



# ARE U.S. HEIs MEETING THE NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS?

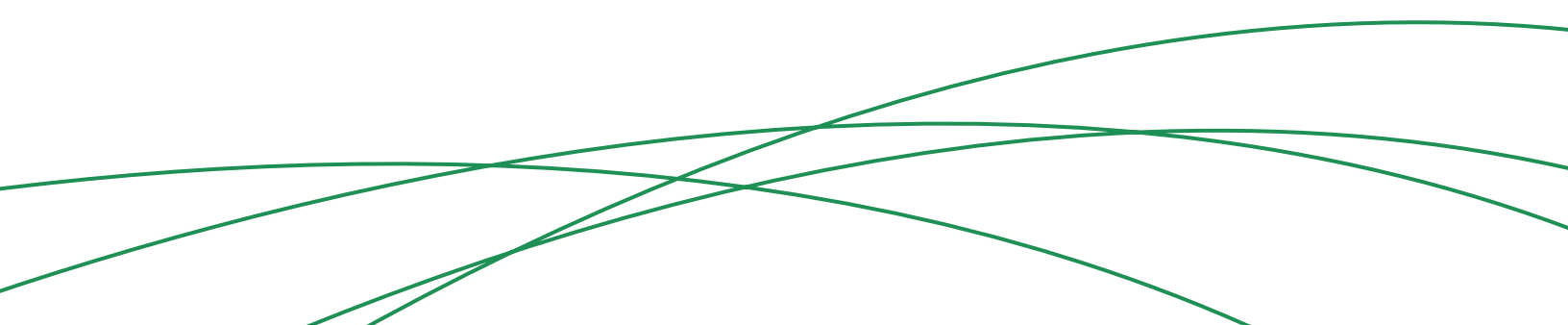
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## ACRONYMS

<b>ADA</b>	Americans with Disabilities Act	<b>MENA</b>	Middle East and North Africa
<b>CIA</b>	Central Intelligence Agency	<b>NSSE</b>	National Survey of Student Engagement
<b>HEI</b>	Higher Education Institution	<b>OBB</b>	Online Bulletin Board
<b>IIE</b>	Institute of International Education	<b>WES</b>	World Education Services
<b>ISSS</b>	International Student and Scholar Services	<b>TA</b>	Teaching Assistant

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of international student experiences at higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States, World Education Services (WES) conducted a mixed methods research study in early 2019 (see [Research Design and Methodology](#)). The research design includes a qualitative online bulletin board (OBB) of 23 current international students (January 2019) and an online survey that collected quantitative and qualitative data from 1,921 current international students and recent graduates (February–March 2019) (see [Respondent Profile](#)). This study set out to explore two primary research questions:

- How do current international students and recent graduates perceive their experiences at U.S. HEIs?
- To what extent do current international students and recent graduates perceive that institutional support services meet their needs?

## SNAPSHOT FINDINGS



### PEER RELATIONSHIPS

International students say that:



#### THE POSITIVES

**86%** it is easy to form close friendships with international students from their home country

**80%** it is easy to form close friendships with international students from a third country

**78%** they are satisfied with the diversity of the international student population at their institution

**77%** domestic students are welcoming to international students



#### THE NEGATIVES

**60%** they are not actively involved in activities and events at their institution

**41%** it is difficult to form close friendships with domestic students

**29%** they do not have a strong social network at their school



## FACULTY RELATIONSHIPS AND ACADEMIC SATISFACTION

International students say that:



### THE POSITIVES

**92%** their professors are welcoming to international students on campus

**89%** they are satisfied with the quality of teaching at their institution

**89%** they are satisfied with the quality of their academic program

**83%** they find it easy to adjust to educational expectations in the U.S.

**71%** they attend professor office hours



### THE NEGATIVES

**59%** the amount of time spent outside of class on schoolwork and activities related to their academic program is more than they expected it to be

**34%** the stress of schoolwork negatively affects their mental health



## ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF RELATIONSHIPS

International students say that:



### THE POSITIVES

**90%** administrative staff are welcoming to international students

**80%** they are satisfied with the international student advising office on campus

**79%** they are satisfied with the orientation they receive at their institution

**77%** they are satisfied with the advising they receive on immigration issues (such as Forms I-10 and DS-2019)



### THE NEGATIVES

**26%** they are dissatisfied with the information their school provides, or their school does not provide any information, on how to set up a U.S. bank account

## IDENTITY AND ACCULTURATION

International students say that:

### THE POSITIVES

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**62%** they have sufficient space available to engage in their religious beliefs at their institution

### THE NEGATIVES

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**38%** living away from home/family is more challenging than they expected

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**30%** cultural barriers in the U.S. are more challenging than they anticipated

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**20%** the language barrier in the U.S. is more challenging than they thought it would be

## DAILY LIFE

International students say that:

### THE POSITIVES

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**61%** they are satisfied with the availability of off-campus housing

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**46%** they are satisfied with the cost of off-campus housing

### THE NEGATIVES

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**51%** transportation is challenging

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**33%** they are dissatisfied with the cost of on-campus housing

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**30%** finding housing is more challenging than they expected it would be

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**24%** they are not able to find food that meets their needs on campus

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**23%** they are dissatisfied with the availability of on-campus housing

## INTRODUCTION

International students require exceptional institutional support to enjoy a fruitful and dynamic study experience in the United States. Navigating social integration, culture shock, academic coursework, and visa regulations, just to name a few responsibilities, requires both individual resilience and a well-structured support system. Many institutions provide several student support offices designed to do just that, from the Housing Office to the Mental Health and Counseling Center to the Academic Advising Office. For international students, International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) plays a particularly critical role, as it typically offers a variety of services (including immigration and visa guidance, financial workshops, and social events), and is the first touchpoint for most international student challenges, including stress management and mental crises (Durrani, 2018; NAFSA, 2019a). As institutions strive to further improve the experiences of international students, they should seek to coordinate the efforts of existing support programs, and encourage collaboration between offices to more effectively communicate international student needs and underpin the entire student degree cycle.

Such support services have arguably taken on greater importance in today's international education context. The U.S. has experienced a 10.4 percent drop in new international student enrollment from 2015/16 to 2018/19, and a 6 percent decrease in the share of global international students from 2001 to 2018 (IIE, 2019; NAFSA, 2019b). Additionally, international applications to both undergraduate and graduate programs have decreased, portending further enrollment drops in the future (Schulmann & Le, 2018).

The declines in U.S. applications and enrollment are due to a multitude of factors, including the ascent of other countries as major international education destinations. Swiftly rising competition within the international education sphere from countries such as China, the largest sender of international students worldwide and now the number three recipient of international students, alters the landscape for U.S. HEIs (Skinner, 2019). Additionally, government-led internationalization plans designed to attract international students are being implemented across the globe, including in New Zealand, France, and Malaysia (New Zealand Government, 2018; Republique Francaise, 2018; Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2011). And the proliferation of English-taught programs in places like the Netherlands and Germany has expanded destination options for many students (Jenkins et al, 2018; Studying in Germany, n.d.).

In conjunction with this increased competition, the political climate in the U.S. has often been infused with nativist and negative rhetoric concerning nationals of other lands in recent years. This climate may cause international students and their families some trepidation as they decide on a country in which to pursue tertiary education. More than an intangible “negative environment,” the political climate has led to real consequences that directly affect higher education; for example, the international student visa policy changes, restrictions on Chinese students and scholars, and issues surrounding OPT and H-1B (Semotiuk, 2018; Yoon-Hendricks, 2018; Baron, 2019).

U.S. institutions are now tasked with the dual mandate of improving support services to address the political atmosphere, and to make themselves attractive enough that students will choose

them from among ever-increasing options. International student experiences at U.S. HEIs are critically important for the success of currently enrolled students as well as for the recruitment of future students. Previous research in the field has found that students who are satisfied are much more likely to recommend their school to friends and potential applicants (Ammigan, 2019, p. 265). Peer recommendations are highly influential in prospective student decision-making (Lu & Schulmann, 2015; Stacey, 2018).

Given this context, WES designed this study to capture how international students perceive both their experience at U.S. HEIs and the support services their institutions offer. The study's goal was to provide international students with a means through which they could share their range of experiences. This research also serves as a follow-up to and expansion of

previous WES research that was conducted in 2016 on the international student experience (Roy, Lu, & Loo, 2016). To this end, the study explores key experience factors relating to Peer Relationships, Faculty Relationships and Academic Satisfaction, Administrative Staff Relationships, Identity and Acculturation, and Daily Life. This study was designed to answer the following two research questions:

- How do current international students and recent graduates perceive their experiences at U.S. HEIs?
- To what extent do current international students and recent graduates perceive that institutional support services meet their needs?

## OVERALL SATISFACTION

International students are overwhelmingly satisfied with their experience studying in the U.S. (91 percent). This remains true regardless of student characteristics such as region of origin, sex, or year of enrollment. Respondents from sub-Saharan Africa report the highest level of satisfaction (95 percent), as they did in WES' 2016 research (Roy, Lu, & Loo, 2016). Even students expressing the least satisfaction—from South and Central Asia—are still highly satisfied (89 percent).

Interestingly, international students from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are just as satisfied as students from sub-Saharan Africa; this result is a deviation from early 2016, when MENA survey participants reported some of the lowest satisfaction levels. One possibility for the lower MENA satisfaction levels three years ago is that the King Abdullah Scholarship Program—the primary funding source for a significant portion of Saudi Arabian students—announced disruptive changes and restrictions to the scholarship at the time. Since Saudi Arabian students made up nearly 50 percent of our MENA student sample both in 2016 and 2019, the different results could reflect the composition of students studying in the U.S. now, who are no longer bound by the obligations of the program.



**91% of international students are satisfied with their experience studying in the U.S.**





## PEER RELATIONSHIPS

International students say that:



### THE POSITIVES

**86%**

it is easy to form close friendships with international students from their home country

**80%**

it is easy to form close friendships with international students from a third country

**78%**

they are satisfied with the diversity of the international student population at their institution

**77%**

domestic students are welcoming to international students



### THE NEGATIVES

**60%**

they are not actively involved in activities and events at their institution

**41%**

it is difficult to form close friendships with domestic students

**29%**

they do not have a strong social network at their school

## MAIN FINDINGS

### PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Close friendships and relationships with peers—both domestic and international—buoy student experiences (Maunder, 2017). Not only do they improve international student well-being on campus as students adjust and integrate into the school community, but they form the latticework of support that allows international students to triumph when they encounter inevitable obstacles on their educational journey. Furthermore, peer relationships form the foundation of career networks long after the ink has dried on degree certificates. Particularly at the graduate level, the network and connections an institution can provide are often as important as the coursework and skills themselves. Given the overwhelming importance of peer relationships to the international student experience on U.S. campuses, it is crucial for institutions to understand how they can encourage and facilitate relationships between students and break down pockets of isolation.

Despite the importance of these relationships, more than a quarter of international students (29 percent) currently say they do not have a strong social network at their school. Chinese students in particular struggle with this. Only 56 percent of Chinese students say they have a strong social network, compared with 70 percent of Indian students. How language functions as a bridge or a barrier is a likely explanation for this difference. Chinese students (41 percent) consistently use the English Language Support services at their school at almost twice the rate that Indian students do (21 percent); this difference may suggest that Indian students have more advanced English skills or greater confidence in their English abilities.

**29% of international students say they do not have a strong social network at their school.**

These findings echo prior WES research, which found that international students struggle with creating robust social networks (Roy, Lu, & Loo, 2016, pg. iv). This pattern has implications not

only for the students, but for the institution as well. As noted, social ties are crucial for student success, which reflects on the institution in both academic outcomes and career trajectories. Social networks can lead to higher levels of engagement and even increase the likelihood that students will provide financial gifts as alumni (ICEF Monitor, 2014).

It is therefore crucial to understand which strands of social webbing are strongest, and which are disconnected and in need of scaffolding. Approximately equal proportions of international students say that making friends in the U.S. is more challenging than they expected (35 percent), easier than they expected (32 percent), and as they expected (31 percent). However, this perception varies both by students' region of origin and by whom they are forming friendships with. South and Central Asian students (41 percent) find making friends in the U.S. easier than expected at twice the rate that students from Latin America and the Caribbean do (19 percent). Likewise, Indian respondents find it much easier to make friends in the U.S. (43 percent) compared with Chinese students (20 percent). Nearly half of Latin American and Caribbean students say that making friends in the U.S. is more challenging than they expected (47 percent).

In general, it is much easier for international students to form close friendships with other international students than with domestic students. Overwhelmingly, international students find making friends with international students from their home country and from a third country relatively easy (see **Figure 1**), which speaks to the strong networks within international student

populations. However, fewer international students find it easy to form close friendships with domestic students. Even though 77 percent of international students say that domestic students on campus are welcoming, 41 percent say that it is difficult to form close friendships with them. This corroborates findings from a recent research study which found that international students were relatively unsatisfied with making friends with domestic students (Ammigan & Jones, 2018, p. 9).

## 41% of international students say it is difficult to form close friendships with domestic students.

European (66 percent), sub-Saharan African (58 percent), and South and Central Asian (56 percent) students find forming close friendships with domestic students significantly easier than students from Latin America and the Caribbean (42 percent) and East Asia (43 percent). Compared to Indian students (38 percent), Chinese students (50 percent) find it more difficult to form close friendships with domestic students.

Language, as mentioned above, is likely a key factor in these differences between regions of origin (VOA Learning English, 2017). A shared language in which both parties feel confident communicating provides greater opportunity for social connection to take place. Many European, sub-Saharan African, and South Asian students coming to the U.S. are proficient in English. Students from East Asia, by contrast, often have more difficulty with the language.

**Figure 1: Ability to Form Close Friendships**



Likewise, discrimination and the current political context play a role in helping or hindering the development of relationships between students from particular regions (see **Figure 7**).

The qualitative data we collected reveal that many international students encounter instances of ignorance or racism or, in many cases, a lack of interest on the part of domestic students. International students recommend that, to manage domestic students' expectations and awareness, domestic students receive education in intercultural exchange, as well as information about the presence of international students on campus. For students from other countries attending institutions that have small international student populations, this kind of education for domestic students is especially important, as students at these schools will rely primarily on domestic students for social interaction.

For Chinese and Indian students, in many cases there is also the phenomenon of large numbers of other international students from their home country being on campus. International students arrive in the U.S. from all over the world; however, a full 52 percent come from just China and India, according to the Institute of International Education (IIE) (IIE, 2019). And the top 10 sending countries make up nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of the total international student population in the U.S.

These proportions add a complex social layer that facilitates friendships with other international students from the same country, but also impedes opportunity and stifles motivation to seek friendships with domestic students. Despite this complexity, learning

in a classroom of students of diverse cultural backgrounds is a top consideration for international students when they recommend their school to peers (Ammigan, 2019). A diverse student environment offers numerous benefits to international and domestic students alike by exposing them to new cultures and ideas. This exposure not only offers an opportunity to students to learn more about the world, it develops critical thinking skills by challenging previously unexamined constructs. When faculty are adept at moderating conversations of intercultural exchange in the classroom, domestic and international students can learn from one another and, together, develop a more robust, inclusive body of knowledge that the entire academic community can benefit from (Croese, 2011).

**78% of respondents are satisfied with the level of diversity of the international student population at their institution.**

Encouragingly, most international students (78 percent) are satisfied with the level of international student diversity at their school. This holds true regardless of students' region of origin. A smaller but not insignificant proportion of international students feels the opposite: They are dissatisfied with the international student diversity at their school (18 percent). A Thai student in the Northeast pursuing a master's in education cited that their graduate program was made up almost entirely of international recruits from just one country. The student said, "It is my

**“My school is actually very diverse. I've witnessed more international students than national students, and that has helped me to call this home. There is everyone from every background.”**

- A Ugandan bachelor's student in the Southeast studying aviation management

school's prerogative to admit students this way. However, as a prospective student, I should have been informed of [the demographics] as well."

HEIs should focus on diversifying their international student bodies. Ensuring a mix of international students will help prevent the development of inadvertent silos of students from just one country. Greater international diversity in turn encourages students to "step outside of their comfort zone" as they develop peer relationships. Cross-cultural friendships are helpful not only for international and domestic students, but for the institution as well. Having a well-integrated student body can reduce bias and improve students' cognitive function, all of which can potentially lead to a more positive campus culture and greater student success (Farnsworth, 2018).

As institutions think about ways to bolster peer bonding, it is helpful to take an inventory of existing structures. For example, extracurricular activities are social apparatuses already in place at most institutions. According to our data, only a small portion of international students (37 percent) are involved in activities and events at their institution; the majority (60 percent) are not.<sup>1</sup> This is comparable to domestic student involvement, where only about a third of senior

undergraduates spent six or more hours per week on co-curricular activities, and 41 percent did not participate at all in 2018, according to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2018).<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, international students who are involved are more likely to find domestic students welcoming (84 percent) compared to international students who are not involved (73 percent). One possible explanation is that students involved in activities have more opportunity to interact with domestic students and to develop these important peer relationships. South and Central Asian students are the most involved in activities and events at their institution (44 percent), and MENA students are the least involved (28 percent). Likewise, Indian students (44 percent) tend to be more involved in activities and events than Chinese students (35 percent).

Participation in clubs, activities, and events allows international and domestic students to meet and interact in a safe, social space where they might not otherwise have the opportunity. Institutions should focus on encouraging both domestic and international students to join clubs that engage their interests and are likely to attract students from both groups.

In the qualitative data we collected, time was often a primary barrier to participation rather than interest. For example, one student said,

“ I haven't attended any [activities or events] yet. My study and workload last semester did not permit this. I learned to have fun on my own (or with a few friends) and in my own time. I hope to change my schedule and habits so I can attend more of these events.”

- A Nigerian master's student in the Southeast studying engineering

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1 Respondents were asked the question "To what extent are you involved in activities and events at your institution?" (For example, student organizations, department sponsored events, etc.) and were able to select one of four answers: "A. Not involved at all," "B. Somewhat involved," "C. Involved," or "D. Very involved." We collapsed this scale as follows: "Not involved at all" + "Somewhat involved" = "Overall not involved" and "Involved" + "Very involved" = "Overall involved."

2 Though the NSSE does not offer a perfect comparison to our international student survey since the majority of our respondents are at the graduate level, it does shed light broadly on activity participation trends in higher education.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS** (Peer Relationships)

- **Provide diversity, inclusion, and cultural sensitivity training for the entire student body (both domestic and international students).** Training along with information on how to interact with people from different backgrounds is useful for all students, and helps facilitate respectful, positive interactions—the bedrock of peer relationships. By requiring students to take this training, schools set institutional expectations regarding conduct and foster a more inclusive campus community. An Indian student in the Southeast studying public health recommends that HEIs “try a more interactive method of educating people on culturally sensitive issues instead of a mere mandatory online module.”
- **Consider the role that language and student demographics play in developing peer relationships.** As schools develop better programs and interventions that support relationship-building among students, it is wise to think about how language and the number of students from a particular country operate within each of these initiatives.

For example, a peer program that matches small groups of students from domestic and international backgrounds can be beneficial, but may need to be adapted based on the makeup of the students involved (Stokes, 2017). Including specific questions to ask one another to get a conversation started may reduce language anxiety for international students who are less confident in their English abilities. It is also important to note that buddy programs run the risk of exacerbating rather than bridging cultural differences if not handled artfully—which underscores the importance of intercultural competence training.

- **Diversify international student populations.** International students value learning in diverse classrooms, where they can meet domestic peers as well as international students from other countries. When programs are made up of international students from primarily one country, the promise of a diverse, international experience goes unfulfilled. By enrolling international students from an array of countries, institutions can produce a richer learning environment and, in tandem, minimize their own risk should one country’s enrollment drop suddenly for political or economic reasons.
- **At multiple touchpoints, emphasize the social networking benefits of joining clubs and activities.** Institutions can encourage international students to participate in social activities and events on campus by stressing the social and career benefits of doing so. Describing examples of these benefits (such as peer networks transforming into career networks after graduation, the opportunity to interact and form friendships with domestic students, and so on) at multiple junctures—including pre-arrival, orientation, online, and during early advising meetings—helps reframe extracurricular activities from “extra” or frivolous endeavors, to time investments that have the potential to reap significant benefits later on. Institutions can further support international students by providing a list of questions and phrases students can use to break the ice when they attend an activity for the first time.



## FACULTY RELATIONSHIPS AND ACADEMIC SATISFACTION

International students say that:



### THE POSITIVES

**92%**

their professors are welcoming to international students on campus

**89%**

they are satisfied with the quality of teaching at their institution

**89%**

they are satisfied with the quality of their academic program

**83%**

they find it easy to adjust to the education expectations in the U.S.

**71%**

they attend professor office hours



### THE NEGATIVES

**59%**

the amount of time spent outside of class on schoolwork and activities related to their academic program is more than they expected it to be

**34%**

the stress of schoolwork negatively affects their mental health

## FACULTY RELATIONSHIPS AND ACADEMIC SATISFACTION

Research consistently shows that both faculty and the quality of the academic experience are highly important to international students. Top professors and experts in students' educational fields and the reputation of programs of study are main draws of international students to the U.S. Relationships between international students and their professors, lecturers, and teaching assistants (TAs) are complex and sometimes difficult for both students and faculty members to navigate; however, international students overwhelmingly report positive experiences overall.

The vast majority (92 percent) of survey respondents say that their professors are welcoming to international students on campus. A Colombian student pursuing a doctoral degree in the social sciences at a Northeastern institution says, "The faculty is conscious that international students face different challenges

than domestic students, especially ... if English is not your [first] language. I feel the interactions are polite, respectful, and [that they are] always seeking to help me with any problem or challenge I might face with my coursework."

In addition to feeling welcomed, most international students are satisfied with the quality of teaching at their institution (89 percent), as well as the quality of their academic program (89 percent). Faculty are the backbone of academic programs delivered at HEIs in the U.S. and contribute to institutional reputations as well. Excellent teaching and access to quality professors likely influence international students' high rates of satisfaction with both the reputation of their university as a whole (89 percent), and the reputation of their specific academic program (88 percent).

International students note that professors encourage them to ask questions and attend office hours if they encounter any issues. Perhaps

because of this ready access, international students attend professor office hours more than they take advantage of any other learning support service. Nearly three-quarters of international students (71 percent) attend professor office hours occasionally or often. Conversely, only 43 percent of international students regularly attend TA office hours. The quality of teaching and the support offered by faculty may help account for the ease of adjusting to educational expectations in the U.S. that most international students (83 percent) report.

For the small portion of students who report negative experiences with professors, lack of awareness and knowledge about international students is the main critique. For example, assigning projects that privilege American students, such as those that require immense background knowledge about U.S. culture and lifestyle, makes completing assignments disproportionately difficult for international students. International students also note that some professors have very little understanding of what international students go through before, during, and after they attend an HEI in the U.S. Students recommend that faculty receive training in how to manage and support international students in their classes.

Though international students overwhelmingly report positive perceptions of faculty and academics at their institutions, more than a third say that the stress of schoolwork negatively affects their mental health. Nearly half of Southeast Asian (49 percent) students feel that school stress takes a toll on their mental well-being. International students from MENA (43 percent) and East Asia (40 percent) also report high proportions of negative mental health impacts. Sub-Saharan African (23 percent) and South and Central Asian (30 percent) students, on the other hand, report the lowest academic stress levels.

School stress may be compounded by the amount of time that international students spend on their academic study. More than half of international

students (59 percent) say that the amount of time spent outside of class on schoolwork and activities related to their academic program is more than they expected it to be. East Asian (65 percent) and MENA (64 percent) students are most likely to feel this way, while European students are the least likely (46 percent).

One possible explanation for this disparity is language. Respondents from East Asia and MENA are the most likely to use English Language Support services at their institution, with 63 percent and 57 percent respectively having used these services at least once. This greater use may indicate more need for English language assistance among students from these regions. Conversely, only 28 percent of European students reported using English Language Support services at their school. Students from East Asia and MENA may be spending more time than they anticipated on classwork because of the extra time and effort required to overcome the language barrier.

Another possible explanation accounting for the high proportion of international students who say the amount of time spent on schoolwork is more than they had anticipated is U.S. pedagogy. The U.S. higher education system typically employs multiple assignments of varying nature over the course of a semester to assess students rather than basing grades purely on exams. Conversely, many education systems assess student understanding with one final exam rather than a continuous stream of work. International students from some countries may need to adjust to the U.S. assessment framework, which may be more time intensive than what they are used to.

Institutions can help manage international students' expectations by providing estimates on the average amount of time they should expect to spend outside of class on academic coursework, as well as the time students should expect to spend on lab, studio, or field experiences. In addition, schools should orient international students on the U.S. pedagogical approach



by walking them through the different kinds of assignments they should expect and how such assignments contribute to their success in the course. These expectations should be communicated to students prior to their arrival

in the U.S. as well as during orientation. It may also be helpful for schools to provide estimates or ranges of how much extra time students may need to spend on coursework if they are still developing English language proficiency.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS** (Faculty Relationships and Academic Satisfaction)

- **Increase faculty awareness of how they can support international students.** Faculty are influential and spend significant time with international students over the course of their studies. Institutions can provide faculty with training on cultural sensitivity and intercultural moderation for classroom discussions, as these create a more inclusive environment for all students. Faculty should also be made aware of what they can expect from international students in the classroom and the available resources some students may benefit from, which will allow faculty to direct students to services and help manage expectations.
- **Communicate clear and accurate estimates of the amount of time international students should expect to spend outside of class on academic coursework.** Institutions should provide estimates or ranges of the amount of extra time students may need to dedicate to their studies if they are still developing English language proficiency. Learning and producing assignments in a second language and culture are challenging tasks, and international students will typically require more time than domestic students. Institutions should also help manage international student expectations by clearly communicating the U.S. pedagogical approach of continuous assessment, which differs from exam-based education systems. Schools can produce accurate estimates on the average amount of time students spend on coursework outside of the classroom by surveying their current international student population.



## IS THE U.S. WELCOMING TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS?

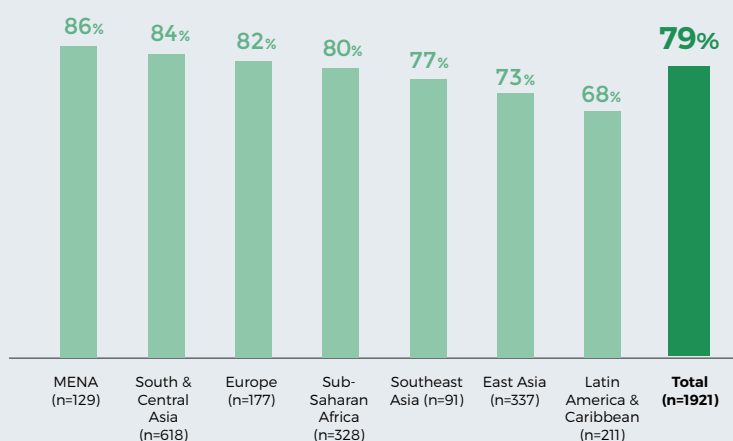
Negative rhetoric from the White House about immigrants and other internationals, attempts to build a border wall with Mexico, and the travel ban all call into question whether the U.S. is welcoming to people of international origin (Kanno-Youngs, 2019; Gladstone & Sugiyama, 2018). In tandem with this rhetoric, visa policy changes, restrictions on Chinese students and scholars, and issues surrounding OPT and H-1B are directly affecting international students (Semotiuk, 2018; Yoon-Hendricks, 2018; Baron, 2019). In 2018, 71 percent of institutional representatives said that the U.S. political climate was the number one obstacle to recruiting international students (Schulmann & Le, 2018).

Encouragingly, based on our findings, the **majority of international students think that the U.S. is a welcoming country (79 percent)**.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the participants in this research study have already made the choice to pursue their education in the U.S. and have started or recently completed their program. The perception that the U.S. is not welcoming toward international students likely still influences prospective students during the decision-making stage, however. A recent NAFSA study found that 50 percent of institutions think international students' feeling unwelcome in the U.S. is partly responsible for falling international student enrollment. U.S. HEIs have tried to challenge this perception of the U.S. being unwelcoming (NAFSA, 2019b). According to a 2018 WES research report, 86 percent of surveyed institutional representatives who participated in the #YouAreWelcomeHere campaign found it to be effective in combating this perception (Schulmann & Le, 2018; #YouAreWelcomeHere, n.d.).

MENA students are most likely to think that the U.S. is a welcoming country (86 percent), a surprising result given the political context. International students from **Latin America and the Caribbean, on the other hand, are the least likely to find the U.S. welcoming** (see **Figure 2**). This perception may be influenced by U.S. political tensions with countries in Latin America, particularly Mexico (over trade and immigration) and Venezuela. It is also important to note that survey answers were collected just a few months after family separations at the U.S.-Mexico border received extensive news coverage.

**Chinese students are 11 percent less likely than Indian students to find the U.S. welcoming**, likely a result of increasingly tense U.S.-China relations. The two countries are engaged in an escalating trade war, and in 2018 the U.S. president described Chinese international students in the country as spies (Mullen, 2018; Redden, 2018). In addition, the U.S. government truncated Chinese student visas for master's students in certain STEM fields last year, cutting the visa length from five years to just one year (Redden, 2019b).

**Figure 2: Level of Agreement that the U.S. Is a Welcoming Country for International Students**



3 Participants defined "welcoming" for themselves.



## ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF RELATIONSHIPS

International students say that:



### THE POSITIVES

**90%**

administrative staff are welcoming to international students

**80%**

they are satisfied with the international student advising office on campus

**79%**

they are satisfied with the orientation they receive at their institution

**77%**

they are satisfied with the advising they receive on immigration issues (such as Forms I-10 and DS-2019)



### THE NEGATIVES

**26%**

they are dissatisfied with the information their school provides, or their school does not provide any information, on how to set up a U.S. bank account

## ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF RELATIONSHIPS

Often, the first interactions that international students have with a U.S. HEI are with the administrative staff—admissions officers, international student advisors, learning support offices, and so forth. These staff provide frontline information to students prior to their arrival, which can set their expectations about life on campus and in the U.S. in general. International student advising offices in particular are the primary point of contact once international students arrive on campus. This transition period can fill students with uncertainty as they strive to adjust to a new country and culture. Administrative staff facilitate their acclimation to the school by making the transition a positive one, which in turn has a huge impact on the students' overall experience.

**80%** of international students are satisfied with their international student advising office.

Given the importance of administrative staff, it is encouraging to know that 90 percent of international students find administrative staff to be welcoming. The majority of international students are satisfied with their specific international student advising office (80 percent). They note that international student advisors are often the first people they attempt to reach when they encounter an issue, be it academic, financial, or personal.

Upon arrival, international student service offices provide orientations to international students which help to equip them with the information they need to successfully navigate their new surroundings. This ranges from the broad—such as cultural expectations—to the specific and practical—such as taking care of financial paperwork. Though most international students are satisfied with the orientation they received at their institution (79 percent), only a little over half are satisfied with the information their school provided on how to set up a U.S. bank account (26 percent). Since banking processes in the U.S. may be very different from those in a student's home country, institutions should supply clear, step-by-step instructions on opening a U.S. bank account as an international student. Schools can consider

“The international student services office is a one-stop shop for all international students.... In the event of confusion, I have always found it helpful to approach them for information regarding pretty much anything.... I’ve approached them for assistance with applying for a driver’s license, legalities for visiting my home country for vacation, help with Social Security, tax filing, and for assistance with employment authorization after graduation. These services were streamlined in my university—it was all I hoped for.”

- An Indian master’s student in the Southwest pursuing business analytics

providing a dedicated webpage or flyer of explicit instructions, and include information on local banks that can be handed out at orientation.

For the much smaller portion of international students who are dissatisfied with the international student advising office on their campus as well as their orientation (10 percent each), more guidance may be needed. These students cite receiving misinformation and vague answers to specific questions from their advisors as causes of their disappointment.

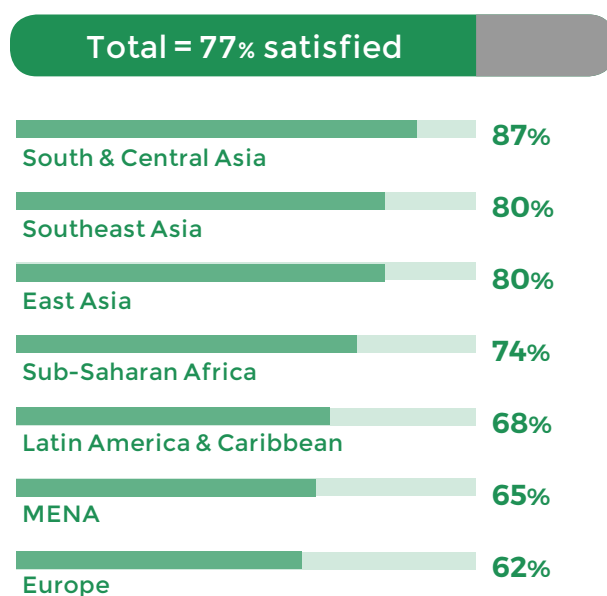
Importantly, international student service offices advise international students on immigration issues (such as Forms I-10 and DS-2019) and the responsibilities of F-1 and J-1 visa holders. Luckily, most international students are satisfied with this crucial advising aspect (77 percent). South and Central Asian students are particularly satisfied with immigration advising (see **Figure 3**). Conversely, European students are less satisfied than those from other regions.

A potential explanation for lower European student satisfaction is expectations surrounding visas. The majority of European international students are from the European Union, where traveling across borders is relatively uncomplicated (though it is unknown if ease of movement in and out of the U.K. will remain under Brexit) (European Union, n.d.). Visa and

immigration bureaucracy in the U.S. may feel comparatively burdensome.

International students from MENA (14 percent) and from Latin America and the Caribbean (11 percent) are the most dissatisfied with the advising they receive on immigration issues. This is unsurprising given the context of the travel ban (of mostly majority Muslim countries) and tensions surrounding the U.S.-Mexico border (Associated Press, 2019; Gladstone & Sugiyama, 2018).

**Figure 3: Satisfaction with Advising on Immigration Issues**



“ As far as I have seen, most of the institutions are very supportive of international students and they provide their best help. But unfortunately, due to some political reasons, such as the travel ban, the visa application process has become very difficult, specifically for Iranian students.... Providing a recommendation letter to U.S. embassies, especially for students who have been awarded assistantships or scholarships, can be very helpful and eases the process.”

- An Iranian master's student in the Midwest studying arts and humanities

As international students focus on their coursework, administrative staff within learning support offices on campus take on significant support roles as well. Learning support services such as academic advising and tutoring are critical to international student success. These learning support systems are important tools for international students as they acclimate to the academic environment in the U.S., and the staff in these offices are positioned to encourage and assist students so that they are able to achieve their academic potential.

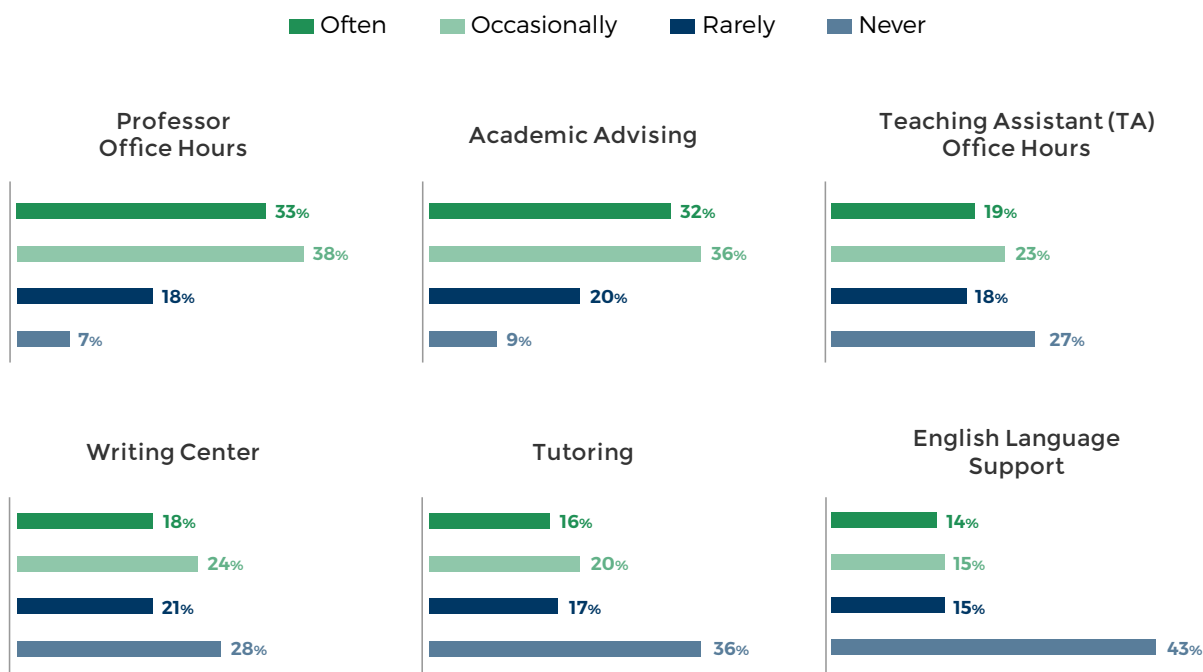
International students use some learning support services more than others (see **Figure 4**). For example, the majority of international students attend professor office hours and academic advising, but fewer than half regularly attend TA office hours or use the Writing Center. In many cases, students make less use of a certain service because they do not know it exists, or they are hesitant to use a new support system. For services such as the Writing Center, it may be helpful for administrative staff to partner with key faculty members in courses that are writing intensive. For example, faculty can emphasize and promote the Writing Center throughout the term. This ensures that students are aware of the service and, importantly, may push students to move out of their comfort zone and pass through the invisible wall of using something for the first time. Once a student has learned how to set up

an appointment and where to go and whom to speak with, the barrier to using that service a second time is greatly reduced.

Interestingly, most international students do not use English language support services. A few factors may contribute to this low use. For one, international students from English-speaking backgrounds (such as some students from Europe and India) do not require English support, naturally lowering the proportion of international students using this service. It is also likely that many students who could benefit from English language support are unaware of the services offered at their institution. HEIs that offer English language services should inform students in a variety of ways of the options available to them, including through the school's orientation, website, and social media platforms. English language support services may be another opportunity to partner with faculty. By making professors aware of English language support services, the professors themselves can direct students as appropriate.

The Disability Resource Center is the least used learning support service of those we measured. Only 7 percent of international students report using the Disability Resource Center often and 6 percent use it occasionally. This service is expected to be used at lower rates since many students do not require disability services. Our

**Figure 4: Frequency of Using Learning Support Services at Institution**



Note: "Not Applicable" and "My institution does NOT provide this service" have been excluded from the graph.

findings are similar to those of the I-Graduate's International Student Barometer, which found that as low as 7 percent of international students reported using disability services in the U.S. in 2015 (I-Graduate International Insight, n.d.; Mobility International USA, n.d.). However, some international students may also come from countries in which learning differences are unrecognized (Hayes, Dombrowski, Shefcyk, & Bulat, 2018). They may not be aware that they could benefit from the Disability Resource Center at their school. The Americans with Disabilities

Act (ADA) that was passed in the U.S. in 1990 was groundbreaking in terms of recognizing the rights of individuals who have physical or mental disadvantages (ADA, n.d.). Many countries do not offer these same protections and services, and may not acknowledge the existence of learning disabilities such as dyslexia or auditory processing deficit. Institutions should take steps to inform international students of the Disability Resource Center on their campus and be prepared to explain what services are offered and who may benefit from them.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS** (Administrative Staff Relationships)

- **Provide clear, step-by-step directions on how international students can set up a U.S. bank account.** Institutions can provide this information on a dedicated webpage and as a handout distributed prior to arrival and again at orientation. Both should list the documents needed to open a bank account, as well as the names of local banks. It may also be helpful to include appropriate language and phrases that international students can use when they arrive at the bank.
- **Support International Student Service advisors.** Institutions, especially those that have large international student populations, should take care to prioritize the International Student Services office on campus. Making sure that all ISSS staff are trained to answer international students' questions, especially in a time of so much visa policy flux, is crucial. Many ISSS staff have large student-to-advisor ratios—where possible and appropriate, institutions should invest in more advisors and reduce caseloads. By supporting ISSSs, institutions can help ensure that international students receive exceptional guidance.
- **Increase awareness of learning support services by partnering with faculty members.** Learning support service offices on campus can raise greater awareness and utilization of their services by collaborating with appropriate faculty members. Though information about learning support services is often relayed during orientation, many students will not seek out support unless they are encouraged to do so multiple times, or they encounter difficulty with a particular course. Faculty are well-positioned to direct students toward appropriate support offices long after orientation has taken place. To provide this kind of seamless guidance, faculty should be made aware of where they can direct international students for particular support (that is, English language support, tutoring, academic advising, and so on), as well as how to do so in a culturally sensitive manner.

## IDENTITY AND ACCULTURATION

International students say that:

### THE POSITIVES

**62%**

they have sufficient space available to engage in their religious beliefs at their institution

### THE NEGATIVES

**38%**

living away from home/family is more challenging than they expected

**30%**

cultural barriers in the U.S. are more challenging than they anticipated

**20%**

the language barrier in the U.S. is more challenging than they thought it would be

## IDENTITY AND ACCULTURATION

When international students arrive in the U.S., they have both the exciting opportunity of learning in a new country and culture, and the daunting task of acclimating to a new environment. This opportunity not only requires students to be flexible enough to allow their ideas to change and grow, but also to have the presence of self to retain and nurture their own culture and identity. Navigating a move to a new country can be full of adventure—and, in equal measure—fraught with internal struggle. Institutions can support international students as they adjust, to help them experience a fulfilling academic journey.

Homesickness is a significant challenge for international students. A larger proportion of students say that living away from home and family is more challenging than they expected compared with cultural or language barriers (see **Figure 5**). When students move to the U.S., they are often leaving an established support system behind. Technology and social media allow students to stay in touch with friends and family back home, but unshared experiences, time differences, and sheer distance can make

these supports more tenuous. Nearly half of international students from South and Central Asia<sup>4</sup> find living away from home to be more challenging than they expected (47 percent), the highest of any region (see **Figure 6**). Interestingly,

“

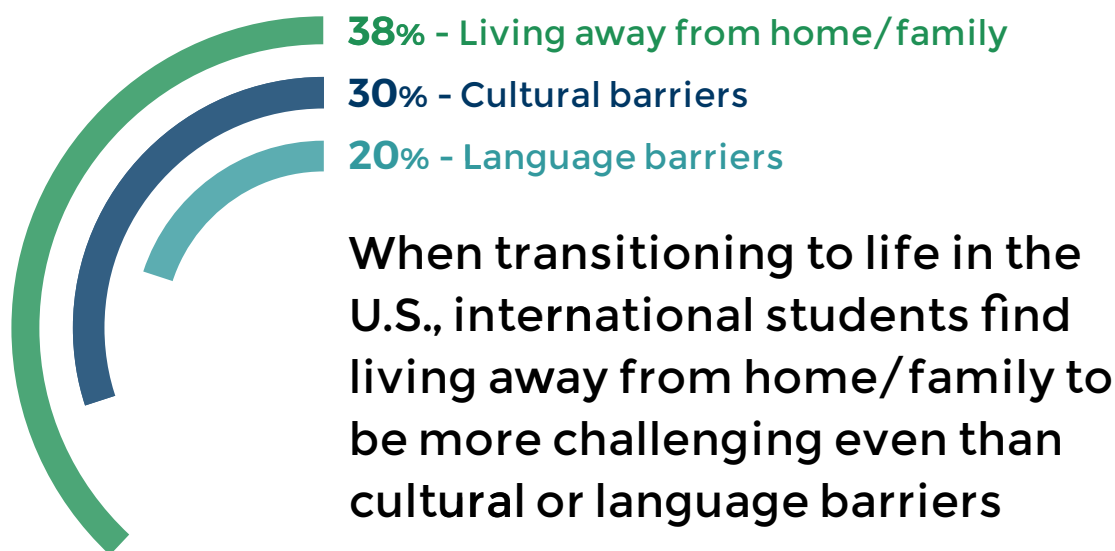
Most international students that come to the U.S. do not know much about the culture [here] and face a language barrier. I think if the institution can prepare a tutorial for these students ... [and] provide some examples of the cultural use of language and phrases, such as idioms and expressions that people use and in what sense they use it, it would be easier for international students to communicate. We know the language, but not the cultural use of language.”

- A Pakistani student in the Midwest studying education

4 The majority of South and Central Asian students who took the survey are from India (79 percent).

**Figure 5: Expectations vs. Experiences**

Students who said these factors were “more challenging than expected”






fewer than half as many East Asian international students feel the same (21 percent). This is similar to previous WES research results, which found that 42 percent of Indian students experienced homesickness as a significant challenge. One possible explanation is that familial affiliation and family structure play an especially powerful role in Indian society (Asia Society, 2004 as cited in Roy, Lu, & Loo, 2016).

In addition to adjusting to a life independent of the familiarity of home, nearly a third of international students feel that cultural barriers in the U.S. are more challenging than they anticipated. A significant proportion (20 percent) of students finds the language barrier to be more challenging than expected as well. Cultural and language barriers often go hand in hand, with one greatly influencing the other. Students may arrive in the U.S. with outstanding academic English, only to find that they cannot understand the idiomatic English used both in and out of the classroom. Further, it may be challenging to grasp cultural expectations of when and with whom it is appropriate to use these different forms of verbal communication.

Acclimation hurdles such as homesickness, cultural barriers, and language barriers are well-documented challenges that international students in higher education experience or encounter (Andrade, 2006). These important aspects of the student experience can affect how easily individuals adjust to their new environment. In particular, these difficulties can affect the mental health of students and their ability to handle stress. Schools can support international students by providing culturally sensitive mental health and counseling resources in addition to the programmatic initiatives discussed earlier that help students develop their social support networks. Counseling services can greatly help students, especially during the adjustment period. A Colombian doctoral student in the Northeast pursuing the social sciences said, “[My school] has counselors that help with transitioning to U.S. cultural and everyday life, so you feel safe and prepared for the challenges of new beginnings. It’s been helpful for me because I felt very exhausted the first three months living here. Talking to someone is helpful too, for clarity and to develop plans to ... take care of yourself.”



**Figure 6: Top 3 Regions Per Category**

	 <b>Living Away from Home/Family</b>	 <b>Cultural Barriers</b>	 <b>Language Barriers</b>
More challenging than expected	<b>47%</b> South & Central Asia	<b>39%</b> Sub-Saharan Africa	<b>38%</b> MENA
	<b>46%</b> Sub-Saharan Africa	<b>36%</b> Southeast Asia	<b>35%</b> Southeast Asia
	<b>41%</b> MENA	<b>35%</b> Latin America & Caribbean	<b>34%</b> East Asia
Easier than expected	<b>33%</b> East Asia	<b>35%</b> South & Central Asia	<b>49%</b> South & Central Asia
	<b>20%</b> Southeast Asia	<b>33%</b> MENA	<b>36%</b> Europe
	<b>20%</b> Europe	<b>31%</b> Europe	<b>36%</b> Sub-Saharan Africa

Importantly, mental well-being is a predictor of academic success for higher education students, both domestic and international (Wyatt, Oswalt, & Ochoa, 2017). A 2008 study in Australia comparing academic stress levels between local and international students found the groups to be comparable (DeDeyn, 2008). However, while academic stress levels may be similar between the two groups, international students often face greater cultural and language barriers to mental health support services to address this stress (Redden, 2019a). It is crucial that schools recognize how, prevented from seeking or receiving adequate help, international students may be affected in their day-to-day experience.

Mental health is stigmatized or unrecognized in many countries; therefore for some international students, counseling services are unfamiliar or even taboo (Fu, 2018). In the OBB, we asked students an open-ended question: “What kind of mental health and counseling services are offered at your school? To what extent do these services meet your needs?” In response, a Chinese master’s student in the Southwest studying education said, “Honestly, I do not really know the mental health and counseling services [offered at

my school] because most Chinese people do not believe [in] mental illness and health.”

Moving past these kinds of stigmas can be extremely challenging, and for international students who do attempt to see a counselor, language can be another significant barrier. During counseling sessions, students bring up topics that are highly personal and often emotional. Speaking in a second language becomes much more difficult during these kinds of conversations because being overwhelmed or distraught can affect the language center of the brain (Van der Kolk, 2015). Additionally, though students may be proficient in academic English, they may not have the necessary vocabulary to communicate complicated internal experiences and emotions (Faubert, & Gonzalez, 2008).

Institutions should therefore go further than just telling international students that mental health and counseling services are available on campus. Schools must take steps to destigmatize mental health support, and they should collaborate across offices to provide support that is culturally sensitive. For example, ISSSs can partner with counseling offices on campus to

see if it is possible for some therapists to counsel international students in their first language.

As international students work to manage their mental health, stress levels, and cultural acclimation, providing spaces on campus for students to exercise aspects of their identity is important. Just one example of this is the provision of appropriate and inclusive religious spaces. Only about a quarter of international students say that having space to engage in religious practices is not applicable to them.

Encouragingly, most international students say that they have sufficient space available to engage in their religious beliefs at their institution (62 percent). Sub-Saharan African students are the most likely to feel that they have enough space to practice their religion (79 percent). Only a small portion of students say they do not have adequate space on campus to engage in their beliefs (10 percent). Students from MENA (18 percent) and South and Central Asia (14 percent) are most likely to feel this way.

One possible explanation for this disparity is the types of religion practiced within these regions and how they compare with those widely practiced in the U.S. For example, the majority of South and Central Asian students in our sample are from India (79 percent), where most of the population identifies as Hindu (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2019c). Likewise, the majority of MENA students in our sample are from Saudi Arabia (50 percent) and Iran (20 percent), both of which are more than 90 percent Muslim (Fahmy, 2018; CIA, 2019b). The top two represented sub-Saharan African countries on the other hand, Nigeria (53 percent) and Ghana (13 percent), have much higher proportions of people who identify as Christians (primarily Protestant or Catholic), which is more similar to the religious makeup of the U.S. (CIA, 2019d; CIA, 2019a; CIA, 2019e). Institutions can help ensure that students from all religious backgrounds have sufficient space to practice their beliefs if they make available a dedicated location on campus that offers appropriate functionality (such as wash stations or prayer rugs) (IFYC, 2014).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS** (Identity and Acculturation)

- **Offer culturally sensitive mental health and counseling resources to international students.** To provide adequate mental health and counseling services to international students, two primary steps must be taken: (1) Destigmatize the seeking of mental health support, and (2) Offer counseling in languages other than English. Institutions can work toward the first goal by addressing mental health in optional student workshops or by bringing speakers to campus. To address the second goal, schools can hire therapists who can offer counsel both in English and another language, such as Mandarin. Schools should consider the makeup of their student population to determine which languages would be most useful to have available. For more tailored support, ISSSs may want to partner with Mental Health and Counseling services to better communicate the needs of international students.
- **Provide inclusive religious spaces on campus.** Institutions can help ensure that students from all religious backgrounds have sufficient space to practice their beliefs by dedicating a room or facility on campus. The location should have appropriate functionality (such as wash stations or prayer rugs) for multiple religions (IFYC, 2014).

## DISCRIMINATION

Equity and inclusion are important elements of social interaction within any group of people, including campus communities. Discrimination is detrimental to positive student experiences.

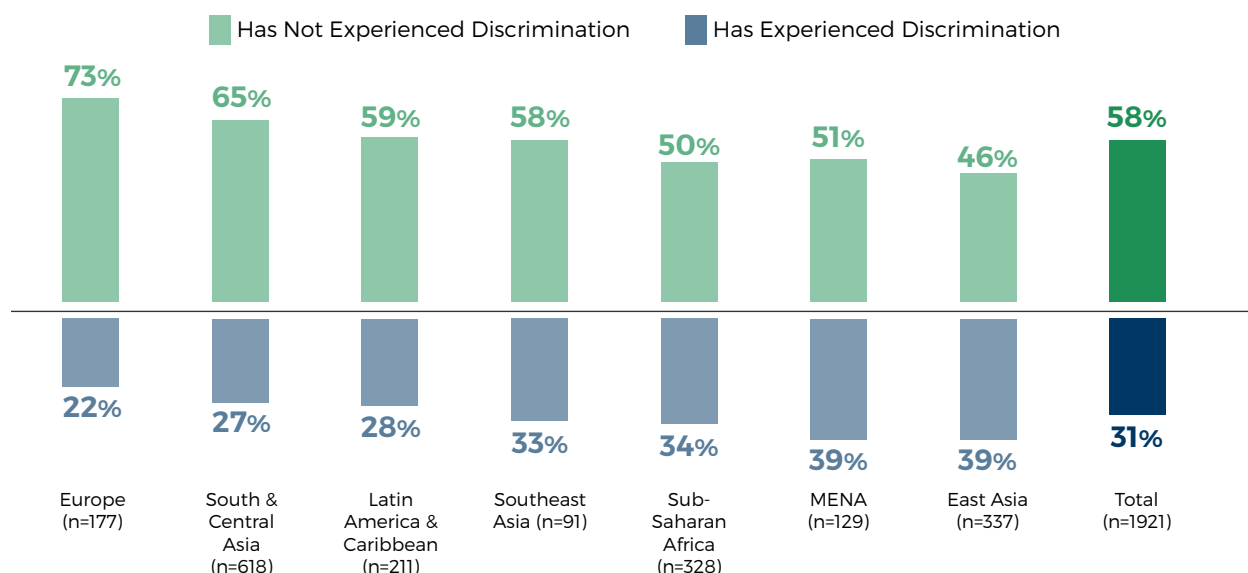
Thus it is a troubling finding that, though the majority of international students do not face discrimination based on their nationality, nearly a third do (31 percent). East Asian students, particularly Chinese students (40 percent), are the most likely to experience discrimination based on their nationality (see **Figure 7**). Likewise, students from MENA and sub-Saharan Africa experience discrimination at higher levels. European students, on the other hand, are significantly less likely to experience discrimination based on their nationality.

This disparity between students from different regions of origin is likely rooted in the complex historical context and present political and economic ties between the U.S. and other nations. These relationships have produced cultural similarities and ideological alignment with some countries, while generating disassociated, oppositional, or contentious links with others. This environment may predispose students, staff, and faculty to behave positively or negatively toward individuals from certain countries. For example, relations between the U.S. and China and countries in the Middle East are currently strained and have a history of conflict, in contrast with recent U.S. relationships with most European countries. (Russia is a notable exception.) Likewise, prevailing patterns of domestic discrimination in the U.S., particularly toward racial minorities, presumably influences which international students are more likely to face discrimination.



**31% of respondents said they have faced discrimination at their institution because of their nationality.**

**Figure 7: Experiences with Discrimination at Institution Because of Nationality**



## DAILY LIFE

International students say that:

### THE POSITIVES

**61%** they are satisfied with the availability of off-campus housing

**46%** they are satisfied with the cost of off-campus housing

### THE NEGATIVES

**51%** transportation is challenging

**33%** they are dissatisfied with the cost of on-campus housing

**30%** finding housing is more challenging than they expected it would be

**24%** they are not able to find food that meets their needs on campus

**23%** they are dissatisfied with the availability of on-campus housing

## DAILY LIFE

Much of international student experience on U.S. campuses revolves around the day-in, day-out routines of living. Routines in food, transportation, and student housing form the backdrop of academic experience. Though often seen as less important than other aspects of experience, this “backdrop” is foundational. Having stable, affordable housing, the ability to get where you need to go, and access to food that meets dietary and cultural needs must all be firmly in place for a student to feel secure and stable in a new environment.

Securing housing is an important and challenging transition step for international students. For international students living off campus, it is more difficult to sign a lease than it is for domestic students. International students lack a credit history in the U.S., encounter higher upfront costs (some landlords even require international students to pay the full year of rent upon signing), and, in some cases, experience discrimination (Lee & Rice, 2007). Preference for domestic rental applicants is a common issue in several countries,

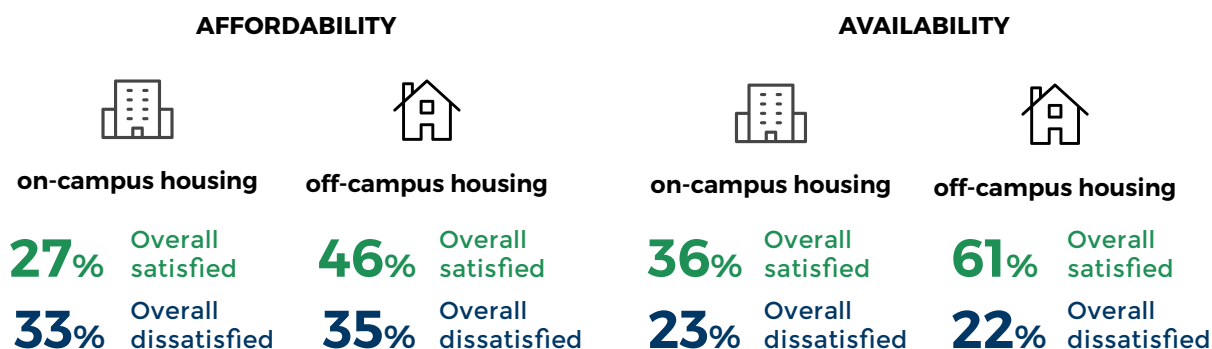
including the Netherlands (Kennedy, 2019). A report recently released in Australia details the ways that international students can be taken advantage of by landlords (Crace, 2019). The situation in the U.S. is likely similar.

“

Finding accommodation is very crucial as I live in [a major city in the West], which is very expensive. Coming from a middle-class family from India, it's hard to survive here. But because of a Facebook group made by Indian students where people post if they need a roommate, I [was able to find] my roommates and now they are my friends also.”

- An Indian master's student in the West pursuing engineering

**Figure 8: Degree of Satisfaction with Housing Affordability and Availability**



Note: "Not sure" and "Not applicable" have been excluded from the figure.

Most international students in our study live off campus (85 percent); a comparatively small portion live on campus (15 percent). This is perhaps unsurprising given that three-quarters of the international students who took our survey are enrolled at the master's level or above, levels at which both the availability of and demand for on-campus housing is lower. In our sample, bachelor's students are three times as likely as those at the master's level or above to live on campus, and six times more likely to live on campus than those pursuing an associate degree. Most international students pursuing an associate degree live off campus because most community colleges in the U.S. are commuter schools. In addition to level of education, school location is a factor. International students attending rural institutions are more likely to live on campus (25 percent) than international students living in urban areas (13 percent).

The search for safe, affordable housing can be difficult. Nearly a third (30 percent) of international students say finding housing is more challenging than they expected. The cost of housing in the U.S. is an important consideration for international students, yet they routinely report limited satisfaction in this area. One research study found that out of nine variables measuring living experiences of international students in the U.S., students were least satisfied with the price of housing (Ammigan and Jones, 2018, pg. 10).

Our research findings reveal that about a third of international students are dissatisfied with the cost of housing both on and off campus (see **Figure 8**). Interestingly, international students are much more likely to be satisfied with the cost of off-campus housing than with the cost of on-campus housing. This likely reflects both the large proportion of respondents living off campus, and also the sometimes higher price of living on campus. Recent research on the comparative affordability of on- and off-campus housing found that in 28 of 48 U.S. college towns, the cost of living off campus was either the same as or lower than living on campus; this is not always the case, however, as in 20 towns, the reverse was true (Trulia, n.d.).

In conjunction with cost, the availability of on-campus housing is an important factor for international students. Just as with cost, international students are more satisfied with the availability of off-campus housing than with the availability of on-campus housing (see **Figure 8**). Students are also more satisfied with housing availability in general (for both on- and off-campus housing) than they are with the cost. However, satisfaction with housing availability fluctuates depending on where the institution is located. Students attending rural HEIs are 10 percent more dissatisfied with the availability of off-campus housing than students attending city schools.

The cost and availability of housing, both on and off campus, almost certainly influence the high proportion of international students living off campus. International students tend to be more dissatisfied with on-campus housing compared with off-campus. Though living on campus is not the first choice for all students, it does offer convenience and a level of predictability and security for many students moving to the U.S. for the first time. Institutions should therefore strive to minimize the obstacles of affordability and availability to allow international students who wish to do so to live on campus. Schools should work to provide housing rates that are comparable to or less expensive than local housing options.

In cases where schools are unable to offer more affordable housing rates or build more housing, there are still several ways that they can ease the burden of procuring housing for international students. Schools can set up an off-campus housing website for individuals affiliated with the school. Through the website, these affiliates can post roommate ads and rental options.

Prior to the students' arrival, institutions can also post on social media and email clear directions that explain how to obtain housing. These instructions should include the specific steps students can take to secure off-campus housing, a list of necessary documents for lease applications, and clear upfront cost estimates. Institutions can further support students by letting them know what to expect from a landlord and what rights they have as tenants in their state and locale. Partnerships with local landlords and housing agreements are additional avenues schools can use to support international students. HEIs that have housing relationships in the community can suggest particular landlords who have a history of responsibly renting to international students.

Once students have secured appropriate housing, mastering the local transportation options to and from school and to places in the surrounding

town or city is next. Currently, transportation poses significant difficulty for international students. More international students say that transportation is challenging (51 percent) compared with those who say it is not (45 percent). Transportation may take a variety of forms including cars, subways, bikes, and buses, depending on the location of the institution.

Students attending school in the Southwest are the most likely to find transportation challenging (63 percent), while those in the Northeast find it the least challenging (42 percent). This is likely related to the availability of public transportation and the density of cities in the Northeast compared with the Southwest (Census, 2000; Maciag, 2013). While Northeastern cities tend to be more compact, Southwestern cities and towns are often physically larger and more spread out (Maciag, 2013). Notably, international students at rural institutions are more likely to say that transportation is challenging (72 percent) compared with students attending urban schools (46 percent). HEIs in rural areas often require cars as a mode of transportation. Rural areas typically offer limited or no public transit options.

Institutions can help support international students as they navigate local transportation. Most institutions can offer airport pickup to international students when they first arrive. Past this initial stage, urban schools can provide clear information on public transportation options including how to use them, the cost, and where to purchase transit passes. Rural schools can provide information to students about procuring a driver's license and purchasing a car. They can also offer shuttle buses that leave campus and go to common destinations such as the local grocery store.

The ability to buy food that meets both dietary and cultural needs is an important aspect of daily living. Food has the potential to provide not only nourishment for brains and bodies, but also the comfort of home when familiar recipes and dishes are served. International students

say that finding appropriate food to meet all of these requirements is a significant challenge. In fact, nearly a quarter of international students are not able to find food that meets their needs on campus (24 percent). Students who are unable to find appropriate food cite inadequate options (56 percent), lack of food options from their home country (49 percent), and high prices (42 percent) as the most common issues (see **Figure 9**).

Institutions can help support international students by offering a wide variety of food designed to meet numerous needs. Providing spaces on campus where international students can purchase dishes common in their home countries is an often overlooked way of supporting students. However, it is the second most common reason students give for not having their food needs met. Institutions that have a lot of students from sub-Saharan Africa should especially focus on this area as much as possible, as these students are most likely to say

that their school does not provide food options from their home country (74 percent).

Southeast Asian students, on the other hand, are the most dissatisfied with food options and prices at their institutions. Lack of variety is the number one complaint among international students. Schools should work to offer multiple food options, and, importantly, these options should be affordable. The third most common reason students say food options do not meet their needs is because the food is simply too expensive. Institutions can strive to provide healthy options at multiple price points on campus to help alleviate this burden. Increasing variety can also help address other complaints, such as dietary restrictions and religious needs. Schools can provide cuisine that is kosher, halal, or vegetarian, for example, or offer alternatives to accommodate common food allergies, such as to gluten and dairy.

**Figure 9: Perceived Problems with Food Offerings at Institution**



## **RECOMMENDATIONS** (Daily Life)

- **Help international students find housing through multiple avenues.** Institutions can assist international students in securing safe, affordable housing in a variety of ways. If possible, HEIs should offer on-campus housing that is less expensive than or comparable to local off-campus options. For off-campus housing assistance, the Housing Office can establish an off-campus housing website where individuals affiliated with the institution can post roommate ads. The website can also provide step-by-step instructions on how international students can obtain off-campus housing, including a list of necessary documents, information on the upfront financial cost, what to expect from a landlord, and state tenant rights.
- **Guide international students as they learn to navigate local transportation.** For institutions located in towns and cities that offer public transit options, provide clear information to students on how to use them, the cost, and where to purchase passes. For schools in areas without public transportation, provide information on how students can procure a driver's license and purchase a car. Schools may also want to consider instituting a shuttle bus system that takes students to common local destinations, such as the local grocery store. HEIs that are able to should provide airport pickup for international students upon arrival.
- **Offer a wide variety of foods on campus that meet dietary and cultural needs.** Institutions should make sure that campus dining options include cuisines and dishes common to international students' home countries, particularly those of sub-Saharan Africa. Food should be available at affordable prices, and kosher and halal options should be offered. Additionally, schools can support students who have common food allergies, such as to gluten and dairy, by providing alternatives.



## CONCLUSION

The international student experience is a multifaceted one. It incorporates concrete pieces such as academic coursework, and more amorphous, yet omnipresent, aspects, such as social inclusion, and the individual moments of daily life that together form what we call the student experience. These factors, combined with the particular student and the specific institution, culminate in a complex array of encounters that determine the degree to which international students feel supported during their academic journey. Institutions can provide exceptional support by listening to international student voices, as documented in the previous pages, and tailoring programs and interventions to meet student needs from pre-arrival to graduation and beyond.

The benefits of a positive and productive international student experience are numerous, both for the students and the institution. Positive, healthy experiences create better prepared world citizens, who create ripple effects as they enter the job market in the U.S. or abroad. These experiences foster the development of persuasive and vocal alumni who will no doubt influence the higher education choices of their family and friends. In a time when xenophobic and insular political narratives dominate the world stage, it is particularly important for institutions to offer extraordinary student support services to international students. Through intentional, evidence-based support, U.S. HEIs have the power to combat intolerant, dogmatic policies and instead establish a collaborative, cross-cultural synergy of ideas and innovation.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions laid out in the Introduction and explore international student experiences, WES designed a mixed methods study, which included the following three sources:

- Literature Review (Secondary data)
- Qualitative Online Bulletin Board (OBB) (Primary data)
- Quantitative Survey (Primary data)

Relevant information discovered through the literature review and OBB were used to develop the survey. The survey is the most prominent piece of the study.

### ONLINE BULLETIN BOARD

From January 7 to January 9, 2019, 23 current international students participated in a three-day OBB. For this qualitative research method, participants were given a set of questions to respond to each day in an online forum. Participants answered discussion questions posed by WES and responded to each other's answers as well. Participants logged into the OBB at their convenience each day and answered the questions. They were offered a \$75 Amazon gift card for their participation.

Of the 29 persons selected for the OBB, 23 actively participated. The 23 active participants attended institutions across all five regions of the U.S. (Midwest, Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, West) and were citizens of 15 countries. The majority of participants (61 percent) were at the master's level; 22 percent were at the doctoral level, 13 percent were at the bachelor's level, and 4 percent were working toward a certificate; 61 percent of respondents were male, and 39 percent were female.

Participant quotes and answers from the OBB are used throughout the report to offer specific examples of larger trends found in the quantitative survey data.

## SURVEY

In early 2019, WES launched an online survey about international student experiences, which remained open from February 25 to March 14. The survey included a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions. Ultimately, it collected a total of 1,921 valid responses from two target groups:

- **Currently enrolled international students:** International students who were currently enrolled in a brick and mortar degree program at a U.S. HEI at the time of taking the survey
- **Recent graduates:** International students who graduated from a brick and mortar U.S. degree program one year ago or less at the time of taking the survey

Recent graduates were asked to answer the survey questions as if they were still enrolled in their program. Throughout the report, we use the term “international students,” which refers collectively to currently enrolled students as well as these recent graduates.

The survey was sent to individuals who had used WES services and applied for a WES credential evaluation.<sup>5</sup> Of the invited individuals, 20 percent were offered an incentive to win one of four \$100 Amazon gift cards; 80 percent of invited individuals were not offered an incentive.

Using SPSS, we analyzed the survey results and looked specifically at overall frequencies and frequencies disaggregated by respondent characteristics (for example, the percentage of satisfaction of all respondents, as well as the percentage of satisfaction of respondents at the master’s level compared with respondents at the bachelor’s level). When examining the frequency

data disaggregated by groups, we also employed chi-square statistics (Statistics Solutions, 2019). A chi-square test reveals if there is a statistically significant difference between two or more groups (for example, between regions of origin). Whether the result is statistically significant or not allows us to discern which percentage differences between groups are likely due to chance, and which ones illuminate a pattern within the larger population. We then performed a z-test to see where that statistically significant difference took place between the groups (IBM, n.d.). For example, perhaps students from one region, such as sub-Saharan Africa, were statistically more satisfied with their overall experience studying in the U.S. than those of another region, such as South and Central Asia, but the rest of the regions were not statistically different from each other. The z-test allows us to make that distinction.

When conducting the survey analysis, we collapsed the scales used in the survey into “overall” categories. For example, when respondents were asked to select “Strongly disagree,” “Disagree,” “Agree,” or “Strongly agree,” we combined the answers into “Overall disagree” and “Overall agree.” This allowed us to conduct the analysis using a two-point scale rather than a four-point scale. We used this method for all scales used in the survey.

## LIMITATIONS

The survey sample is restricted to individuals who have used WES services and applied for a WES credential evaluation. Because of this limitation, the survey findings may not be generalizable to the entire international student population in the U.S. It may also result in self-selection and sample biases.

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5 It is important to note that not everyone who orders a credential evaluation report ends up matriculating at an in-person degree program in the U.S. Some students use the report to pursue an online degree; others ultimately choose a different country for a variety of reasons, including preference, visa complications, and cost; and still others are domestic students who have had their study abroad credentials evaluated. The survey therefore relied on filter questions to ensure that only currently enrolled international students and recent graduates from in-person U.S. degree programs were included in the study. As a result of the fact that not everyone who received a survey invitation was eligible to participate, we had a relatively modest response rate of 2 percent.

## RESPONDENT PROFILE

The majority of survey participants are currently enrolled international students (76 percent) and the remaining participants graduated within one year of taking the survey (24 percent). Participants attend public (55 percent) and private (45 percent) institutions in similar proportions. Seventy-four percent of international students enrolled in their program in 2017 or later, and the majority attend an institution in a city or urban area (71 percent).

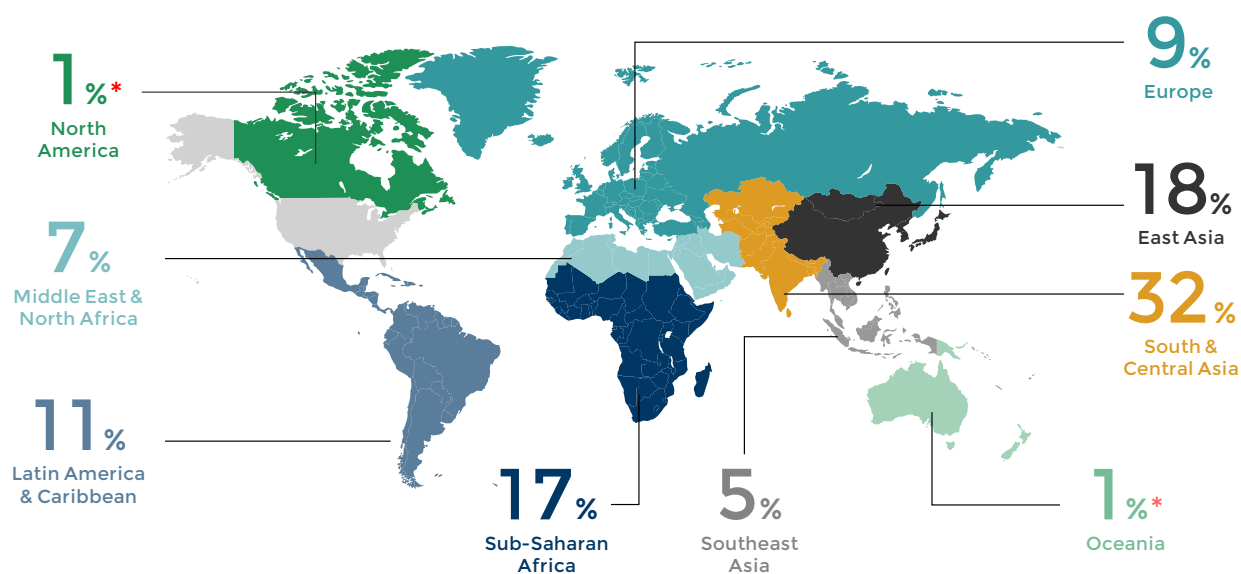
More participants attend school in the Southeast (30 percent) and Northeast (28 percent) compared with the Midwest (18 percent), West (16 percent), and Southwest (8 percent). Most international students are enrolled in a master's program (63 percent); smaller proportions of students enrolled at the bachelor's (14 percent), doctoral (13 percent) and associate (7 percent) levels.

There were similar proportions of females (55 percent) and males (45 percent) with slightly more females. The vast majority of survey participants

are in the U.S. on an F-1 visa (81 percent). The three most popular fields of study for survey participants are health care and medicine (23 percent); business, finance, accounting, and management (17 percent); and engineering, manufacturing, and construction (16 percent).

The international students in our sample are from all over the world, with the largest numbers coming from South and Central Asia (32 percent), East Asia (18 percent), and sub-Saharan Africa (17 percent) (see **Figure 10**). Smaller proportions of students are from Latin America and the Caribbean (11 percent), Europe (9 percent), MENA (7 percent), and Southeast Asia (5 percent). Respondents from North America (that is, Canada), Oceania, and "Other" were excluded from the regional analysis because of their insufficient numbers, but were included in the overall findings. Since China and India are the top two senders of international students to the U.S., comprising 34 percent and 18 percent of the 2018/19 international student population respectively (IIE, 2019), country-specific data for respondents from these two nations have been added alongside regional data for some topics.

**Figure 10: Region of Origin**



\*North America and Oceania were not included in regional analyses due to low response rates. Less than 0.5% of respondents selected "Other," which is also not included in regional analyses. Responses from these regions, however, were included in the overall findings.

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### **Improving the International Student Experience: Implications for Recruitment and Support**

Provides insights into U.S.-educated international student motivations, expectations, experiences, satisfaction levels, and the likelihood of recommending their institutions to others. The report also discusses implications of the findings and offers recommendations for both recruitment and retention of international students.



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