



# Prioritizing **International Student** Well-Being



TERRADOTTA





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# Preface



**MENTAL HEALTH** has long been a challenge for international students as they navigated a new culture far from home. Back in 2007, some 44% of international graduate students surveyed had an emotional or stress-related problem that impacted their well-being or academic performance, according to a **study** from the Journal of American College Health.

But the world is far more complicated than it was in 2007. Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, international students are grappling with a collection of obstacles — international conflicts, extreme weather events, embassy bottlenecks, and, in the United States, reports of gun violence and an escalation of racist events, particularly directed at Asians. All of this is having a dramatic impact on students' travel abilities, academic dreams, and mental health.

# 44%

**SURVEYED INTERNATIONAL  
GRADUATE STUDENTS HAD  
AN EMOTIONAL OR STRESS-  
RELATED PROBLEM**

## Common Stressors

Uncertainty and anxiety created by COVID-19-related decisions and policies topped the list of international student stressors, according to a [study published in May 2022](#). COVID concerns may be subsiding now, but three remaining stressors likely continue to be top of mind. They are:

- 1 FEARS REGARDING XENOPHOBIA.**
- 2 LIMITED UNDERSTANDING BY EDUCATORS AND SCHOOL STAFF OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' UNIQUE CHALLENGES.**
- 3 GREATER AWARENESS OF RACIAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY**

The good news is that international students are back on campus. After a drop in enrollment during the pandemic, international student numbers are on the rebound, according to the **2022 Open Doors report**. The **number of international students** enrolled as freshman during the 2021-22 academic year came to 58,700, up 20% from the year before. Total enrolled international students rose by nearly 8% from the previous academic year.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS  
ENROLLED AS FRESHMAN UP

20%



Now, mostly back on campus, the struggles have only continued. Uncertainty about the ongoing pandemic, an escalation in racism and xenophobia in the United States, and war and threats of war across the globe are making matters difficult for international students. Even now, in 2022, to return in person, many are experiencing embassy bottlenecks as they maneuver through the often confusing immigration system.

As we move forward, however, higher education institutions can't lose sight of the growing needs of those returning students. And to best support them, colleges and universities must double down on prioritizing their well-being. Luckily, many are answering the call by working to build a better and more cohesive community for their international students.

**Here are seven ways to support international students and their mental health.**





# 1

## UNDERSTAND CULTURAL HESITATION

International students may be wary of accessing mental health resources for a variety of reasons. Some fear their academic dreams will get derailed or that they'll get sent home if they reach out for help. For others, mental health access simply isn't common in their home countries or communities.

Talking with other students from the same cultural backgrounds who had positive experiences when they sought help is one way to reduce the stigma. Connect with international students and U.S. students from culturally diverse backgrounds who have sought support, possibly through the campus counseling center, and encourage them to share their experience with their peers.

**TIP:** Providing students with a virtual mental health platform with access to a diverse array of counselors who speak different languages and understand different cultures is another way to support international students who are wary of getting help. Baylor University offers students resources through a virtual mental health counseling website that they can access from anywhere in the world to receive services.

## UNLIKELY PATIENTS

Just 33% of international students said they'd consider seeking care from campus counseling services, compared to 56% of their domestic peers.







# 2

## KNOW THE TRIGGERS

Holidays and school breaks can be a trigger for some international students as they see their classmates heading home to celebrate with family and anticipate the loneliness of a few days to several weeks on their own.

**TIP:** During breaks, find ways to connect international students with others. Organize an event for international students who remain on campus. Or, connect them with local families who can host and introduce them to an American holiday.





# 3

## CONNECT STUDENTS WITH COUNSELING

Don't just tell international students that a campus counseling center exists, introduce them to the people who work there. Invite counseling center representatives to a student gathering. Encourage the counseling center to speak at international student group meetings and sponsor their events. Some college campuses are even embedding counselors in international student support offices.

**TIP:** The University of Rochester's international student office has coordinated both in-person and virtual drop-in sessions with the university's counseling center. The programs support specific groups of international students who represent the same region or demographic.



A photograph of three young adults, two women and one man, sitting on a grassy area outdoors. They are all looking at a tablet held by one of the women. The man on the left is wearing glasses and a blue t-shirt. The woman in the middle is wearing a light blue t-shirt. The woman on the right is wearing a dark blue t-shirt. A large, bold, black number '4' is overlaid on the image, positioned above a white rectangular box that contains text.

# 4

## MAKE INTERNATIONALIZATION A GOAL

Internationalization has long been an aim for higher education institutions to ensure that students are ready to live and work in a global society. But it's also key to supporting international students' mental health. That's because when leaders set an expectation that faculty and staff will be attuned to the unique needs of all students, including international ones, it's more likely that their needs will be met.

**TIP:** At the University of Delaware, the emphasis is on the “Global We,” and international student engagement staff keep students informed of their work on their behalf through student leadership networks and email campaigns. They also survey students to learn more about their experiences and needs.



# 5

## FOCUS ON COMMUNICATION

Don't stop at orientation. Develop a regular communication cadence with international students to highlight campus resources and events to build community and connection and news about changing immigrations rules to let them know you're ready to help.

**TIP:** Baylor University sends international students a weekly newsletter that promotes campus services and encourages their use. And the University of Rochester regularly communicates with both international students and their parents to keep them updated on news and issues and to be available as a sounding board for their concerns.

## DID YOU KNOW?

Terra Dotta can help you maintain open lines of communication with students with automated and personalized messaging to keep them engaged with your office, their peers, and the institution. Talk to us about Engage!





A background image showing a group of diverse students in a library or study hall. In the foreground, a Black man with glasses and a beard is smiling while looking at a laptop. Behind him, a white man is also smiling. In the background, a woman is reading a book, and another man is looking at a phone. Bookshelves filled with books are visible in the background.

# 6

## BE A RESOURCE

On-campus cultural groups and other activities popular with international students may have been on hiatus or disbanded during the pandemic. Help students rebuild those organizations, which can provide vital connections to their peers.

**TIP:** At the University of Delaware, in a partnership with the career center, the international student staff is offering development training through a career lens. The program prepares students to be leaders on campus and provides a pathway toward professional development and career competencies.



# 7

## HELP THEM BUILD A BROADER COMMUNITY

International students can sometimes isolate themselves, focusing on their studies and socializing only with students from their own home countries. Help them make campus a home by connecting them with other students and broader parts of the community.

**TIP:** Baylor University is upgrading its friendship program, a two-part program that pairs international students with a peer on campus, who can acclimate them to campus life. It's also updating its host program that connects students with local families.



# MAKE IT PERSONAL

**WHILE MENTAL HEALTH** on college campuses has reached crisis levels, state governments do not offer health policies that ensure services are accessible to students. **This leaves higher education institutions on their own in developing such programs.**

As colleges and universities pave their own paths forward, here are recommendations to consider:

## **Don't rely solely on technology**

**Academic research** demonstrates that personalized academic advising can be a huge motivator for students, especially diverse ones. Give academic advisors the time and space to interact, engage and build community with international students.

Even as technology makes it easier for students to register their classes or update their academic plans, make sure that human interactions are at the center of the student experience, not an afterthought. And be mindful that not all students, particularly underrepresented ones, have full access to technology, making those personalized interactions all the more important.

## **Get their opinions**

Conduct a systematic assessment of the campus climate for diversity, equity and inclusion to understand how students are feeling and if they are experiencing social or academic isolation.

no state governments have mental health policies ensuring that services are accessible to students

## **Let them talk**

Provide a space for intercultural communication and dialogues to promote a deeper understanding of the challenges and to find ways to reduce implicit bias, microaggression, marginalization, discrimination, and educational and technological inequities.







CLOSER LOOK:

## BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

LOCATION

Waco,  
Texas

TOTAL STUDENT  
POPULATION

14,300

INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENT  
POPULATION

860

As it bolsters international student support, Baylor is looking to provide a more holistic set of services, said Jeff Hamilton, vice provost for global engagement.

### Supporting specific needs

Baylor has launched an International Student Academic Services office where faculty and staff can flag international students who might need to shore up their language skills or cultural competencies. And it's also working, as part of an American Council on Education's Internationalization Laboratory cohort, on a global dashboard. It will eventually share information about Baylor's overall international student and faculty population, along with videos and other resources that share tips for working with students from different cultures.

### Thinking about the families

Graduate students often come with spouses and children. Baylor has worked to meet the needs of their students. It's beginning to be more intentional about addressing the needs of the families that come with them, particularly spouses who may be isolated if they speak little English or have no social network nearby. Team members are looking for ways to better support them, possibly with language instruction and social activities.



CLOSER LOOK:

## UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHARLOTTE



LOCATION

Charlotte,  
North  
Carolina

TOTAL STUDENT  
POPULATION

24,175

INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENTS POPULATION

2,000

Among the top strategic priorities for UNC-Charlotte's Office of International Programs is working to increase and expand international students' sense of belonging and engagement, said Joël A. Gallegos, assistant provost for international programs.

The office's plans call for including Career Services and the Center for Graduate Life and Learning in its ecosystem to address things that matter to international students beyond immigration and regulatory concerns.

“While we don't have the secret recipe, we are certainly committed to identifying far more proactive and successful ways that we integrate them into campus life.

—JOËL A. GALLEGOS

*ASSISTANT PROVOST FOR INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS*





# CONCLUSION

**AS TRAVEL GETS EASIER** and international education leaders move into a “new normal,” setting goals for the future through strategic plans and new projects, it’s also vital to remember what will make those plans successful. And that includes providing robust mental health resources and a campus community that encourages international students to take advantage of them so they can ultimately thrive.



INCOMING



OUTGOING



TRAVEL RISK



ENGAGEMENT

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