Writing Support for International Graduate Students

Enhancing Transition and Success

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1 Introduction

> Since our class entered college, the faculty has introduced … Arnold's Latin and Greek prose composition…. Now you know probably the many disadvantages in which I labor aside from these additional studies…. I therefore request you to send me up the keys to those [texts].
>
> (Yung Wing, a Chinese student at Yale College, 1851; Yale University library archive)

> The Chinese students fail out of the program. We have never graduated the Chinese students…. I think that the challenge is that few people in the program understand that these students are shell shocked, and [instructors] don't understand the [educational backgrounds] that these students came from. (Interview with an instructor at a California university, February 2016)

The first quotation above is from a letter sent from Yale University in 1851 by the first Chinese student to graduate from a U.S. college, named Yung Wing, to a former classmate named Albert Booth, who had moved to New York City. Brought to Connecticut four years earlier by a Christian missionary, Yung Wing had completed high school in Hartford before joining Yale College. At the end of the first year in college, he wrote to seemingly the only person he could turn to for help with purchasing the "keys" to two new Composition textbooks that he had just found out were extensively used by other students. The contents of the letter powerfully illustrate the multiple layers of challenges that students face when they pursue education in a new country and culture away from home, challenges that often extend far beyond their studies but affect their academic experience and success more than they would at home.

The second quotation is from an interview with an instructor at a business school in a public university in California who was responding to my question about what kinds of writing-related academic support was provided to international graduate students at her institution. The instructor's response reminded me that international students still face some of the same challenges that Yung Wing did in the 1850s.

While today's international students in most American cities can find more company, are better treated by peers and professors, and can find more resources, they still encounter additional "disadvantages" that aggravate the challenges of reading, writing, and other aspects of pursuing higher education in a foreign country. Besides "additional studies" for improving and adapting their linguistic and communicative skills, they must tackle challenges related to immigration laws and political climate; deal with often overt prejudice outside campus and subtle stereotypes that obscure realities about them even within; and overcome financial, emotional, cultural, and social challenges that affect them in ways that are often not visible to those who haven't gone through similar experiences of international education.

Yung Wing's process of learning to write involved acquiring significant proficiency in the English language, the aspect of learning to communicate in a new place that is most visible to others. He had started learning English before he came to Hartford in 1847 from Macao, with a missionary named Samuel Brown, continuing it at a preparatory school named Monson Academy and through the mentorship of Brown's friend, Charles Hammond. When he joined college, learning to write further demanded significant command of rhetorical conventions and communicative practices in a new culture and society. He evidently did all of that well. Unfortunately, as historical accounts of this international student indicate,[1] even after he had become proficient enough to win much-coveted composition contests, he was never accorded the same treatment and understanding as his fellow domestic students because perceptions about his language and communication were shaped by his identity as a foreigner. In a book on the history of international students in the United States, Bevis and Lucas (2008)[2] note that Yung Wing, even though he was engaged in student clubs and the debate team, was considered a "loner who had little social interaction although he was a common sight around campus" (44). Generally speaking, Yung Wing's experiences reflect a critical but often overlooked dimension of foreign students'[3] educational journey: how their status as outsiders affects almost every aspect of their education, including their learning and their performance of academic writing. As we can see better from a distance today, Yung Wing wrote the letter during a period when, even after his graduation in 1854, fluctuating political relations between China and the United States (including such events as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) seriously undermined his frequently unsuccessful, 58-year attempt to be an academic and social ambassador between the two nations.

My field notes from visiting 20 universities across the United States, between 2014 and 2017, as well as an analysis of the interviews that I conducted with 44 international graduate students, reveal striking patterns of challenges about the process of learning to write and communicate

that are unique to international students in general and also distinct from those of their undergraduate counterparts. Interviews with three times as many scholars and academic professionals who worked closely with these students strongly reinforced the same patterns. In individual interviews and focus group conversations, students shared powerful stories about how that process was shaped and affected by a variety of challenges and realities, both in kind and degree, beyond what domestic graduate students generally encounter. For example, a doctoral student in pharmacology at the University of Louisiana, Monroe, whom I call "Vijay," [4] said that he was "completely lost" during class discussions when he first arrived because he couldn't make sense of the rhetorical moves made by the professor and his classmates. He struggled to remain motivated despite social isolation and continued culture shock and almost had to discontinue his degree when his grant-based funding ended (given his visa status). He did not know about writing support before he tried it and then found it inadequate. Eventually, he learned to create and use his own ad hoc networks of support toward eventual success. As with many other students I interviewed, faculty and staff members who paid attention to what Vijay was facing as an *international* student better understood political and ideological forces/realities against which he learned to academically succeed (the subject of Chapter 2 of this book). Their attention to Vijay's true needs helped faculty advisors and academic support professionals develop better perspectives for supporting international graduate students (the subject of Chapter 3).

The key factor that enables international students to more quickly and effectively learn and to use writing skills for navigating a new academic culture and negotiating their intellectual positions is the design of support that fosters their own *agency* to explore the ecology of resources at their disposal (Chapter 4). This agency best thrives when support is driven by *advocacy* for the students (Chapter 5). While the experiences of individual students I interviewed were unique, and the issues discussed by the academic professionals I interviewed were contingent on their distinct institutional contexts, my research identified significant correlations between seemingly extraneous forces and students' process of learning to write, interactions that deserve exploration in the context of graduate-level writing support for these students *as* international students. Thus, I view "writing support" as a means for helping students to learn and to use writing skills in the broader context of academic and professional "communication"—in the same sense as the emerging professional community uses the term "graduate-level communication." Furthermore, in the case of international graduate students, I consider learning to write as a complex puzzle requiring a number of linguistic, rhetorical, cultural, and social skills that they must gather from a variety of places and processes, formal and informal, visible or invisible to writing support professionals.

The demographic that this book focuses on is the more than half a million *foreign* students at the graduate level in the United States (ICE, 2017),[5] roughly a third of whom are new to American academic culture when they first arrive from around the world every year.[6] Whether permanent residents, refugees on any status, or undocumented students, students with prior education in other countries are typically excluded by the term “international” due to a definitional focus on immigration status; however, the thematic scope of this book includes all students, in any visa/immigration status, who received all or nearly most of their pre-graduate education outside the US.[7] The academic professionals[8] I interviewed for this book included writing scholars and researchers, instructors of writing and of language who taught writing skills, faculty advisors and graduate program directors in other departments, administrators and staff members in various academic support units, graduate deans and deans of specific schools, and a few institutional leaders above the level of deans. These professionals encompassed the broader ecology in which the students learned graduate-level writing and communication skills.

The goal of this book is not to present a full and objective picture of graduate writing support for international students in the United States, but to describe and draw theoretical insights from the findings of a research project that studied what made a number of selected programs[9] most useful for foreign students, further exploring how these students use additional support and resources available in the larger ecology of their institutions. My objective was also not to present program profiles[10] since I did not study the programs long-term or extensively; my focus was to analyze data from across institutions in order to identify important issues about programs and pedagogies while also discussing policy implications. While I revisited some institutions, conducted follow-up interviews remotely about others, then gathered additional information about all programs from secondary sources, I used the data I collected principally to explore themes emerging from reiterative analysis of the data. Similarly, the narratives that I have chosen for discussing student experiences are only meant to be illustrative of salient themes that I identified from analyzing the data, rather than being considered case studies of students. I also use themes emerging from perspectives shared by academic scholars and professionals working with international graduate students as the basis for discussing broader geopolitical issues that shape and influence international education. So, I encourage readers to pay attention to the *situatedness* of the programs and support practices, themes in students’ experiences stories, and perspectives shared by academic professionals who worked with the students. I hope this book will add to and help foreground additional topics and themes about international students in conversations about graduate-level writing support.

Study Design and Data Collection

Between the spring of 2014 and summer of 2017, I conducted 168 interviews, of which 12 were follow-ups. Among them, I transcribed 157 interviews for coding and analysis, excluding 11 interviews that didn't provide considerable context or focus vis-à-vis my project objective. Among the interviews included, four were with groups of students with an average of six participants, four more involved faculty and staff members with an average of six participants, and five were with two academic professionals each. The total number of individuals involved was 191. Most of the interviews were conducted at 20 university campuses,[11] and 22 of them were conducted at six academic conferences (for the most part early in the process); seven of the initial interviews were by phone/videoconferencing; two were by email, with participants who requested email as the medium. Including the institutions of participants whom I interviewed virtually or at conferences increases the number of universities studied to 36. Most of the follow-ups were conducted by phone, and new participants were interviewed when revisiting four of the 20 visited institutions. Research consent was acquired by asking interviewees to sign them before interviews done in person; they were secured by email in other cases.

It would be too complicated to describe all the overlapping roles of participants, but to focus mainly on the primary roles, 16 of the 157 interviews were with writing program or writing center directors (including six graduate writing support specialists); nine associate directors or coordinators of writing programs; 32 writing instructors, including seven ESL specialists (19 of whom also did research); 19 directors/coordinators of academic services (such as English language support, international teaching assistants support, library support, student success centers, and centers for teaching and learning); 27 staff members in the academic services just mentioned; six directors of international student offices and seven academic liaisons/coordinators who worked in or with international centers; 22 faculty members from other disciplines (one retired), including six heads of academic programs or departments; four university administrators (vice presidents and vice provosts); 11 deans (including five graduate deans); 44 international graduate students (11 of them graduate teaching assistants); and five members of the community who were informally involved or had experience of providing academic support for international students. In addition to students and academic professionals, two interviewees were editors of biology journals at a publishing house. Their interviews were included in the data set as offering some additional perspectives. Besides formal interviews with professionals in nonacademic positions (with research consent), such as with one housing program assistant director, one director of "global connections" community on campus, and one officer from a state department of education, a number of informal conversations have also indirectly informed this study.

The research for this book was designed by using a "constructivist" version of Grounded Theory approach to data collection and analysis. This specific method as described by Charmaz (2006)[12] provides a set of "systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves" (2). Adapted from earlier Grounded Theory scholars, including sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967),[13] who originally developed this methodology in response to the dismissal of sociological research by many at the time as lacking objectivity and reliability, the strategies described by Charmaz fit my research purpose because they allowed me to "construct theories through [my] past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices" (10). Furthermore, the Grounded Theory method not only helped me start "with an area of study [in mind] … allowing the theory to emerge from [analyzing] the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 12),[14] instead of starting with "preconceived theory in mind." Charmaz's version of Grounded Theory also provided a variety of more specific affordances, including allowing me to draw on relevant scholarship, to be clear about my identity and positionality as a researcher, and to approach data without the rigidity and jargon associated with other developments in the methodology. This approach acknowledges that subjectivity and ambiguity in study design and data interpretation are inevitable in all research, and it helps researchers use that awareness self-consciously and productively. Regarding a researcher's own past experiences and perspectives, Charmaz notes that prior knowledge can be helpful in *sensitizing* the grounded theorist, encouraging writers to provide readers with a theoretical framing as an anchor and to show how one's Grounded Theory "*refines, extends, challenges,* or *supersedes* extant concepts" (169). Knowing that researchers are "*part* of [their] constructed theory and [their] theory reflects the vantage points inherent in [their] varied experiences, whether or not [they] are aware of them" (149) helped me to be alert and to use my positionality and experience meaningfully rather than unrealistically try to disown it. This research paradigm also assumes that discourses, beliefs, and institutions are constructed and shaped by social and political forces and conditions and that they are also complex and can be interpreted differently (Cresswell, 2007; 20).[15] The constructive approach is also flexible about using and adapting relevant tools and strategies of research. I have used additional guidelines from Saldaña's (2009)[16] Grounded Theory coding manual and relevant strategies from other Grounded Theory scholars—~~trying~~ to try not to force the findings from a broad and complex data set into rigid and jargon-filled structure or process.

Finally, constructivist Grounded Theory method acknowledges that the researcher's work is shaped by the discourses, beliefs, and values of his or her discipline and profession. It doesn't require rigidity about the relationship between new findings and current scholarship on the

some pages skipped...

what theme best belongs to what chapter and section. The process helped to shuttle among different data inputs and emerging themes/theories, also allowing me to ultimately connect my findings and theorization to relevant scholarship, following what Luckerhoff and Guillimette (2011) call the helical path of Grounded Theory approach.

An Ecological Framework

In the iterative process of gathering and analyzing data from different universities, the people, programs, and institutions that I was learning from and about became increasingly diverse. The constructivist Grounded Theory approach to gathering and analyzing data provided flexible strategies for understanding and discussing writing support at different institutions by learning from the "experiences [of participants] within embedded, [often] hidden networks, situations, and relationships" (Cresswell, 2007; 65)[21]. Yet, I increasingly felt that I needed a methodological theory to even better account for contextual complexities of programs and practices and the variety of experiences and perspectives shared by participants. As I completed analyzing the data that I had gathered, I found it useful to adopt the "ecological orientation," a philosophical view of the contexts, participants, and process of research that acknowledges their complexity and fluidity. Considering that the ecological view of research is consistent with Grounded Theory methodology's focus on the use of data analysis for theory-building, I adopted it while developing thematic outlines for chapters and the sections within them.

In a classic article titled "The ecology of writing," Cooper (1986)[22] reflected on the emerging theoretical frameworks for describing writing and its programs and pedagogies, which seemed after some time to become more dogmatic and less capable of describing writing in all its complexity. To address that challenge, she proposed "an ecological model of writing, whose fundamental tenet is that writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems" (367). She similarly viewed the writing researcher as an ecologist who "explores how writers interact to form systems…. made and remade by writers in the act of writing" (368), which is "both constituted by and constitutive of these ever-changing systems, systems through which people relate as complete, social beings" (373). Cooper's view of learning to write is also relevant to understanding how a group of learners like international graduate students explore the complex new ecology of higher education in a new country and the complex, often hidden, network of support and resources for learning writing and communicative skills. So, using the ecological view about writing made it easier to articulate the theoretical observations that I had made while analyzing data about the dispersed and rich networks of support systems

and practices in the different types and sizes of institutions, as well as the decentralized context and structure of graduate education and the very nature of learning to write. This view was also useful for me to best understand the political and ideological forces influencing international education and the ad hoc solutions that students created by *hacking* and going beyond established support systems.

In addition to adopting Cooper's (1986) ecological view of writing, I also borrowed insights from writing scholars who have further advanced the theory and applied it to different areas, including theory and methodology of writing research, program building and sustainability, and discussions about our discipline and profession. Writing in the discipline's flagship journal *College Composition and Communication*, Fleckenstein et al. (2008)[23] presented a substantive framework of writing research using ecological theory. In this book, I draw on the interpretive perspectives provided by Fleckenstein et al.'s article to explain findings related to diversity, fluidity, and change in international graduate students' identity as they interact with and negotiate power and relationship with people and programs across institutions. I found it particularly useful to view the students, and the people and programs supporting them, as "actors, situations, and phenomena … [that are] interdependent, diverse, [and] fused through feedback" (390). Fleckenstein et al. add that an ecological approach to research directs the researcher to focus on relationships, including their own to the rest of the system, thereby fusing the "knower, the known, and the context of knowing" (395). Such an orientation, they argue, "emphasizes the need for research diversity: multiple sites of immersion, multiple perspectives, and multiple methodologies within a particular discipline and research project." Such an orientation also "destabilizes that monoculture [of traditional research], requiring researchers to consider who is empowered to ask questions and solicit answers, who can be the object of study, who can be authorized to analyze the data, and who can conduct and report research" (401). The ecological view of research as described by Fleckenstein et al. facilitated my thinking about the research project at the level of exigency, responsibility, and rigor (404). It also helped me better capture how international graduate students, a highly diverse group of learners, explored and interacted with new systems and cultures as they learned to write and communicate as part of larger and complex processes of academic transition and intellectual and professional growth as writers and scholars.

Analyzing and theming the data about the many types of writing support programs and initiatives also required a flexible view about those programs. In this regard, I have borrowed insights from writing scholars, such as the authors who contributed to an edited collection by Reiff et al. (2015).[24] This work uses ecological views as the authors present "profiles of programs in context." While I focus more on practices, strategies, dynamics, and policies of writing support, I build on Reiff et al.'s

perspectives on how writing programs are situated, interconnected, and interactive within the broader ecology of their institutions. The collection has sought to foreground theoretical scholarship in Writing Studies that "works from an inherently ecological perspective, envisioning writing as bound up in, influenced by, and relational to spaces, places, locations, environments, and the interconnections among the entities they contain" (3); such perspectives were helpful for interpreting graduate-level writing and writing support as involving "discursive and material ecologies" where complex networks of people and relations change and respond to political and economic forces, institutional and programmatic contexts, and the processes and dynamics of learning and support. In addition to building on concepts of "interconnectedness, fluctuation, complexity, and emergence" to understand how writing programs were institutionally situated and developed support for international graduate students, I considered the notion of "third spaces" to account for how the students seemed to develop much of their writing skills. This helped me to update the research and to analyze data with an awareness of how graduate students seek out university resources in ~~third~~ such spaces (Grego & Thompson, 2008[25]; Soja, 1996[26]), outside their departments and formal writing programs, and how international graduate students do so more often, even developing their own *underground* ecologies of resource and support networks.

I also borrowed ecological perspectives when theorizing how international graduate students were taught writing skills within and across the academic disciplines. In *WAC for the new millennium: Strategies for continuing writing-across-the-curriculum programs,* McLeod et al. (2001)[27] urge writing scholars to take a long-term and big-picture view of WAC: "How will WAC survive? How will it grow and change—what new forms will WAC programs take, and how will they adapt to some of the present program elements and structures in the changing scene in higher education?" (4). Responding to calls like the above, writing scholars have conducted national and international surveys of WAC/WID programs (e.g., Thaiss & Porter, 2012)[28] and are developing theoretical models and perspectives (e.g., Melzer, 2013).[29] Cox, Galin, and Melzer[30] have also illustrated theoretically grounded models for development, management, and sustenance of WAC programs. Building on sustainability methods drawn from a Canadian sustainable development mission and the "Imagine approach" developed by Bell and Morse (2008),[31] the scholars propose an integrative WAC model that emphasizes understanding campus context, planning by gathering support and setting goals, developing and implementing projects, and leading to manage growth and change in campus writing culture. An ecological view of writing programs helped me to address a conundrum about growth and sustainability of writing support programs in relation to the need to empower international graduate students to explore the larger

ecology of support and resources across and beyond the institution. I recommend that writing programs adopt an advocacy approach and focus on writing education in order to foster students' epistemological agency, helping them to find and use the support and resources they need, and empowering them to tackle challenges affecting the process of developing identity and voice as writers and scholars especially as they learn to participate and negotiate with power and ideology within their disciplines and beyond. I argue that this approach could also help writing programs provide leadership to their institutions, especially toward addressing emerging challenges of graduate education created by local and global influences of economic and geopolitical forces.

In addition to building on this scholarship in Writing Studies, I draw on ecological perspectives from other disciplines. In particular, I adapt ideas from the "socioecological approach" to research in education as described by Krasny, Tidball, and Sriskandarajah (2009).[32] Reviewing prior scholarship on "social and adaptive learning theories," the authors illustrate the relevance of that literature in educational research, especially because it complicates "systems notions of unpredictability, emergence, and interactions" (1), which they find inadequate for describing more situated and adaptive modes of education. Besides being robust systems in themselves, writing support programs might have to continue (and I argue will benefit from) taking a *participatory* approach to the support they provide students and the role they play in their institutions. In the case of international graduate students in particular, I found the students themselves making it particularly necessary for writing support to participate in, contribute to, and, to the benefit of all parties, take leadership: writing professionals have the expertise for providing critical support for higher education, but graduate education also demands a more sociological approach that is described in the scholarship on educational reform. The students I interviewed described their experiences of developing writing skills and their identity as scholars in their disciplines through "sheer number of interactions … multiple pathways … [relying] on flexibility and adaptive capacity…" (2). Understanding those interactions could prompt writing programs and professionals to develop support practices that help to promote situations where "through ongoing interactions with the social and ecological elements of the larger system, students [can] develop the capacity to play a meaningful role in shaping their own future and that of their larger community" (2). It is productive to view international graduate students' writing skills as emerging from their interactions with a complex network of professionals and from exposure to a variety of communicative opportunities within and beyond the university, and their development of identity and voice as writers and scholars as a process of participation and negotiation with power and ideology within their disciplines and beyond. Writing support programs can be most sustainable and effective if they are built with a deep

understanding that encompasses global, national, social, and institutional realities affecting international graduate students.

Finally, ecological perspectives are useful for theorizing educational policy at all levels. I was inspired to theorize data, as have been numerous scholars of higher education policy, by Weaver-Hightower (2008)[33] and Banathy (1992),[34] as I further develop perspectives about change and sustainability of writing support programs and practices. Weaver-Hightower, for instance, shows how the "ecology metaphor helps us to conceptualize policy processes as complex, interdependent, and intensely political.… [It] is more appropriate than one of *stages* and *circuits* because the interactions of environments, groups, and events capture better the fluidity of processes" (154). I explore major issues about international graduate students with this view of politics and policy in higher education, including political and policy ambiguity about international students, disciplinary ideologies and gaps/tensions affecting them, context and process of their social/academic transition/adjustment, and diversity and complexity of their identity and experiences, in the next chapter.

The Scholarly Context

International students have been a hot topic not just in the news but also in academic scholarship for at least a few decades; so, there is abundant literature that scholars, program leaders, and instructors of writing can draw on. But most of the scholarship does not focus on international students as *international* and instead views them merely as English as a second language (ESL) students, albeit with changing terms. This section foregrounds certain issues in the scholarship while I argue that there is a need for explicitly and substantively focusing on international graduate students *as* international, especially in the context and process of their *academic transition* when they (begin to) learn graduate-level writing skills in the United States (or in similar contexts), both generally and within their specific disciplines. Given the significant influence of the international student "market" upon international graduate students, I also draw insights from within and beyond Writing Studies for asking and exploring new questions and issues relevant for a transition-focused inquiry. In contextualizing my work, especially given that an extensive review is outside the scope and objective of this book, I include a few reviews already done by other scholars during the last two decades on the more than four decades of relevant scholarship.

Visually put (Figure 1.1), while most international students are "second language" [35] users of English (e), and while there are other overlaps that this simple visual doesn't represent, viewing international students only in terms of their language identities and proficiencies (nn) leaves out many other issues about them as *international* or foreign students (i), especially the fact that most of them came from academic cultures and

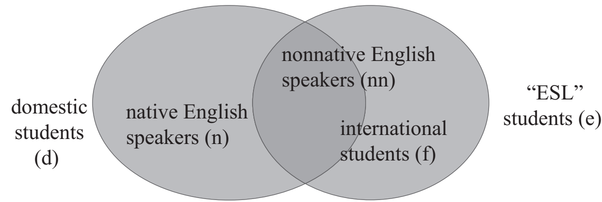

Figure 1.1 Intersections of identities/identifiers.

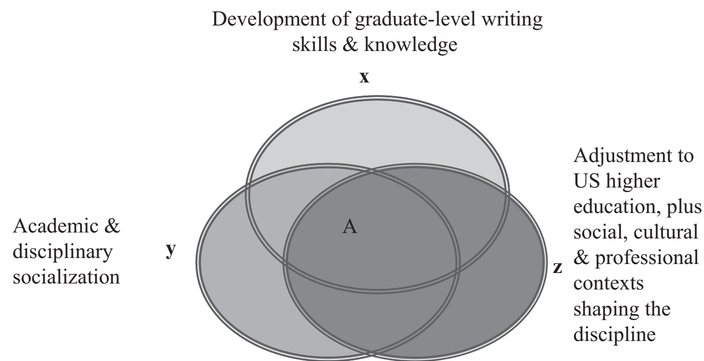

Figure 1.2 Intersections of experiences.

systems that were different from what they encounter here. For example, native English-speaking students from Australia or India may face challenges of academic transition and social/cultural adjustments that a focus on their language identity or proficiency could obscure. In fact, that focus may also obscure the distinction between graduate and undergraduate international students. So, to put it visually again, the intersection from which I seek to borrow insights from existing scholarship in order to discuss specific issues could be represented by the area marked "A" in Figure 1.2. For instance, all graduate students in a given American university may face shared challenges as they develop skills and knowledge required for graduate level writing (x) and in a shared context and process of academic socialization into their discipline (y). In addition, international students must also learn about and adjust to the general culture and system of U.S. higher education and the social/cultural and professional contexts in which the academic discipline is situated (z). Many writing scholars tend to focus on the intersection and find similarities in the abstract or justify a "universal design" for pragmatic reasons, but when the objective is to understand international students and their experiences and needs, looking at the intersection "A" does not have