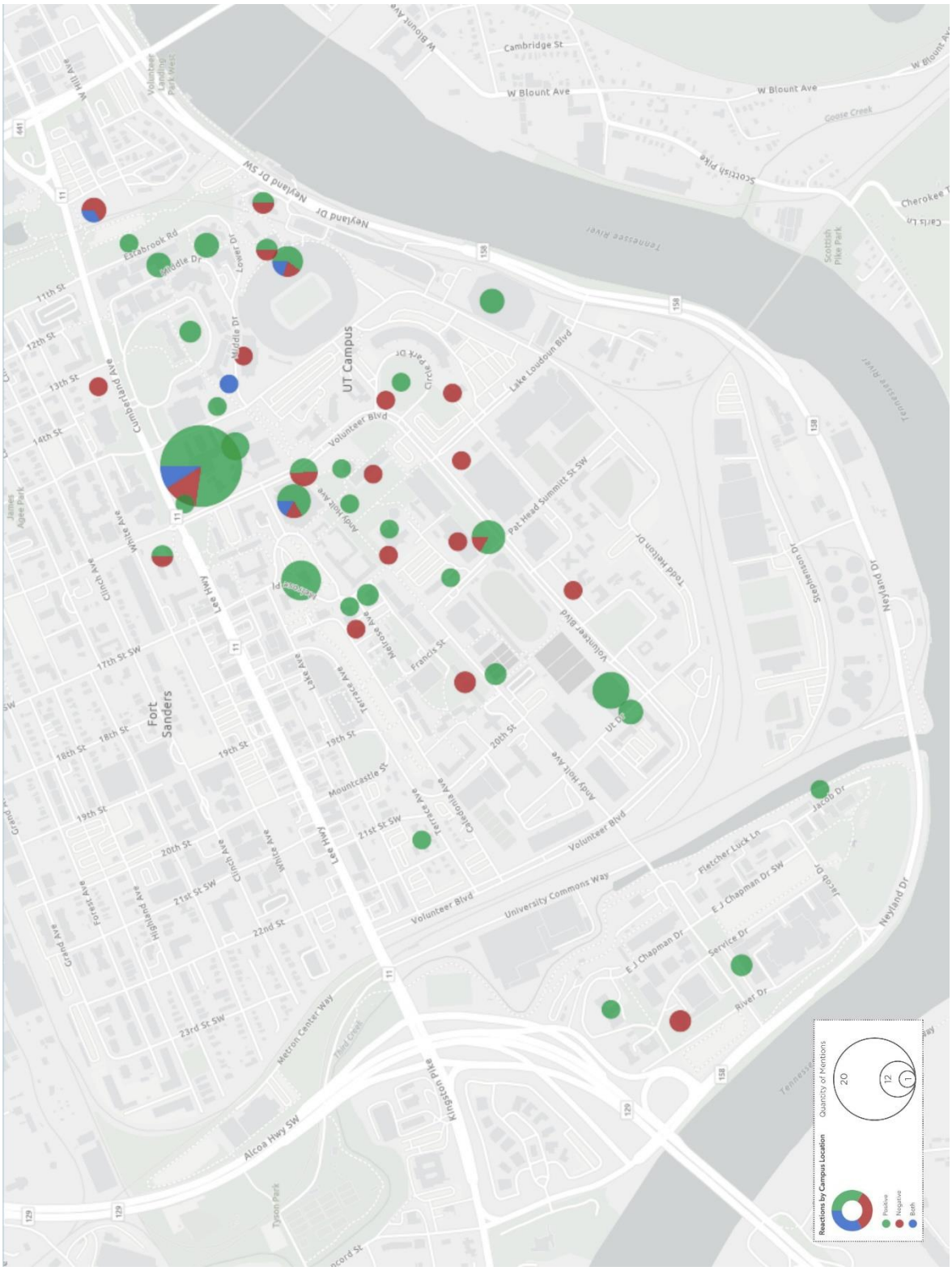


Figure 1: Graduated Circle Map of UTK with International Student Photos

Table 2: Data from International Student Photos for Mapping

	Location	Total Mentions	Positive	Negative	Both
1	21st Mortagage Plaza	4	4		
2	Ag Campus Greenway/Green Paths	1	1		
3	AMB	1		1	
4	Ayres South Lawn	2	2		
5	BCM	1		1	
6	Big Orange Buses	2	2		
7	Burchfield Geography Building	1	1		
8	Circle Park	1	1		
9	Clearence Brown Theatre	1	1		
10	Doughtery Engineering Builidng	3	3		
11	Engineering Quad (Infront of Ferris Hall)	3	3		
12	Food Science and Technology Building	2		2	
13	Food Trucks in front of AMB	1			1
14	Fraternity Village	1		1	
15	Free Store	1	1		
16	Frieson Black Cultural Center	4	2		
17	HSS	1		1	
18	Humanities Amphitheatre	1	1		
19	International House	12	8		
20	Lab Theatre	1		1	
21	Lab/Department	11	7	4	
22	Library	7	4	1	1
23	McClung Museum	1		1	
24	McClung Tower	1	1		
25	Morgan Hall	1	1		
26	Mossman Building	1		1	
27	Natalie Haslam Music Center	1		1	
28	Neyland Stadium	5	3	1	1
29	Parking	3		2	1
30	Ped Walkway	4	2	2	
31	Pendegrass Library	2	2		
32	Rocky Top Dining	2		2	
33	Second Creek	1	1		
34	St John XXIII Catholic Center	1	1		
35	Stokely Hall	1		1	
36	Strong Hall	2	1	1	
37	Student Union	20	17	3	2
38	Student Union Front Lawn	1	1		
39	Tennis Courts	2	2		
40	The Rock	6	5	1	
41	Thompson Bowling Arena (Food City Center)	3	3		
42	Tickle Engineering Building	2	1	1	
43	Torchbearer Statue	1		1	
44	TREC	7	7		

Student Union

The site that emerged most frequently from the photo journal interviews with international students was the Student Union. This building is a central hub for student engagement, encompassing various amenities such as dining facilities, meeting rooms, study areas, spaces for relaxation, and the bookstore. One student remarked, “maybe it's hard to relate, but this university does a lot for their students. In [their home country], the universities would never have such places. At home, [the institutions] just don’t have that much infrastructure... this university has all this infrastructure for the students to care for them.” Notably, twenty photographs were captured in and around the Student Union, with 85% of these images reflecting themes of belonging and inclusion. This emphasizes the significance of the Student Union as a pivotal space fostering community and connectivity among students. The student Union comprises some key spaces or infrastructures highlighted in student photos.

Big Orange Pantry

Two particular spaces hold significant importance for participating international students: the Big Orange Pantry and the Union Station Recreation Area. The Big Orange Pantry serves the campus community, encompassing current students, faculty, and staff, by providing a diverse array of non-perishable and fresh food items, hygiene products, and other essential resources (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-d). Notably, the pantry's operation does not require any application or screening process, thereby ensuring accessibility for all individuals in need. This initiative not only addresses food insecurity but also contributes to the mitigation of food waste on campus; surplus food from dining facilities is redirected to the pantry, resulting in a readily available source of nutritious meals (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.-d). One student described the pantry as “a resources and place that is a part of my routine. I really enjoy the

space and how they provide support to students. For example, you can go in see what they are offering. Sometimes as an international students, you don't know exactly what that kind of food is. So [they help] you see and read what is in each item and they get that thing for you." In addition to its primary location in the Student Union, an assortment of "pocket pantries" are strategically positioned across campus, including one in the Pendegrass Library on the Ag campus (**Figure 2**). A participant from the Food Science department notably captured an image of this particular pocket pantry, highlighting its convenience for departments with limited time to access the main pantry. These spaces provide significant support to students in financial, mental, and nutritional aspects, thereby alleviating one dimension of their daily stressors.

Complementary to this initiative is the Free Store, a community-driven resource designed to assist the University of Tennessee (UT) campus community in diminishing their environmental footprint while also saving money. The UT community is invited to utilize the Free Store for acquiring clothing, household items, and various other goods. This resource is housed in a repurposed house situated on the periphery of the campus (**Figure 3**),



Figure 2: Pendegrass Pocket Pantry



Figure 3: The Free Store

and it maintains regular operational hours while also hosting occasional pop-up events at various locations across campus. One student articulated the Free Store's significance upon their initial arrival at the university, underscoring its role in fostering a supportive community with invaluable resources: “I really like the free store, when I first came, it was really helpful and it's not really far from [campus]. And the people there are really nice. I've been volunteering there too. It's pretty nice and I recommend my international friends to go there because at the beginning, when you just get here, it is actually really, really helpful.” Notably, the International House Great Room frequently serves as a venue for at least one pop-up event each semester, thereby aligning this resource with the global community center philosophy it aspires to uphold.

Union Station Recreation Area

The Union Station Recreation Area (**Figure 4**) within the Student Union emerged as an unexpected focal point during conversations. This space, conveniently accessible from the 21st Mortgage Plaza entrance of the Union and adjacent to the first-floor dining stalls, offers a variety of recreational amenities. Specifically, the Union Station features four billiard tables, two ping-

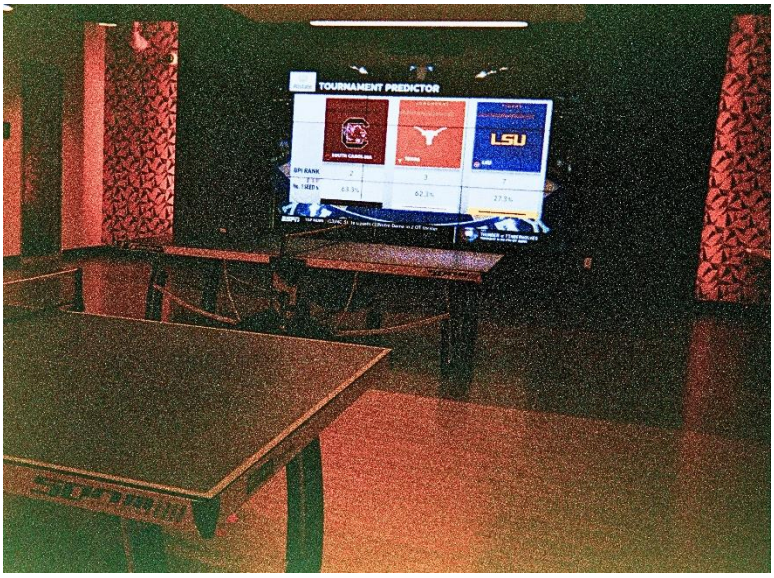


Figure 4: Union Station Recreation Area

pong tables, four Xbox consoles, and an assortment of board games, all available for student use at no cost. The facility operates daily from noon until the closure of the Student Union.

Notably, four participating students documented their experiences in this area, citing its role as a communal space where they could connect with peers and take respite from their academic endeavors. The backgrounds of these individuals are notably diverse, encompassing Brazil, India, and Nigeria. This recreational area had not previously been on my radar, as I had erroneously assumed that its usage would be predominantly by undergraduate domestic students. However, through discussions with various international students, it became evident that its central location on campus and the ease with which one can transition from study to leisure make it a favored gathering spot. This insight emphasizes the role of inclusive environments in promoting community within a diverse student body.

Failed Infrastructures in the Student Union

The Student Union faces several challenges that have led to negative perceptions among its users, constituting infrastructure failure in the eyes of the international students. One notable

example is the prayer and meditation room (**Figure 5**), which, according to student feedback, has served as a safe space for practicing meditation. However, in this space, students have felt unwelcome due to the presence of other groups whose prayer practices led to interactions that left some students uncomfortable and frustrated by the lack of inclusivity and ability to share the space. The student explained "it's called the interfaith and meditation space. I really liked it in the beginning. I got into a specific meditation routine. So, I really liked this place, but then it got weirder when one specific time when I was doing my meditation, there was somebody [from another faith] walked up to me and said, 'hey, could you move away because we're actually doing meditation?'" This student further explained how "this [room] should be an all-inclusive space, but the props and supplies in [the room] are specific to some faiths but not fully inclusive." This situation was exacerbated by the perception that the room was more accommodating to specific groups or prayer and meditation traditions rather than being universally accessible to all.



Figure 5: Student Union Prayer and Meditation Room

Another significant instance of infrastructural inadequacy occurred when international students participating in an exchange internship program for six months were inadvertently excluded from events organized by the Center for Student Engagement. This exclusion arose from a malfunction in the identification system, which inaccurately classified these students as non-students. As a result, these individuals experienced feelings of isolation and frustration, expressing their confusion about their status on campus. Fortunately, they reported positive experiences with the International House and UT Outdoor Pursuits, which employed a different identification system and ensured comprehensive inclusion in their events.

Library

Klinenberg (2018) highlighted the critical role of the Public Library System as an essential hub for a diverse array of community members. In a similar vein, the campus library, specifically Hodges Library (**Figure 6**), serves as a repository of extensive resources. Hodges Library features expansive study halls, an impressive catalog of records, and a substantial collection of literature. Furthermore, it encompasses dedicated spaces for creative pursuits, meetings, technology rentals, and access to academic and financial assistance.

Among the various facilities within Hodges Library, the Graduate Student Lounge (**Figure 7**) has emerged as a focal point of discussion and an important third space, particularly among international students. This space is highly regarded for its array of resources and quiet workstations, while also offering designated meeting rooms. Students have articulated that this intentionally designed space for graduate students provided them with a dedicated area within the library, free from the distractions and overcrowding characteristic of other sections. This environment fostered a sense of care and consideration for their academic needs. Over the past two years, the space has been expanded to twice its size with thoughtful accommodations like



Figure 6: Hodges Library



Figure 7: Graduate Student Louge in Hodges Library

sit-to-stand desks and desktop computers with dual monitors. This area is exclusively for graduate students, helping address critiques of the library related to overcrowding and high volume, which detract from the study experience.

Additionally, the Pendergrass Library on the agriculture campus has been recognized as a safe and conducive environment by participants in their photos and interviews. This smaller library offers alternative workspaces outside of traditional laboratory settings, as well as non-academic resources. One student remarked on their satisfaction with the new release novel section (**Figure 8**) and the pocket pantry provided by the Big Orange Pantry, further contributing to the library's supportive atmosphere. This space offered a respite from the demanding laboratory environment, with its location providing a necessary refuge for relaxation and mental reset.

Affinity Spaces

International House

The International House (**Figure 9**) situated adjacent to the Library, emerged as a

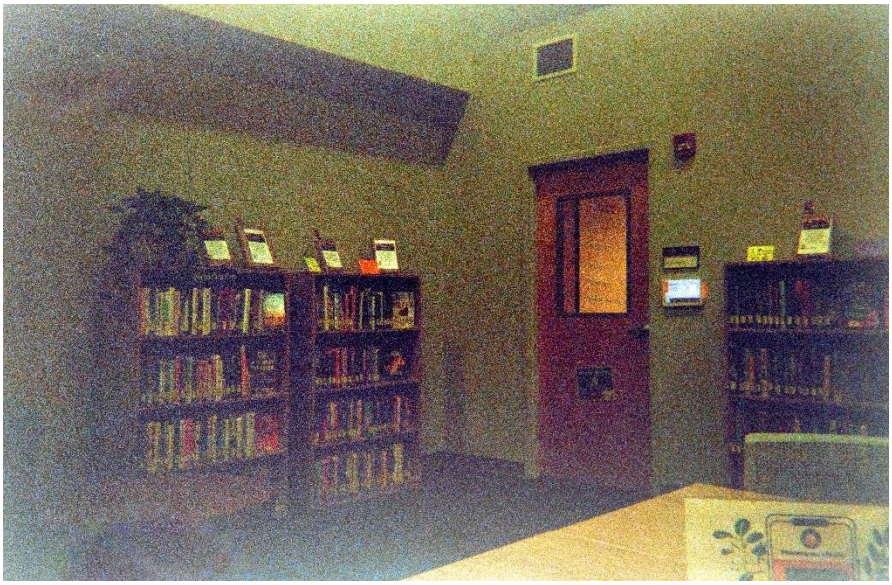


Figure 8: Pendergrass Library



Figure 9: International House

significant focal point in the interviews, being referenced twelve times in photos, all with positive connotations. The International House is intended as an inclusive space for all students, serving as an affinity space dedicated to fostering cross-cultural community engagement. However, staff within the department have observed that not all international students or globally oriented student groups choose to utilize this space for various reasons.

For eight out of the eleven participants in the research, the International House was represented in photos as a safe haven, facilitating relaxation and community connection. One undergraduate student from India described it as their "home away from home," particularly when facing challenges within their roommate situation. For them, the International House served as an essential refuge for both personal and communal support.

Several specific rooms and programs within the International House were emphasized by the research participants as particularly impactful. The Community Room stands out as a designated gathering place where students frequently convene to study collaboratively. This space has established itself as a known meeting point for various friend groups; upon arrival,

students would typically send messages to others encouraging other to join in their study sessions.

Additionally, the lobby area (**Figure 10**), furnished with two-person high-top tables and comfortable seating, alongside a free coffee and tea bar and a resource desk staffed by students, was frequently mentioned as a locale for relaxation, occasional napping, and re-energizing before returning to academic responsibilities.

Two specific programs at the International House had a significant impact on the participants in this study. The Language Practice Program provides a weekly hour-long meeting, allowing groups of students to engage in language practice. This semester, the schedule features twelve distinct language groups led by volunteers. The program is designed to create an informal yet supportive environment for learners at all proficiency levels, ranging from beginner to advanced. One participant expressed pride and enthusiasm in their role as a facilitator for their native language, highlighting the value of sharing linguistic knowledge within a receptive community.



Figure 10: International House Lobby

The Friendship Program (**Figure 11**) is articulated as “designed to encourage cultural exchange and help all students feel at home on campus. Each week, we’ll take a break from our busy academic schedules to connect with a global community through dinner, activities, games, and discussions. We hope this hour becomes a refreshing pause in your week and a consistent space to build meaningful connections with other students on campus.” Notably, this program has been central to my role as a graduate assistant and has facilitated interactions with five of my research participants. Modifications made in the past academic year, including standardizing the meeting schedule to weekly gatherings at the same time and location, were inspired by the success of the Language Practice Program. This initiative, in alignment with Klinenberg's (2018) concepts regarding the significance of sustained recurring interactions, has proven effective in fostering consistent, meaningful connections.

For exchange interns, the Friendship Program served as the beginning of friendships that endured throughout their stay, while a PhD student reflected on their experience of participating since their first semester on campus. Another student reflected that “this is a place where I have



Figure 11: International Friendship Program

really positive feelings. I think it was in the second week when we went into the friendship program for the first time, and this is when I met all of my friends. I'm still friends with them, and we met a lot outside of the friendship program on weekends. I think it's one of my most favorite places." The establishment of this consistent space has kindled lasting connections that contribute to a supportive academic environment, enabling students to navigate, persist, and succeed in their academic journeys.

Frieson Black Cultural Center

The Frieson Black Cultural Center (FBCC), situated in close proximity to the International House, serves as a pivotal hub for Multicultural Student Life on campus. Within this supportive environment, a number of international student participants for this thesis identified the FBCC (**Figure 12**) as a sanctuary and safe space. Notably, one student, having relocated to Knoxville from their home country, faced the challenges of being a minority for the first time, grappling with the realities of racism and discrimination that were previously unfamiliar. This student found invaluable support and guidance through the staff of the Multi-Cultural Student Life Division at the FBCC, which provided a framework for understanding and a liberating environment in which they could express their identity "authentically and wholly."

The FBCC represents more than just a refuge; it functions as a vital social infrastructure on campus that facilitates gatherings, particularly for student organizations. Numerous student participants reported utilizing the FBCC as a venue for connecting with various support networks. This is an example of how social infrastructures encourage care by helping students build social capital and community. A noteworthy example is the Multi-Cultural Graduate Student Organization (MGSO), which has been a key resource for nearly two decades and was recently revitalized by students currently enrolled at the institution. Characterized as a "safety



Figure 12: Frieson Black Cultural Center

net," this organization has had a profound impact on students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds. One participant articulated the significance of MGSO, noting it as a source of community given the limited representation of their country of origin on campus.

Additionally, several students highlighted their involvement in a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting international students, which actively uses the multipurpose rooms within the FBCC to provide complimentary meals throughout the semester. Overall, the FBCC has demonstrated its efficacy as a safe space for diverse populations, fostering connections among students through comprehensive systems of care.

Additional Spaces for Student Care

Several significant campus environments identified by students have proven to be positively influential, including university athletics facilities, green spaces throughout the campus, and the Tennessee Recreational Center for Students (TRECS). These areas serve as essential third spaces for students, providing opportunities to alleviate academic stress and foster connections within the local community.

Green Spaces

The significance of green spaces on campus is underscored by their frequent positive mention, occurring 14 times in photos, and ranking just behind the Student Union in quantity of respondents' photos. This observation aligns with existing literature regarding the importance of social infrastructure in outdoor environments, which provide opportunities for individuals to engage with nature, breathe fresh air, and relax in shaded areas beneath trees and on grassy expanses. Notable green spaces identified by research participants in their photos include Ayres Lawn (**Figure 13**), Circle Park (**Figure 14**), Greenways (**Figure 15**), the Humanities Amphitheatre (**Figure 16**), Second Creek Walkway (**Figure 17**), and the lawns surrounding the Student Union.

Furthermore, two specific areas—21st Mortgage Plaza and the Engineering Quad located in front of Ferris Hall—were highlighted by at least half of the participants. The centrally located 21st Mortgage Plaza (**Figure 18**) is notable for hosting various events that foster student engagement and enhance community connection on campus. In contrast, the Engineering Quad (**Figure 19**) emerged as a favored location for students seeking respite near academic laboratories, complemented by a picturesque view of downtown.

Importantly, these green spaces were among the locations where students expressed sentiments of belonging and social connection, a finding of considerable relevance in understanding the role of outdoor environments in student life. 21st Mortgage Plaza was mentioned as a significant example: "When I arrived here, there were a lot of events in this plaza. When I found my friends in the beginning, we didn't really know what to do at first, and we were still getting to know each other. We always went to those events together, and there was always something planned. There was a lot of free food all the time. We went to everything."



Figure 13: Ayres Lawn



Figure 14: Circle Park



Figure 15: Campus Greenways



Figure 16: Humanities Amphitheatre



Figure 17: Second Creek Walkway



Figure 18: 21st Mortgage Plaza



Figure 19: Engineering Quad

This underscores the necessity of maintaining and enhancing such spaces to support social cohesion within the campus community.

College Athletics

One notable characteristic of American universities that represents a novel experience for many international students is the system of collegiate athletics. This phenomenon is largely unique to the United States and often captivates students who have not encountered similar athletic structures and fandom in their home countries. For instance, one student remarked, “I had never experienced an event where the entire stadium donned a single color; this was truly a new experience for me.”

Another student vividly recalled attending the memorable football game at Neyland Stadium (**Figure 20**) between the University of Tennessee and the University of Alabama in 2022, during which the Volunteers secured their first victory over Alabama in sixteen years. The extraordinary atmosphere culminated in the field being stormed by the crowd and the subsequent disposal of the goalposts into a nearby river. This event represents a significant highlight of their



Figure 20: Neyland Stadium

tenure at the University of Tennessee, with the student asserting that it is a memory they will cherish indefinitely. The collective experience of being part of such a large, unified crowd—each member engaged in fervent support for their team—was unlike any they had previously encountered.

Additionally, a student from Brazil expressed that attending Lady Vol volleyball matches played in Thompson Boling Arena (**Figure 21**) offered not only a respite from academic pressures but also an opportunity to connect with a sport that holds personal significance for them. This engagement illustrates how collegiate sports can cultivate community and provide meaningful experiences for international students navigating a new cultural landscape.

At the University of Tennessee, obtaining student tickets for athletic events is a relatively straightforward process, with the exception of football, where demand is notably high and seating is limited. In recent years, various systems for requesting tickets to football games have been implemented. It is common for international students to seek to experience the unique atmosphere of a Tennessee football game at least once during their academic tenure. However,



Figure 21: Thompson Boling Arena

the ability to acquire tickets can be challenged by factors such as the availability of points accumulation or participation in group requests. The ticketing system is more suited for undergraduate students, making it more challenging for graduate students, especially for the majority of international students. This system is not providing care for international students and has led to frustration and difficulty for many students. Notably, exchange students have reported that due to discrepancies in their campus designation, they were ineligible to request tickets through the established channels, forcing them to independently seek tickets in the open market at higher prices.

Tennessee Recreational Center for Students

The Tennessee Recreational Center for Students (**Figure 22**) provides a range of resources and spaces that international students have identified as particularly beneficial. The gyms are places to relieve stress, and the badminton courts are places to connect with the community in an active way through a sport enjoyed worldwide. A student expressed a deep sense of comfort and belonging in the gym, “In the gym, it's more like everyone is similar to you,

all there to play sports, so it doesn't matter where you are or where you come from. I never really met anyone there, but I always had some nice moments with people there as well." Within the main facility of TRECS, the Department of UT Outdoor Pursuits operates an outdoor equipment rental service, a bicycle repair shop, and organizes recreational trips. Numerous students have participated in these excursions, which are offered at discounted rates, allowing them access to experiences such as skiing and backpacking that would otherwise be financially prohibitive. Additionally, the department offers maintenance services for bicycles and scooters at minimal or no cost, which are essential modes of transportation for many students; thus, this support is of considerable significance.

Another noteworthy component of TRECS, frequently mentioned by research participants, is the Vol Wall (**Figure 23**), located in a separate yet adjacent building that serves as the university's climbing gym. One participant described this environment as fostering a sense of community among individuals who may not conform to typical social norms. The student remarked, "I feel like people are when you go to the climbing gym, you get more like the outcast



Figure 22: TRECS

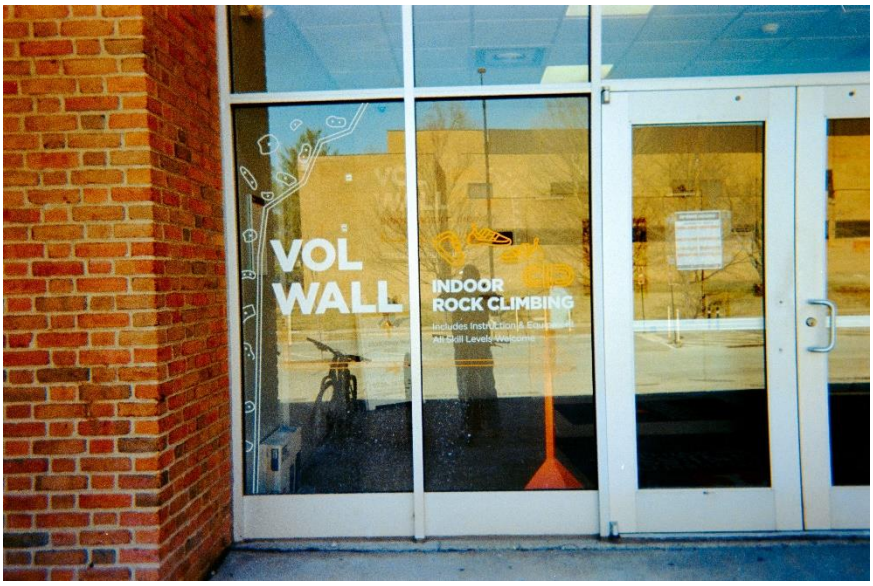


Figure 23:Vol Wall

people that are just all in a group... Maybe that's why the internationals feel potentially that they fit in better?... it's a really cool space." The Vol Wall thus serves not only as a recreational venue but also as a lower-traffic space that addresses the unique needs of students who may seek alternative social environments, facilitating their connection to a broader system of care and community.

Spaces of Alienation and Vulnerability

On campus, there exist environments where international students encounter negative interactions rooted in cultural misunderstandings. In such cases, these students are often left to navigate the situation independently. Numerous participants have recounted experiences of discrimination linked to their identities. For instance, a student from the Caribbean shared an incident while working at the McClung Museum (**Figure 24**), where they felt overlooked and disregarded during an event. Despite being on duty, when a visitor posed a question at the help desk, this student was rendered virtually invisible. Just as parts of the campus infrastructure can facilitate care and support, other parts bring alienation and vulnerability.



Figure 24: McClung Museum

In a contrasting scenario, a student attended a music history class as the sole person of color present. This student's cultural music was in the curriculum; however, when they identified an inaccuracy concerning its representation, they were publicly reprimanded by the professor, who responded with hostility. Another participant, a hijab-wearing student, has reported repeated instances of derogatory remarks and stereotypes while navigating campus facilities. Additionally, a student recounted a distressing experience where they were ridiculed by a group of peers for walking across a university seal in the pedestrian walkway adjacent to the library. This interaction significantly impacted the student, who felt confusion, having been unaware of the underlying traditions or superstitions associated with the seal.

These moments within everyday campus life significantly shape students' overall experiences. They illustrate societal challenges that are often beyond individual control yet yield enduring consequences. When prompted about the effectiveness of diversity and cultural training in alleviating such incidents, one student offered a poignant reflection: “No. It doesn't matter how much diversity training you take or whatever. If someone has to tell you as an adult who can

vote and drink alcohol that you should treat another person like a human being, then there's a bigger problem." This remark underscores the gravity of their experiences with intentional exclusion within their department. For example, this student was assigned a desk in the lobby instead of the lab space, and they, along with another graduate student of diverse background, were not invited to a welcome event hosted by their lab for new students. Such instances highlight the need for a more profound examination of levels of inclusivity and equity within academic environments.

Lab / Department

Academic environments are not universally conducive to fostering the well-being of students. The cyclical nature of academia, characterized by pressing deadlines and research outcomes, often results in heightened levels of stress, particularly as students navigate the challenges of acquiring new skills and confronting mistakes. However, there exist circumstances that extend beyond the routine pressures of university life that significantly affect students, especially those from international backgrounds.

One research participant articulated this experience, stating, "You come into this system and you kind of have one shot. You have one shot and you have to make it count and you can't miss... Because if you miss, then there's all this fallout that nobody really helps you deal with." This sentiment reflects a broader concern regarding the support systems available to students. The individual further noted the importance of networking beyond their immediate department, leading them to join the Multicultural Graduate Student Organization (**Figure 25**) and engage with peers and faculty across disciplines.

Two participants in this study experienced such profound deficiencies in departmental support that they were compelled to transfer to different programs. One student reported being



Figure 25: Multicultural Graduate Student Organization

systematically excluded from lab activities, with an assigned workspace located in the lobby rather than within the lab itself. Additionally, for their PhD qualifying examinations, this student was not provided with a project by their advisor, violating departmental norms. Faced with these challenges, they were forced to design their own project to fulfill the qualifying requirements. This student raised concerns regarding the lab's lack of diversity, in accordance with National Science Foundation (NSF) guidelines, suggesting that their inclusion and that of two other students was primarily motivated by funding considerations rather than genuine support for their academic trajectories. Ultimately, this student has since transitioned to a different department to continue their PhD.

In contrast, a separate case involving two exchange students—categorized as “interns” under a J-1 visa—highlighted expectations for departmental mentorship. Their six-month research tenure was slated to provide valuable international research experience; however, upon arrival, they encountered significant delays, including a month-long wait for departmental identification, which adversely affected their final month and associated deadlines. Furthermore,

their advisor failed to provide essential orientation and guidance within the lab (**Figure 26**), and the existing student cohort offered little support. It remains ambiguous whether this lack of assistance by the labmates stemmed from the students' individual project commitments or the broader environment created by the advisor.

Despite these adverse experiences and the well-documented issues within the lab environment known by previous participants from their university in this program, the students nonetheless continue to participate in this exchange program, drawn by the prospect of international research experience. When queried about the value of their participation considering the departmental challenges, the students indicated that the benefits of experiences external to the department made their involvement worthwhile. They further expressed that the opportunities arising from this experience would prove beneficial for their future endeavors, though they remain committed to advising future participants to prepare for potentially negative experiences within the lab.



Figure 26: Lab

The infrastructure of care at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, is an "uneven" landscape. While participatory international students saw the International House as a refuge and safe space, departmental places and practices could invoke different feelings all-together. In examining instances of severe departmental treatment, it becomes evident that the affected students sought assistance beyond their academic units, engaging with various support systems available on campus. The accessible spaces and resources played a pivotal role in enabling these students to persist in their academic pursuits. For this group of students, the most significant resources included the Multi-Cultural Student Life, Frieson Black Cultural Center, International House, International Friendship Program, Multi-Cultural Graduate Student Organization, Center for Care and Resilience, and the library system. These students actively sought external support to navigate challenges they should not have encountered within their departments. Consequently, the university's systems of care were compelled to demonstrate their efficacy in providing essential support to students in vulnerable circumstances.

Spaces of Alienation

The narratives of alienation and vulnerability among international students on campus reveal significant challenges related to their integration into the community. Many of these accounts highlight isolated spaces that embody unique experiences of estrangement. For instance, Rocky Top Dining was frequently cited as a site where domestic students engaged regularly, leveraging their dining plans, while international students often found themselves excluded from this aspect of campus life due to a lack of familiarity with the dining system. International students reported having friends who possessed dining plans and extended invitations for lunch meetings. However, these participants lacked dining plans and were unfamiliar with the operational procedures of the dining hall, which frequently resulted in missed

opportunities or avoidance of the dining hall due to perceived complications or awkward circumstances.

Similarly, spaces like The Rock, Fraternity Village, and the Torchbearer Statue emerged as emblematic of cultural disconnect; one international student expressed difficulty in grasping their significance or forging any meaningful connection, despite observing their prevalence in undergraduate experiences. For the Rock, a student said, “I have never been a part of it, so I have never had a feeling identified with it.” Similarly, for the torchbearer, “I never understand the torch, either, because I mean it should mean something to me, but I have never been a part of it or had it explained to me." This phenomenon can be attributed to the demographics of the international student population, which is predominantly comprised of graduate students. As a result, the locations and experiences that are often celebrated within undergraduate culture may appear distant and unfamiliar, further exacerbating feelings of alienation among this group.

Felt Needs of International Students

My thesis used photo journaling and interviews to identify the “felt needs” of international students. I use the phrase “felt needs” to capture the idea that student needs are not just matters of logistics and neutral resources. Rather, these needs are deeply embedded in the socio-emotional lived experiences of students, and the felt needs negotiate the terms of life for students.

Housing

The needs experienced by international students through their photos and interviews can be summarized into three primary areas: housing, orientation, and advocacy. Housing and orientation represent immediate necessities upon the students’ arrival on campus. Interviews revealed the significant stress associated with securing housing in an unfamiliar city and among

individuals they had not previously encountered. This situation not only rendered students vulnerable but also instilled fears of encountering unsafe conditions or potential scams.

Many of these students transitioned to Knoxville from societies equipped with efficient public transportation systems, only to find themselves in a city with limited knowledge and merely their suitcases in tow. This challenge contributed to a typical, yet profound, sense of anxiety linked to relocating across the globe. However, students expressed that their academic journey in Knoxville could have commenced more positively had housing been prearranged. One student encountered challenges in establishing a connection to an apartment complex due to the stipulation of possessing a U.S. phone number on the application. Consequently, this student had to depend on a contact within the United States to provide their cell phone number, thereby facilitating the student's consideration for housing. Another student arranged accommodations along a bus route; however, upon moving in, they were informed that the bus route had undergone alterations and no longer serviced their apartment. By that time, it was too late to relocate, and this student subsequently relied on ridesharing services for transportation to campus. If housing were provided, challenges related to isolation, transportation, food accessibility, and acclimatization to a new campus and city could have been mitigated.

The initial phase of adjusting to a new environment is crucial, often significantly influencing the trajectory of their experience. One student even proposed that if the university cannot guarantee housing, it should consider providing a list of trusted and recommended neighborhoods or complexes to alleviate the uncertainties associated with selecting a residence.

Orientation

Orientation, while seemingly a straightforward concept, encompasses a range of complexities when experienced in practice. Students who relocate are confronted with an influx

of new information regarding the practices and resources of their new campus and city environment. The processes of fulfilling basic needs and navigating to destinations undergo significant alterations. This standard stress associated with adapting to new routines is compounded by the additional challenges of encountering diverse cultures and potentially unfamiliar languages, all while academic pressures mount. Consequently, the transition following relocation can quickly become overwhelming. The majority of international students participating in this research originated from cities and countries characterized by extensive and efficient public transportation systems. The transition to Knoxville, a city fundamentally reliant on automobile ownership, presented considerable challenges in navigation.

Participants in this research expressed a need for assistance in understanding associated fees, accessing available resources on campus, and navigating the physical campus itself. There was a shared sentiment regarding the essentiality of empathy during this transitional phase, particularly when faced with a plethora of unfamiliar elements. One participant desired some kindness and understanding during the transition period, “people take for granted what it means to come from a new place. That means, I literally don't know anything. What you think is normal and what everyone would know, I do not. I simply do not, because it's a new system. I just moved here, literally. And I think when I first moved I would ask questions, I could see people getting annoying, but I just didn't know what they wanted me to do? I had to just figure it out.”

Throughout my tenure in the Center for Global Engagement, I have observed that the orientation experience has significantly evolved over the past three years. Some international students within this research cohort encountered different orientation methods compared to the current format. Nevertheless, it is evident that institutions like the University of Tennessee must heed the voices advocating for enhanced support during the initial stages of this massive

transition. Orientation often presents a deluge of information at the outset; however, the phenomenon of culture shock typically manifests in varying waves. Thus, it is a pertinent consideration whether orientation should be designed to unfold in waves, or alternatively, whether it should be structured to recognize these waves and provide clear pathways for students to access essential information as the initial novelty begins to fade.

Advocacy

One student articulated a sentiment of concern, stating, "I felt like no one was 100% responsible for us." This perspective was notably expressed by individuals experiencing less favorable circumstances within their academic department. A similar feeling was echoed by several students, who expressed uncertainty regarding the identification of appropriate contacts to facilitate change without risking negative repercussions on their academic trajectory.

Students sought clarity on whom they could approach when faced with inappropriate treatment and desired assurance that these individuals possessed the authority and capability to provide assistance. During the interviews, participants recounted various attempts to address their challenges and frustrations; however, they frequently encountered obstacles such as prolonged timelines and difficulties in locating effective support. Throughout my time at the International House, I remain uncertain regarding the ultimate authority responsible for overseeing the fair and ethical practices of the faculty. While the International House may refer students to Title IX, the deans, or the department chairs, I lack awareness of any individual within the Center for Global Education who possesses the authority to implement change or ensure faculty accountability. Furthermore, there appears to be no guarantee against potential negative repercussions of retaliation towards the students. Such experiences detrimentally impacted their academic concentration and overall well-being.

This situation also highlights an urgent call for equity within institutional resources. It was noted that support systems designed to assist domestic undergraduate students did not adequately extend to international graduate students grappling with complex and precarious situations, which can have enduring consequences. Therefore, there is a critical felt need for both equitable access to resources and equitable treatment that encompasses all student demographics.

Conclusion

Through the methodologies of photo journaling and photo elicitation interviews, a cohort of eleven international students articulated their individual experiences related to the dual constructs of belonging and alienation within the university context. These dialogues illuminated key areas of social infrastructure that played a crucial role in the students' transitional processes to campus life, while concurrently revealing specific unmet needs that the students encountered. The findings underscore significant correlations with the intentional design of the University of Tennessee's campus, particularly in relation to the places and spaces identified by students as conducive to their sense of inclusion. Despite certain aspects of the campus's design demonstrating efficacy in fostering inclusive environments, the research indicates that further advancements are necessary within the existing systems of care to enhance the overall experience for international students.

CHAPTER 5

Research Conclusion

Where are the gaps in the infrastructures of care and how can they be improved?

This research endeavors to critically examine the inherent roles and responsibilities of universities towards their student population, with a particular emphasis on international students, and to investigate the necessity of establishing robust infrastructures of care. The study aims to identify the expressed needs of international students concerning university support services as well as the effectiveness of the campus's social infrastructure. Additionally, it explores the institutions' perceived needs and highlight the gaps and discrepancies that exist between these dimensions. The research also seeks to identify specific agencies, initiatives, or infrastructural models capable of addressing these identified deficiencies.

The strategic vision of the University of Tennessee underscores a commitment to excellence, equity, and, fostering a nurturing academic culture where diversity and community serve as foundational strengths. The university articulates its dedication to implementing structures and practices that not only attract but also retain a diverse student body, thereby ensuring that all individuals feel valued and included. In order to fulfill these objectives, it is imperative for the university to design its campus in a manner that provides adequate social infrastructure and systems of care that cater to the needs of all students, including international students.

Moreover, if the university asserts that international students are an integral part of its structure, success, and its financial sustainability, there exists an ethical obligation to support their overall well-being on campus.

The integration of international student-facing departments and the intentionally designed social infrastructure for comprehensive student care, in conjunction with the lived experiences of research participants, suggests a predominantly positive system of support. As discussed in the previous chapter, campus facilities such as the Student Union, Library, TRECS, Pedestrian Walkway, and various green spaces exemplify the university's deliberate efforts to create third spaces that promote student well-being beyond academic buildings and housing. Furthermore, it is a promising outcome to note that students have identified the International House and the Frieson Black Cultural Center as safe havens where they cultivate a sense of belonging. However, there is still a significant amount of support that still needs to be cultivated and systems established to better holistically care for its population of international students.

Felt vs. Perceived Needs

Administrative officials interviewed for this thesis have acknowledged the various pressures and needs expressed by students, particularly concerning the demand for adequate housing. However, a significant discrepancy exists regarding the ability to fulfill this need. Currently, no single department within the institution has control over housing provisions and is specifically designated to address the concerns of international students. This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that the majority of international students arrive on campus as graduate students, a group for whom graduate student housing is nonexistent. In contrast, undergraduate international students receive comprehensive housing benefits on campus. As such, it is imperative for a dialogue to occur at the administrative level specifically to address the housing requirements of international graduate students.

Moreover, issues of equity arise when international students are not only defined as part of a minority population but also exist outside the predominant demographic of undergraduate

students pursuing bachelor's degrees. Populations such as students from the English Language Institute, exchange students, student interns, and international graduate students often find themselves outside the mainstream student body, resulting in certain resources and support systems failing to adapt to their unique needs.

When resources do align, as seen with initiatives like the Big Orange Pantry, the Free Store, TRECS, UTOP, and the Library, the positive impact is substantial. However, it is essential that these services are communicated effectively and repeatedly to assist minority populations in their adjustment to a new environment.

University service providers interviewed also recognize the impact of newly established campus priorities on the stress levels of graduate students, particularly in maintaining UT's designation as a top-tier R-1 institution. Simultaneously, students often perceive tension in their interactions with advisors and departments. Some advisors may overreach in their roles, complicating students' ability to identify safe avenues for addressing concerns without the fear of jeopardizing their funding, positions, or facing retaliation. Thus, the question arises: where can students turn to find credible support, advocacy, and validation?

Barriers as actual spaces where services and care occur often arise from a lack of consistent and cohesive infrastructure, resulting in the frequent oversight of student needs. It is not uncommon for administrative responses to issues to be met with the sentiment, “Yes, that is important; however, it falls outside our purview.” This raises a critical inquiry: who, then, is responsible for these essential matters? Is there not a more efficient mechanism to facilitate these processes? The institution has a duty to enhance efficiency, as the time of all individuals involved is valuable and should not be wasted working in circles through an inefficient system. The absence of a designated advocate for the well-being of international students hampers

effective service delivery, leading to fragmentation and confusion among the available support services.

The Concept of a Welcoming Campus Environment

In this thesis, I posed the question, “How would you define a ‘welcoming campus environment’?” to every participant, both students and administrators. While their responses exhibited some commonalities, distinct differences emerged based on the respondents' perspectives.

Administrators characterized a welcoming campus environment as one where individuals can express their authentic identities freely, incorporating facets such as culture, cuisine, fashion, and viewpoints. They underscored the necessity of fostering a robust sense of community, wherein students feel genuinely supported and connected beyond superficial interactions. A truly inclusive environment, according to their insights, demands a collective responsibility across the institution rather than relegating this duty to specific departments, in this instance CGE and MSL. Crucial elements such as equity, accessibility, and cultural awareness were highlighted as vital to ensuring that international students have reliable access to essential resources, including food and spiritual spaces, as integral components of campus life. Ultimately, service providers argued that a welcoming campus is one where diversity is not merely acknowledged but actively celebrated, fostering an atmosphere in which all students feel valued and at home.

Conversely, students articulated a welcoming campus environment as one characterized by kindness extended towards newcomers, marked by recognition and a readiness to assist. They emphasized the significance of opportunities for friendship formation and community connection, whether through organized events or informal interactions. A robust orientation program, which introduces students to campus resources and spaces while nurturing social

bonds, was viewed as essential. Students also expressed a desire for flexibility within the campus environment, advocating for adaptability to accommodate the diverse backgrounds and needs of its members. Ultimately, they contended that a truly welcoming campus environment actively supports all students, irrespective of their origins, and visibly celebrates diversity through mentioned events such as the Homecoming Parade and the International Festival.

Many of these responses, while valuable, are largely theoretical and challenging to quantify. However, the clearest and most succinct response emerged from my last interview with a student, who asserted that a welcoming campus environment fundamentally begins with the fulfillment of students' basic physiological and safety needs, as delineated by Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This student suggested that when a student arrives on campus, the university should ensure that their basic needs—such as access to food, water, and shelter—are adequately met. This foundational aspect can manifest in various forms, such as providing housing for the initial semester or academic year, thereby offering students physical shelter, access to on-campus dining options, and opportunities to utilize resources like the Big Orange Pantry for additional food needs. Such provisions would satisfy the physiological needs, address the subsequent level of safety needs, and serve as a pathway to fostering belongingness and community among students. These tangible arrangements and immediate connections to campus resources are pivotal in addressing students' essential needs in the early stages of their academic journey.

Models of Social Infrastructure and Best Practices

Existing Effective Models at the University of Tennessee

The Thornton Center exemplifies an equity-driven, holistic student support model designed for a diverse group of university athletes. This center is committed to providing

comprehensive care and support to all student-athletes, improving the social infrastructure within the academic environment.

In an interview with a staff member responsible for monitoring the needs of international student-athletes, it was revealed that an important aspect of the center is that international students are not prioritized over other student-athletes. When an international student approaches the staff with a concern, they receive a response similar to that given to any other student-athlete. Whatever need or concern that is brought to the staff will be addressed. However, it is important to note that the challenges faced by international students often differ in nature, highlighting the uniqueness of their experiences. This approach reflects equity in both response and importance. The operational framework of the Thornton Center is grounded in equitable and holistic practices.

It is significant to point out that certain distinguishing aspects of this department merit attention. The center serves a student population of fewer than 500 individuals, with approximately one-fourth of them being international students. This contrasts with the larger population of the campus. Additionally most student-athletes are undergraduates, including the international students, which is also significantly different to the international population on the rest of campus. The center's use of principles of equity and ongoing support, rather than creating siloed services, warrants further acknowledgment and could serve as a model for replication in other contexts.

Key Areas for Institutional Change

Holistic Start for First-Year International Students

A holistic approach to the initiation of first-year international students is critical and necessitates comprehensive support systems, particularly in the domain of housing assistance.

Stable housing accommodations are vital for the well-being and academic retention of these students, as they serve as a fundamental pillar for their success. Establishing partnerships for on-campus housing or providing options can significantly alleviate the challenges associated with their transition to a new educational environment, ultimately fostering a supportive foundation for their academic journey.

The manner in which students embark on their educational trajectories profoundly influences their overall experiences and engagement within the university setting. It is imperative to emphasize the importance of continuous orientation and resource navigation throughout their initial phase. Implementing a structured, phased orientation model can facilitate a "soft landing" for international students, allowing them to acclimatize gradually rather than relying on a single orientation event. By equipping students with the knowledge of available support systems and instilling a sense of confidence in their ability to navigate campus life, institutions can cultivate a more sustainable and inclusive environment for international students.

In essence, the integration of housing assistance not only enhances student well-being but also underscores the necessity for ongoing guidance in resource accessibility, thereby promoting a more resilient academic community.

Breaking Down Institutional Siloing

Addressing the issue of institutional siloing necessitates the establishment of enhanced continuity between international student services and other university offices, thereby creating a more cohesive support system. Presently, support for international students tends to be fragmented, characterized by distinct start-and-stop obligations within dedicated offices, coupled with gaps in services offered by general student departments. Ideally, a collaborative approach grounded in an equity framework should guide departmental efforts to address these disparities.

The question arises: When such collaboration is absent, who is accountable for ensuring that international students receive the comprehensive support they require? A more integrated approach is essential to recognize the unique challenges faced by international students and to provide them with continuous and equitable guidance throughout their academic endeavors.

Advocacy and Protection for International Students

International students require a dedicated and empowered advocate to protect them from exploitation. It is essential to establish a safe and structured environment where students can share their experiences and hold faculty accountable for their treatment. The future of international students is intricately linked to their academic programs and visa status; therefore, unfair treatment by advisors or departments can place students in precarious situations, jeopardizing their funding or legal standing. While some students demonstrate a rare level of resilience in enduring difficult circumstances to achieve their goals, others have to face the challenge of navigating complex department changes independently.

To support these students, a clearly identified and accessible advocacy resource is necessary. This resource would provide essential support, ensuring that students are treated fairly and are not left to confront these challenges in isolation. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize the need for equity in safety, ensuring that students do not lose their status or opportunities when leaving a problematic academic environment. Addressing these issues holistically will foster a more equitable and supportive experience for international students.

Conclusion

Universities hold an inherent responsibility to provide holistic support to all students, and this duty is especially critical in the context of international students whose experiences are shaped by additional cultural, legal, and social complexities. As global mobility increases and

international students continue to become integral to both the cultural richness and financial sustainability of institutions, universities face not only a logistical obligation but also an ethical imperative to create intentional infrastructures of care. This includes addressing both felt and perceived needs—such as secure housing, access to food, culturally responsive orientation, and ongoing academic and personal support—in ways that are sustainable and equity-driven.

The findings of this research highlight how fragmented systems and institutional siloing hinder effective service delivery and leave international students vulnerable to exploitation and isolation. While spaces like the International House and programs like the Big Orange Pantry show the potential of supportive infrastructure, these must be consistently communicated and expanded to reach overlooked populations such as graduate and exchange students.

Universities must move beyond passive service provision and embrace their role as proactive caregivers by building systems of advocacy, protection, and community connection. By doing so, they not only uphold their stated commitments to diversity and inclusion but also ensure that international students thrive academically, socially, and personally. This is not simply a strategic choice—it is an ethical necessity.

A Proposed Intervention

The majority of international students at the University of Tennessee are concentrated on the east side of campus in an area of campus colloquially known as "the Hill," particularly within the Colleges of Engineering, Natural Sciences, and College of Business. Another significant cluster of international students is located on the Agriculture Campus, situated along the river on the western edge of campus. Despite the physical separation between these areas, the primary affinity spaces and diversity centers—namely, the International House and the Frieson Black Cultural Center—are centrally located near the main library. For students based on the Hill or the

Agriculture Campus, accessing these centers typically requires a walk of a minimum of ten minutes. While this distance is not excessive, it can present a barrier, particularly for students managing full academic schedules or navigating unfamiliar terrain.

The International House and the Frieson Black Cultural Center serve as essential nodes of social infrastructure on campus, offering expansive networks and systems of care that significantly contribute to student well-being. However, given the geographic distance for many international students, there is a compelling case for the development of more intentionally placed infrastructures that extend support closer to where students work, study, and congregate. This could include pop-up events or satellite programming facilitated by the International House, Center for Global Engagement, or Multicultural Student Life. Additionally, establishing dedicated spaces—such as shared lounges outside of departments with resource hubs or Pocket Pantry extensions of the Big Orange Pantry—within or near departmental buildings would provide international students with consistent access to care and community. Regularly scheduled events like "Chai and Chat" check-ins, held in these satellite spaces, could function as informal office hours, allowing students to interact with trained stakeholders in an approachable, supportive environment.

Moreover, a rotating monthly workshop or orientation program could be implemented to proactively inform students of available resources and guide them through institutional processes. For example, a session at the start of the calendar year might include a federal income tax workshop to assist with filing requirements—an area that often poses challenges for international students.

Bringing these systems of care closer to where students spend the majority of their time would not only increase accessibility but also serve as a visible and symbolic representation of

the university's commitment to their well-being. These touchpoints offer tangible opportunities to form meaningful connections and build trust between students and support networks.

In recent years, meaningful strides have been made in advancing care and advocacy for graduate students—many of whom are international—through the efforts of the Graduate Student Senate, the Multicultural Graduate Student Organization, and the United Campus Workers. These organizations have successfully elevated concerns such as graduate stipends and have played a crucial role in shaping a more responsive campus environment. Their work demonstrates the transformative potential of intentional, collective advocacy. Similar, sustained efforts are needed to address the unique needs of international students. Ensuring that international students feel seen, heard, and supported requires not only inclusive programming, but also structural changes that affirm their place within the broader university community.

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APPENDIX

Informed Consent for Research Participants

Research Study Title: Campus Social Infrastructure for International Students
Researcher: Jennifer L. Ott, Department of Geography and Sustainability, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Key Information for You to Consider

The information below summarizes important points about the study. Please ask questions if there is anything you do not understand, and take your time to decide. Participation is voluntary.
Voluntary Participation: Participation is completely voluntary. You should only participate if you fully understand the study and wish to volunteer.
Purpose: This research study aims to explore the social infrastructure available for international students at the University of Tennessee. It seeks to understand students' and university staff members' perspectives on existing support systems and how they might be improved.
Research Procedures and Activities: If you decide to participate, you will take part in an interview with the researcher. For international students, an additional component may include a Photovoice activity, where you will be asked to take photos on campus. Interviews may be audio- and/or video-recorded if you consent.
Duration: Interviews are expected to take about 1 hour, with the possibility of a follow-up discussion.
Benefits: Although there is no direct benefit to you, your participation may help the university improve social infrastructure and support for future international students.
Risks: Minimal risks are associated with this research. Your information will be treated confidentially, but absolute privacy cannot be guaranteed.

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

You are being invited to participate because you are either an international student at the University of Tennessee or a faculty/staff member who interacts with international students. Your perspective is valuable to our study.

What will happen if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research study"?

For International Students: You will participate in an interview and may be asked to engage in a Photovoice activity, where you will take photos in locations on campus. All photos depicting identifiable individuals in private settings will require those individuals' consent.
For Faculty and Staff: You will participate in a single interview focused on your role, insights, and experiences in supporting international students.
Interviews will be conducted in a comfortable, private campus location or through a virtual meeting if preferred. Participants interviewed virtually will sign a consent form and send a scanned copy to the researcher.

What happens if I say "No, I do not want to be in this research study"?

You can decline participation without penalty or consequence. Additionally, you may withdraw from the study at any time without affecting your relationship with the university or access to services.

Are there any possible risks to me?

There are minimal risks to participation. Interviews will be conducted in private settings, and any identifying details will be removed in reports. Photos that include identifiable bystanders will have their faces blurred. While every effort will be made to protect your privacy, absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

Only the Principal Investigator will have access to the identifiable information. Data will be stored on a secure, password-protected external hard drive, and only anonymized data will be used in reports or presentations.

With your permission, your information may be included in future research or shared with other researchers.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

All identifying information will be removed from study records. Anonymized data may be retained for educational or research purposes.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

For questions or concerns, please contact:

Researcher: Jennifer (Jenny) Ott
University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Email: jott7@utk.edu
Phone: +1 (865) 679-6674

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Alderman
Department of Geography and Sustainability
Email: dalderma@utk.edu
Phone: 865-974-0406

For questions about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team, contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

Statement of Consent

I have read this form and had the research study explained to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions, and they have been answered to my satisfaction. By signing this document, I am agreeing to participate in this study. I will receive a copy of this form after signing.

Participant
Name:_____

Signature:
_____
Date: _____

Researcher
Name:_____

Signature:
_____
Date: _____

Sample Email Recruitment Script for Administrative Personnel

My name is Jennifer Ott, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Geography and Sustainability at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I am conducting a research study titled **"Campus Social Infrastructure for International Students"** as part of my thesis. This study aims to understand the experiences of international students and the support provided by university staff and faculty to improve campus inclusivity and well-being.
I am inviting international students, as well as staff and faculty members who work closely with international students, to participate in this study. Your insights are incredibly valuable to this research.

What Participation Involves-

For International Students:

- A one-on-one interview (approximately 1 hour).
- An optional Photovoice (photo-journaling) activity where you'll take photos on campus related to themes of belonging, support and alienation.

For Staff and Faculty:

- A one-on-one interview (approximately 1 hour) focused on your role in supporting international students.

Interviews can be conducted in person or virtually, based on your preference.

Why Participate?

While there is no direct benefit to you, your participation can help improve the campus experience for international students and inform better support systems in the future.

How to Participate

If you are interested in participating, please reply to this email or contact me directly at:

Jennifer Ott
Email: jott7@utk.edu
Phone: +1 (865) 679-6674

Once I hear from you, I will provide more details about the study, answer any questions you may have, and send you the consent form.

Confidentiality

All responses will be kept confidential. Any identifying information will be removed or anonymized in the study results.

Thank you for considering participating in this important research. I look forward to hearing from you!

Sample Interview Questions with Administrative Personnel

Roles and Responsibilities

- Can you describe your role and how it relates to supporting international students?
- How does the institution define its responsibility for the care and support of international students?
- What aspects of support for international students are formally planned and accounted for by your unit?
- Beyond institutional policies, what additional needs do you and your unit perceive among international students?
- What are some challenges you face in providing resources or support to international students?
- What limitations does the institution face in supporting international students effectively?

Perceptions of International Student Needs

- Based on your experience, what are the most common needs or challenges faced by international students on campus?
- Are there specific programs, initiatives, or spaces that you believe are particularly effective in fostering a sense of inclusion for international students?

Gaps and Recommendations

- Are there any gaps in the university's social infrastructure that you believe should be addressed to better support international students?
- If institutional limitations were not a factor, what changes or improvements would you recommend to enhance the experiences and well-being of international students?

Additional Questions

- How would you define a "welcoming campus environment"?
- What role do you think physical spaces (like the International House) play in creating a sense of community?
- How do cultural differences shape your experience on campus or interactions with others?
- How do institutional priorities align with or differ from the needs of international students?
- How do you measure the success of programs aimed at supporting international students?

Sample Interview Questions with International Students

Demographic and Background Information

- Can you share a little about your background (e.g., country of origin, major, and year of study)?
- What brought you to the University of Tennessee for your studies?

Photovoice Follow-Up

- Looking at this photo, why did you choose this location?
- What emotions or memories does this space bring up for you?
- How does this space impact your sense of connection or isolation on campus?

Felt Needs

- Were there any needs you felt were unmet by the university during your time as a student or when you first arrived as a new student?
- What challenges have you faced in adjusting to life on campus, and what support would have made that transition easier?
- Are there specific moments when you felt a lack of support or resources as an international student? If so, what was missing?
- What aspects of campus life have made it difficult for you to feel fully included or supported?
- If you could change or improve one thing about the university's support for international students, what would it be?

Sense of Belonging and Alienation

- Can you describe spaces on campus where you feel a sense of belonging? What makes these spaces feel welcoming?
- Are there places on campus or in Knoxville where you feel alienated or unwelcome? Can you share why?

Experiences with Campus Social Infrastructure

- What support services or programs on campus have been most helpful to you as an international student?
- Are there any areas where you feel the university could provide more support for international students?
- How do you typically meet and connect with other students, both international and domestic?

Additional Questions

- How would you define a "welcoming campus environment"?
- What role do you think physical spaces play in creating a sense of community?
- How do cultural differences shape your experience on campus or interactions with others?

Photo Journaling Instructions

Thank you for participating in this study on Campus Social Infrastructure for International Students! The Photovoice activity is an important part of this research and allows you to share your experiences and perspectives through photographs. These instructions will guide you on how to complete this activity.

Purpose of the Activity

The goal of the Photovoice activity is to visually capture your experiences as an international student at the University of Tennessee. You will use a disposable camera to document spaces and places on campus and in the Knoxville area that represent specific themes.

Themes to Capture in Your Photos

You will take photos based on the following prompts:

1. Sense of Belonging: Take photos of places or spaces on campus or in Knoxville where you feel a strong sense of connection, comfort, or belonging.
2. Sense of Alienation: Take photos of places or spaces where you feel out of place, disconnected, or unwelcome.

Feel free to interpret these prompts in ways that are meaningful to you.

Guidelines for Taking Photos

- Avoid Identifiable Individuals: Please do not include identifiable individuals in your photos unless you have their explicit permission.
- Respect Privacy: Avoid taking photos in private or restricted areas unless you have consent from the individuals involved.
- Be Creative: Focus on capturing locations, objects, or scenes that resonate with your feelings or experiences related to the prompts.
- Use All Frames: The disposable camera provided has 27 frames. Please aim to fill the entire camera roll within the given timeframe.

Timeline for Completing the Activity

- You will have two weeks to complete this activity.
- Once you have finished, please return the disposable camera to the researcher at the International House or through the agreed collection method.

Follow-Up Interview

After your photos have been developed, we will schedule a follow-up interview to discuss your photos. In this conversation, you will:

1. Identify where each photo was taken.
2. Explain why you took the photo and how it relates to the given themes.
3. Share your thoughts, emotions, or stories connected to each photo.

Privacy and Confidentiality

- Your photos will remain confidential. Identifiable bystanders in any photos will have their faces blurred to protect their privacy.
- Photos will only be included in the research thesis or presentations with your explicit permission.

Questions or Assistance

If you have any questions or need assistance while completing this activity, please feel free to contact me:

Researcher: Jennifer (Jenny) Ott
Email: jott7@utk.edu
Phone: +1 (865) 679-6674

Thank you for your time and participation in this important study. Your contributions are invaluable to understanding and improving the campus experience for international students!

Institutional Review Board Approval

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE

December 13, 2024

Derek Hilton Alderman,
UTK - College of Arts & Sciences - Geography

Re: UTK IRB-24-08497-XP
Study Title: Campus Social Infrastructure for International Students

Dear Derek Hilton Alderman:

The UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your application for the above referenced project. It determined that your application is eligible for expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1), categories (6) and (7). The IRB has reviewed these materials and determined that they do comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects.

Therefore, this letter constitutes full approval by the IRB of your application (Version 1.1) as submitted, including:

Documents Stamped:

- Consent for Research Participation_Ott - Version 3.0
- Photovoice Instructions - Version 1.0
- Recruitment for Research Participants - Version 1.0
- Interview Questions - Version 1.0

That have been dated and stamped IRB approved. You are approved to enroll a maximum of 25 participants. Approval of this study will be valid from 12/13/2024 to 12/12/2027.

Any revisions in the approved application, consent forms, instruments, recruitment materials, etc., must also be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

Finally, re-approval of your project is required by the IRB in accord with the conditions specified above. You may not continue the research study beyond the time or other limits specified unless you obtain prior written approval of the IRB.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board | Office of Research & Engagement
1534 White Avenue Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
865-974-7697 865-974-7400 fax utk.edu

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Lora Beebe, Ph.D., PMHNP-BC, FAAN
Chair

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Flagship Campus of the University of Tennessee System

VITA

Jennifer “Jenny” Ott was born and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Mathematics and Cross-Cultural Sociology, with a minor in Religion, from Carson-Newman University in 2015. While at Carson-Newman, she was a student-athlete, competing on the women’s tennis team for four years and participated in a study abroad program in Cape Town, South Africa. She began her Master’s in the Geography and Sustainability department in the Fall of 2023 at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She participated in the 2024 first and 2025 second annual Global Engagement Summit at the University of Tennessee by presenting her research. She also participated in the 2025 Fifth Biennial Geo Symposium, presenting a paper titled "The Rock: More than a Landmark." As a Graduate Assistant in the International House in the Center for Global Engagement, she supports the planning and implementation of semester-long programming that serves diverse groups of students. Her work contributes to broader goals within the Center for Global Engagement. Jennifer is passionate about creating inclusive environments through thoughtful programming and student support. She enjoys traveling, being in the mountains, exploring different cultures through food, and connecting with her local community. After completing her degree, she plans to continue working in higher education, focusing on international engagement, student affairs, and community development.