Engaging International Students via Dialogic Communication

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This study explores the role of communication in engaging international students at higher education institutions, focusing on the efficacy of communication strategies, channels and tactics, and the involvement of key campus players. Using a co-oriented approach, this study gathered insights via 16 in-depth interviews with administrators and faculty/staff, who had 5 years of experience communicating with international students, and 2 focus groups of approximately 19 international students. The findings highlight discrepancies between university representatives and international students about the use of dialogic communication, communication channels, and tactics as strategies for engagement.

Keywords: engagement, dialogic communication, dialogue, higher education

The 2022 Open Doors Report (Institute of International Education, 2022) indicates that international students constitute 4.7% of the total higher education student population in the United States. The leading host states are California, New York, Massachusetts, Texas, and Illinois, with most students coming from China, India, South Korea, Canada, and Vietnam. The fields of math and computer science, engineering, and business and management attract the highest number of international students. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, international student enrollment dropped by 15% in the 2019/2020 academic year, from 1,075,496 to 914,095 students (Institute of International Education, 2022). Hence, as U.S. institutions rebound from declining enrollment numbers, universities must foster a welcoming and inclusive campus environment to attract international students.

International students bring diverse cultural perspectives and significant academic and financial benefits to American universities (Jin & Schneider, 2019; Koseva, 2018). Exposure to different cultural ideologies positively impacts American society by deepening global understanding (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). Universities aiming to recruit international students should foster a globally aware, ethnically diverse, and culturally sensitive environment (McFaul, 2016). Developing diplomatic relationships within universities will improve intercultural communication and overcome cultural barriers (Koseva, 2018; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013).

International students significantly contribute to the academic rigor and financial revenues of American universities (Jin & Schneider, 2019; Koseva, 2018) yet often face social, psychological, cultural, and academic

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maladjustment difficulties (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000). Sullivan and Kashubeck-West (2015) found that increased acculturative stress among international students correlates with reduced sociocultural adaptation. More than half of these students struggle with language and communication barriers (Dubose, 2017; Omar, Mahone, Ngobia, & FitzSimons, 2016), including English writing, reading, and speaking, and unanticipated differences in professor-student relationships, teaching styles, and class participation. These experiences often lead to feelings of self-doubt and perceived failure (Behl, Laux, Roseman, Tiamiyu, & Spann, 2017; Jin & Schneider, 2019). Furthermore, they face racial discrimination and prejudice (Arthur, 2017; Chen, 1999; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019) and struggle with social and cultural maladjustment (Koseva, 2018; Yan & Sendall, 2016). Students from Eastern countries report cultural intolerance, causing feelings of inferiority, isolation, and discomfort (Lee & Rice, 2007; Quinton, 2019). Thus, gaps in sociocultural understanding can result in emotional and mental distress caused by culture shock and homesickness (Koseva, 2018; Yan & Sendall, 2016).

According to Metro-Roland (2018), "The number of international students on U.S. campuses is seen as a relevant marker of a college or university's global engagement" (p. 1408). Consequently, American universities can address these feelings of stress and discontent by implementing communication strategies to enhance students' experiences. Universities are responsible for fostering a climate of belonging, support, and inclusion (Metro-Roland, 2018). Engaging international students is not a "far-fetched, utopian dream" but a moral obligation to ensure a satisfying and meaningful educational experience (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2018, p. 1273).

Campus stakeholders (e.g., academic faculty/staff, student affairs professionals, counseling staff, and university administration) can engage international students through consistent communication. Engagement and dialogue are interconnected across the literature (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Kent and Taylor (2002) assert that dialogue is a two-way communication between participants, and that engagement cannot occur without dialogue. Dialogic communication emphasizes responsive communication that considers stakeholders' interests and needs, fosters mutually inclusive and respectful attitudes, accepts differing viewpoints, and urges active participation (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Prior dialogical communication engagement studies have focused on corporations, nonprofits, and other organizations. Thus, limited empirical evidence exists about how it applies to student engagement, especially for international students.

The current study addresses a critical and timely issue of engaging international students who bring cultural, academic, and financial benefits to universities, yet often face significant barriers. This study aims to explore effective communication strategies, tactics, and channels for engaging international students. Through triangulated data gathered from university officials (e.g., administrators, faculty, staff) and international students via in-depth interviews and focus groups, the findings of this study will contribute to the theory building and advancement of dialogic communication and engagement in higher education institutions. Additionally, it will expand the body of knowledge on communication best practices with international students and provide guidelines for effectively engaging the growing student population.

Literature Review

Defining Engagement

Despite the relevance of engagement in organizational settings, public relations scholarship has produced scant research on this topic (Jelen-Sanchez, 2017). This study adopts Kang's (2014) definition of engagement as a psychological state characterized by affective commitment, positive affectivity, and empowerment. Affective commitment involves dedication, loyalty, or an emotional connection to an organization. Positive affectivity reflects one's passion and excitement toward an organization. Empowerment refers to active involvement in the operations of an organization. Johnson (2014) defined *engagement* as "A key aspect of organizational behavior in an operating environment that is increasingly sensitive to power relations, requiring organizations to be open to the meaning and value that evolves from interactions with diverse stakeholder perspectives" (p. 382). Jelen-Sanchez (2017) observes that engagement scholarship focuses on managing relationships with publics and promoting organizational interests. Dhanesh (2017) proposes a model, placing salient topics of mutual interest as the connecting link between organizations and publics. Engaged members of an organization are invested, hard-working, and dedicated to their work (physical); feel a sense of excitement, pride, and positivity about their work (emotional); and are dedicated to their work (cognitive; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Engaged members feel connected to the purpose and goals of their organization (Men, O'Neil, & Ewing, 2020).

Dialogic Communication

Universities are responsible for fostering the belonging and inclusion of students struggling with American cultural, social, and academic customs (Metro-Roland, 2018). This study proposes that universities can better engage international students through dialogic communication tactics and strategies to break down existing social, cultural, and linguistic barriers. Kent and Taylor (2002) identified five components of dialogue that foster mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and publics. First, the concept of mutuality states that organizations and publics directly impact one another, so collaboration and mutual equality ensure mutuality. A collaborative organizational outlook seeks to understand outside perspectives and accept differing points of view as part of the dialogic process (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Furthermore, dialogic exchanges are built on humility and mutual equality, so participants feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of repercussions (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Second, Kent and Taylor (2002) discuss the importance of dialogic propinquity, where publics are consulted on matters that affect them and encouraged to voice their needs and desires. Dialogic communication emphasizes the importance of building relationships and ensuring "equitable and acceptable futures" for all involved (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 26). Kent and Taylor (2002) assert that relational communication requires genuine empathy, including supportiveness, communal orientation, and confirmation. Empathetic communication enables the organization to build trust with publics by understanding their perspectives. Supportive dialogue promotes mutual understanding and collaboration to reach mutually acceptable outcomes. Because of increased globalization, relationship building between organizations and publics must also be applied within a global context. Therefore, public relations scholars and practitioners should view dialogic communication as both digital and face-to-face conversations. Finally,

the concept of confirmation occurs when the organization gains the public's trust through attentive listening and consideration of their feedback before making significant decisions.

Kent and Taylor (2002) note that "A sympathetic orientation to publics may help the organization improve relationships with external groups. However, within any dialogic relationship lies potential risks—financial, psychological and relational—to the organization and the public" (p. 28). Therefore, risk is the fourth feature of dialogic communication. Risk involves vulnerability, unanticipated consequences, and recognition of strange otherness. Vulnerability and self-disclosure are relational risks that are vital to developing strong relationships. Risks may produce unanticipated consequences since conversations are spontaneous, nonscripted interactions where participants share beliefs without fear of coercion. To openly express themselves, participants must feel accepted and respected. This recognition of strange otherness occurs when participants feel unconditionally valued for their unique characteristics.

Commitment is the final component of dialogue and emphasizes dedication to genuineness, conversation, and interpretation (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Truthfulness and honesty create genuine dialogue. Relational dialogue and mutually beneficial outcomes result when participants candidly discuss issues as they arise.

Participants must also be committed to continuing the conversation to better understand differing perspectives. While agreement is not a guaranteed outcome of conversations, participants will better understand and value opposing points of view. Although dialogic exchanges may not produce immediate mutually satisfying outcomes, desired outcomes can occur when participants commit to furthering the discussion. Taylor and Kent (2014) assert that engagement has always been a component of dialogue stating,

> Every dialogic interaction involves conversational engagement (presentness, synchronous interaction, respect focus, etc.). A dialogic communicator comes to an interaction with his/her own beliefs, values, and attitudes, and with the best interests of his or her own organization and stakeholders in mind, but he or she also needs to be willing to be changed by the encounter. (pp. 389–390)

Dialogic communicators seek to engage stakeholders and publics through interpersonal interactions founded on mutual understanding, patience, self-discovery, and empathy (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Engagement is critical to dialogue as it encompasses the relational aspect of dialogue developed through consistent interaction, trust, valuable feedback, mutual understanding, and shared views between stakeholders and the organization (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Dialogic engagement assumes equality and active participation between organizations and stakeholders. This may not be a realistic expectation in a "top-down" relationship between university officials and students. Therefore, university personnel, such as administrators (university president, college deans, and department chairs), academic faculty and lecturers, and academic staff (academic advisers, career coaches, mental wellness counselors, admissions officers, and student affairs officials), should exercise elements of dialogic communication with students yet be cognizant of inherent power dynamics.

Dialogic Communication and International Student Engagement

University staff who interact with international students regularly, such as academic staff and faculty and student affairs personnel, play a key role in fostering engagement (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). Two-way dialogic communication is increasingly important in engaging international students. Thelen and Men (2018) explored how dialogic messages from universities on social networking sites (SNSs) can impact engagement. Appealing to the interests and emotions of stakeholders yields a higher level of engagement, so it is advantageous for universities to implement dialogic principles when communicating, informing, and listening to their stakeholders (Thelen & Men, 2018). International students typically go through the following three stages: *pre-arrival*, *arrival*, and *during stay* (Kelo, Roberts, & Rumley, 2010). Students experience the most acculturative stress during their *arrival* and *stay* periods (Kelo et al., 2010; Wekullo, 2019). Dialogic interactions with campus partners could help international students adapt to new cultural and social environments.

To further explore how dialogic communication works in international student engagement, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1:   How does dialogic communication, if at all, influence international student engagement?

Communication Channels and Tactics in Engaging International Students

Universities engage students through various channels by providing information on academic resources, immigration requirements, social and cultural activities, safety, and wellness resources (Ammigan & Laws, 2018). Communications range from interaction via SNSs, digital technologies, and traditional face-to-face meetings to static forms of communication via print publications and electronic media (Men & Bowen, 2017). Each medium varies in richness and usability, uniquely contributing to student engagement. Face-to-face and social media conversations are more informal, dialogical forms of communication, while electronic and print communications are more controlled and one-directional (Men & Bowen, 2017). Further research is needed to discover the most effective communication strategies, channels, tactics, and preferences.

Face-to-Face Communication

Face-to-face communication builds trust through nonverbal cues, such as body language, eye contact, voice tone, and facial expressions (Men & Bowen, 2017; Swanson, Renes, & Strange, 2020). Face-to-face interactions offer a deeper connection that fosters intellectual and social engagement (Arthur, 2017). Though widely trusted and preferred, limitations exist, as these interactions are time consuming and restricted by geographical barriers (Men & Bowen, 2017).

Electronic Communication

Electronic mail (e-mail) offers a swift form of communication (Men & Bowen, 2017) that allows international students to interact with host nationals in a nonthreatening way (Fujita, Harrington, & Soutar, 2017). Ammigan and Laws (2018) found that students frequently communicated with the university through e-mail correspondence. Students prefer to receive informational e-mails on upcoming campus events,

cultural and social programming information, and immigration requirements from the university (Ammigan & Laws, 2018). While e-mails can reach a widely dispersed audience, they lack personal cues and the ability to explain complex information (Men & Bowen**,** 2017).

Digital Technology

Digital technologies (e.g., e-learning platforms) aid academic achievement by offering a convenient platform to access information and instruction. Chang and Gomes (2022) highlight the rapid emergence of digital engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a shift to online education. Developing a welcoming and inclusive online community allows international students to acclimate to a new environment, ensuring a smoother transition. Furthermore, digital technologies enable students to rewatch videos, visualize concepts, and process information at their own pace (Henderson, Selwyn, Finger, & Aston, 2015).

Social Media

Social media are accessible digital platforms where students can interact with universities without geographical or hierarchical barriers (Kim, Wang, & Oh, 2016; Sheldon, 2013). These platforms encourage two-way conversations by empowering users to share opinions and provide feedback (Men & Bowen, 2017). College students are often skilled digital users, so universities have a higher chance of communicating and facilitating engagement with students on social platforms (Kim et al., 2016). Social media is critical, as many international students access WeChat, Facebook, and Instagram (Ha, Joa, Gabay, & Kim, 2018; Li & Peng, 2019). Sutherland, Davis, Terton, and Visser (2018) found that while students may not interact with university SNSs, many follow these accounts, engendering stronger connections to the university community. SNS communication can alleviate stress by providing a user-friendly way for international students to easily interact with Americans (Li & Peng, 2019).

To further explore the preferred channels of communication among international students, the following research question is proposed:

RQ2:   What are the preferred communication channels to engage international students?

Campus-Wide Activities and Events

Campus activities such as educational workshops, English conversation programs, cultural celebrations, and interfaith services connect students and create an engaged campus community (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2018). Regular cultural and social programming enables international students to form meaningful relationships (Ammigan & Laws, 2018). International students feel a stronger sense of engagement and belonging when they feel socially connected to educators, university staff, and domestic peers (Hale, Rivas, & Burke, 2020).

Orientation programs allow students to build comradery within their cohort and understand program requirements, university services, and involvement opportunities (Ammigan, 2019). In addition, they provide information on professional development opportunities, academic degree requirements, English writing/speaking assistance, and student involvement opportunities (Geary, 2016).

RQ3:   *What communication tactics can the university implement to improve and increase the engagement of international students?*

Methods

This research examined (dialogic) communication strategies, effective communication channels, and tactics for engaging international students. Given the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative methodology was most appropriate for achieving a deeper understanding of international student engagement. Semistructured, in-depth interviews with university representatives provided insight into current communication strategies and channels for engaging international students. Interviews were used to gain rich detail, insight, and understanding of current university engagement efforts. Focus groups provided a holistic understanding of students' experiences, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about the effectiveness of university engagement efforts. Engagement through dialogic communication was inferred based on consistent patterns and themes from the data.

Participant Selection

This study was conducted at a public university in the Southeastern United States during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic from March to September 2020. This timeframe warrants consideration because higher education institutions across the globe experienced unprecedented disruptions because of sudden institutional lockdowns and restrictions, which could have influenced participants' perceptions of engagement practices. This study interviewed 16 university representatives with at least five years of professional experience (see Table 1).

Table 1. University Participants.

Position	College/Department	Gender
Administrator	College of Agriculture and Life Sciences	Male
Staff	Multicultural and Diversity Affairs	Female
Administrator	International Center	Female
Staff	International Center	Male
Staff	International Center	Female
Staff	International Center	Female
Faculty	College of Business	Female
Staff	College of Public Health	Female
Staff	College of Design, Construction, and Planning	Female
Faculty	College of Engineering	Female
Administrator	College of Journalism and Communications	Male
Faculty	College of Liberal Arts and Sciences	Female
Administrator	Career Connections Center	Female
Staff	English Language Institute	Female
Staff	Counseling and Wellness Center	Female

Faculty	College of Education	Female

University staff represented various departments and levels of experience, including university administrators, college deans, departmental chairs, communication managers, and International Center staff and administrators. Additionally, two focus groups, one comprising nine international graduate students majoring in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields and the other comprising 10 international graduate students majoring in non-STEM fields, provided feedback about their experiences (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. STEM Student Participants.

Degree	Major	College	Country of Origin	Gender
Doctorate	Public Health	Public Health	Columbia	Male
Master	Public Health	Public Health	China	Female
Doctorate	Environmental Health	Public Health	Jamaica	Female
Doctorate	Agronomy	Agriculture and Life Sciences	China	Male
Doctorate	Soil and Water Sciences	Agriculture and Life Sciences	Nigeria	Male
Doctorate	Landscape Architecture	Design, Construction & Planning	China	Female
Doctorate	Construction Management	Design, Construction & Planning	Nigeria	Male
Master	Computer and Information Sciences	Engineering	India	Male
Master	Mechanical Engineering	Engineering	India	Male

Table 3. Non-STEM Student Participants.

Degree	Major	College	Country of Origin	Gender
Master	Linguistics	Liberal Arts and Sciences	China	Female
Master	Journalism	Journalism and Communications	China	Female
Master	Public Relations	Journalism and Communications	China	Female
Master	Public Relations	Journalism and Communications	China	Female
Doctorate	Mass Communications	Journalism and Communications	China	Female
Doctorate	Mass Communications	Journalism and Communications	Columbia	Male
Doctorate	Urban and Regional Planning	Design, Construction & Planning	China	Female

Master	Museum Studies	Agriculture and Life Sciences	Columbia	Female
Master	Counselor Education	Education	China	Female
Master	Counselor Education	Education	China	Female

STEM and non-STEM students were selected to compare responses from these groups with different interests and abilities and potentially differing communication needs. While undergraduate and graduate international students were invited to participate in the study, only graduate students opted to participate. Students were selected via snowball sampling, allowing the researcher to recruit participants from hard-to-reach populations (Handcock & Gile, 2011). A flyer outlining the scope of the study was posted on university international student group social media and sent through student e-mail listservs. Quota sampling ensured that participants represented various cultural backgrounds to provide sufficient insight into preferred communication channels and the effectiveness of university engagement strategies. Purposive and quota sampling strategies ensured that university representatives represented various departments, colleges, and professional experience. University representatives were identified on the university website, emailed the scope of the study, and invited to participate.

Data Gathering Procedures and Analysis

Each interview and focus group began with the researcher reading the informed consent and gaining verbal consent. The interview protocol uncovered participants' knowledge of current strategies, tactics, and communication channels to engage international students and perceived outcomes. The focus group protocol focused on the participants' personal and academic experiences and communication preferences. The researcher collected participants' background information related to work experience, age, and job responsibilities.

The data analysis and interpretation process followed three steps: open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During open coding, the researcher analyzed and drew comparisons from similarities and differences found in the data. Categories and subcategories that formed as patterns and themes emerged based on consistent responses. Axial coding involved identifying relationships within the data. Selective coding identified core themes within the data. Finally, member checks were conducted to get feedback from the interviewed participants to ensure that the researcher's interpretation of the responses accurately reflected their feelings. Data collection continued until the responses reached saturation.

Results

RQ1: Dialogic Communication and the Engagement of International Students

The following themes related to dialogic communication emerged from the study: openness, listening, genuineness, empathy, and responsiveness.

Openness

University representatives described openness as the willingness to learn about different cultures and create an environment that breaks down existing barriers, so students feel included and at ease. An administrator within the English Language Institute implements an "open-door policy" to enhance approachability. An academic adviser in the College of Design, Construction and Planning explained openness by saying, "You want them to be able to come to you when they have successes they want to share, but especially if they are encountering difficulties. You want them to feel comfortable broaching those subjects with you." Although university representatives perceived the university as practicing openness, students did not describe a climate of openness. Therefore, from the students' viewpoint, it is unclear whether openness is practiced.

Listening

A Multicultural and Diversity Affairs staff member explained how she listens, saying, "I listen more than I give. I ask about their interests and suggest resources based on their needs. It's important to tailor to what the student needs to be successful and to feel grounded while on campus." Similarly, an International Center administrator recalled how a student said she was the only person who had taken the time to listen to her concerns. An academic adviser in the College of Design, Construction and Planning described her role as "acting as a sounding board for students to share their struggles." University representatives believed that international students were listened to and heard, but students stated a lack of intentional listening from both university and American students. For example, an engineering student stated, "Americans do not show much interest in the lives of international students and are not open to interacting with those who may be different from them." The findings reveal contrasting perceptions between university staff and student participants.

Genuineness

University representatives stated that improvement was needed to show a sincere interest in the lives of international students. A Career Connections administrator described international students as a "forgotten population" within the university. A museum studies student echoed this sentiment: "They smile just to be kind to you, but you can see in their eyes that it's not a real feeling. It's not genuine." A mechanical engineering student described a similar experience:

> You see people in class and interact, and after, it's nothing. Everyone keeps to themselves, and basically, it's really difficult to strike a conversation and sustain it for a while so that you can get to know the other person and build a friendship.

Both participant groups agreed that the university needed to do more to foster genuine interactions with international students.

A positive example of genuine interaction provided by an International Center administrator illustrates the importance of genuine interactions: "This is not written into my job description. The need is

there for these students, but the best part is how much I benefit from it. I've learned so much about culture, and I've grown as a person myself."

Empathy

Empathy was characterized as understanding and sharing the feelings of students. While empathy was mentioned as critical to engaging students, many university and student participants described a lack of empathy toward international students. An immigration specialist shared that while her colleagues valued international students, many were unaware of their needs and concerns. University representatives did not illustrate how empathy was displayed but believed that the university should make a stronger effort to understand the experiences of international students. Most students explained that Americans did not take the time to get to know them and could not relate to them. A College of Agriculture and Life Sciences student describes Americans as "lacking empathy, kindness, compassion and a willingness to understand people who are different." Similarly, another student studying education stated, "I do not know which professor I can turn to for help or to say something more private because I feel like they do not really care about how we feel." Only one positive example was given:

> I have one very nice and sweet native friend and she gives me a lot of emotional support. I think the most important thing I get from her is that she really tries to understand my difficulty and she validates and confirms my problems. (Graduate Student, Mental Health Counseling)

These findings reveal that both university and student participants believe that the university must be more empathetic to the experiences and needs of international students.

Responsiveness

Students desired responsive communication but expressed a need for more responsive, two-way communication from the university. They wanted more proactive assistance to overcome social, academic, and psychological challenges. Students shared that communication was often reactive and delayed, taking weeks to receive information on time-sensitive issues, such as immigration and health insurance requirements.

In contrast, university staff mentioned responsive communication as a strength of the university. A faculty member in the College of Education explains how she implements responsive communications:

> I've found that some students given their background, need a little bit more support and reaching out, and sometimes need for me to be a little bit more proactive . . . I make it a priority to check in with these students and ask, 'How are you doing with qualifying exams? Do you need any help?' They may come back and say they didn't need help, but really appreciate the fact that I asked.

This theme underlines another inconsistency between university and student perceptions about the quality of communication. University representatives believe that students receive timely and proactive communications while students feel differently.

RQ2: Communication Channels in Engaging International Students

Universities communicate and engage with students through various communication channels, from traditional face-to-face communication to electronic media and social platforms. The findings show that all groups of participants preferred face-to-face and electronic communication channels for receiving academic and immigration and visa information. While university staff and students used SNSs less frequently, both groups viewed SNS communication as effective in reinforcing messages and providing information on upcoming events. Participants valued the immediacy of feedback and media channel richness. Non-STEM students valued the use of natural language through interpersonal channels, while STEM students valued the reviewability and convenience of electronic channels.

Face-to-Face Communication

University representatives stated that the immediacy of feedback from face-to-face communication enabled them to assess students' levels of understanding and provide additional clarification. This form of communication is essential when delivering critical information on immigration regulations or insurance requirements. An International Center adviser shared that her office established walk-in advising hours because students struggled to understand written communication and preferred to ask follow-up questions in person. Similarly, a student in the College of Education shared that she prefers to meet in person to receive a quicker response since campus partners were inundated with e-mails and were slow to reply.

Students preferred the emotions expressed in face-to-face interactions because they enriched communication. Visual and verbal cues, such as facial expressions, body language, vocal tone, eye contact, and hand gestures, complement or reinforce a message. University staff agreed that face-to-face communication allowed for a deeper interpretation and understanding of information. An adviser at the College of Design, Construction, and Planning explained that face-to-face meetings allowed her to assess students' level of understanding when discussing degree and graduation requirements.

E-mails

Electronic communication was preferred primarily by university staff and STEM students. Several immigration specialists shared that e-mail was most convenient for students unless the conversation generated more questions. Participants found that international students were responsive to e-mails and preferred reviewing them at their own pace and convenience. An adviser in the College of Design, Construction and Planning explained:

Students prefer e-mail because if you are talking in person or over the phone, sometimes things get lost in translation. Whereas if it is in writing and there is still some confusion, I can refer them back to what I wrote and explain in greater depth.

While many non-STEM students viewed electronic communication as ambiguous and lacking adequate connection, STEM students valued the reviewability and convenience of electronic communication. For example, a student at the College of Public Health and Human Performance stated, "I prefer e-mail because I think for international students, sometimes just reading makes it more clear to us."

Many university representatives appreciated the ability to send out critical information on visa requirements, academic deadlines, academic and career workshops, and wellness resources to students through e-mail. Most mentioned distributing e-newsletters with upcoming campus and departmental events and preferred the convenience of e-mails to reach a widespread audience quickly.

Social Media

All participants viewed social media as a supplemental communication channel to inform students of upcoming social events and activities. As illustrated by an immigration specialist, "We use our Facebook account to promote guest lecture series, festivals, concerts, picnic lunches, trips to the farmer's market, sports games, and game nights." Students saw the value of social platforms in reinforcing messaging distributed via face-to-face and electronic communication channels. A public health student stated, "I like my communications exclusively by email. Social media . . . I don't check it that often, but I see the value of having social media for information on social events, but only complementary to other channels."

RQ3: Communication Tactics to Engage International Students

Both participant groups mentioned student-oriented social programs (e.g., university, college, and student association-sponsored social activities) and academic and professional development opportunities (e.g., student orientations, career services, summer bridge courses, and leadership development programs) as effective engagement tactics.

Social Programs

Many university staff viewed social programs (e.g., related to peer mentorship, English conversation partnerships, sports and recreation, wellness and mental health, and cultural awareness) as an effective way for students to establish a community. Staff members discussed the importance of creating opportunities for students to meet new people, learn about other cultures, and develop a stronger connection to the university. For example, the International Center and College of Agricultural and Life Sciences hosts a Thanksgiving celebration for international students to learn about American history and traditions over a shared meal. The International Center also hosts an annual International Education Week, which features various educational workshops and cultural celebrations.

While students appreciated these events, many desired frequent social activities targeted at international students. Students felt that the university could offer more opportunities to connect with their peers. As a public health student described:

> I was really frustrated at the beginning of my program. The first community that helps international students adapt to the local life is normally the church . . . I think this is odd because the university should stand up to be this role.

Students described the lack of social support for international students as "frustrating" and "isolating."

Some students shared positive and impactful tactics, including peer mentorship and conversation partner programs. Students viewed these programs as a structured way to establish friendships and practice English. As described by a journalism student:

> My program matches new students with a mentor, and when I go to her for help, she always gives me good answers to help me think in a different way. I think this is a good way for international students to help us adapt to a new environment.

Ultimately, university representatives viewed social programs as standalone events to promote cultural awareness, while students preferred structured and frequent opportunities to develop meaningful connections.

Academic and Professional Development

Responses to academic and professional development opportunities lacked consistency among the participants. University representatives shared that the Dean of Students Office hosts a new-student orientation covering university academics and campus culture. The International Center also hosts an orientation covering immigration compliance requirements. The College of Journalism and Communications offers a preparatory summer course for international students called "Communicating for Success." The College of Education requires a cross-cultural communication course and hosts weekly research meetings. Finally, the Career Connections Center offers career development workshops to explain the job search and interview processes.

Students preferred ongoing and consistent academic and professional development opportunities throughout their education. According to students, colleges that offered preparatory summer bridge courses helped them integrate into American culture and higher education. A public relations student stated, "I feel so lucky because I didn't experience loneliness or feelings of depression when I first arrived. We had the summer course and had three months to get used to everything." Opportunities to build friendships and better understand American culture, teaching styles, and academic expectations were the most salient. After language barriers, student participants viewed forming friendships and understanding the culture as their greatest obstacles.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to increase current knowledge and help fill the research gap on international student engagement from a communicative perspective. The study explored how dialogic communication strategies, channels, and tactics enhance the engagement of international students and uncovered a misalignment of perspectives between universities and students.

Dialogic Communication and International Student Engagement (RQ1)

This study identified openness, listening, genuineness, empathy, and responsiveness as critical themes. University representatives viewed their institution as having an open culture through open-door policies, frequent check-in e-mails, and spaces for voicing frustrations. Participants believed that an open atmosphere empowered students to freely share personal experiences or challenges. Literatures affirm this claim, revealing relational expressions of openness as essential to promoting organizational dialogue and public engagement. For example, when organizations promote a climate of openness, members feel more satisfied and often perform better (Jablin, 1978). However, students did not perceive these universities as open, although this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic when universities were under strict lockdowns, which could have potentially influenced students' perceptions of openness.

Listening to and acknowledging the public's voice are critical to fostering effective dialogue (Baxter, 2011). This study revealed that listening is critical to understanding the needs and concerns of international students. While university staff thought they listened intently, students still felt their voices were ignored. Despite an earnest desire to listen to students, students reported that understaffed departments were overwhelmed by the number of students and the volume of e-mails they received, which may have contributed to this discrepancy in viewpoints.

Participants perceived the university as genuine when actions and words aligned, consistent with dialogic communication principles (Kent & Taylor, 2002). According to Taylor and Kent (2014), "Dialogic engagement should . . . prepare the interactants for genuine civic engagement, informed by dialogue, and designed to better the lives of all parties involved" (p. 394). Both participant groups believed that the university should offer more genuine communication with international students. This study's findings suggest that honest and truthful dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 2002) displaying genuine interest (Yang, Kang, & Cha, 2015) and concern (Botan, 1997) leads to mutually beneficial outcomes.

The student participants stipulated that the lack of empathy from university officials negatively impacted their level of engagement. University representatives also noted the need for increased empathy for international students. As found in previous research, empathetic listening creates

> an atmosphere of mutual respect and willingness to entertain new ideas; to share feelings and sentiments when individuals so desire, and to establish as much as possible in a context of unequal power a climate of trust and mutual concern. (Eisenberg & Witten, 1987, p. 423)

The perceived lack of empathy and genuine interactions with Americans could stem from a cultural literacy gap among Americans, resulting in misunderstandings that impact the experiences and perceptions of international students.

In line with previous literature, this study confirms responsiveness as a function of dialogue (Bowen, 2010) that contributes to engagement. Responsiveness focuses on the relational component of relationships by considering others' emotions (Richmond & Martin, 1998, pp. 136–137). Responsive communication encourages international students to voice their needs, desires, frustrations, and concerns. University staff viewed their communication as responsive, whereas students reported delayed and reactive communication. This gap in perceived responsive communication could stem from an imbalanced staff-to-student ratio.

Kent and Taylor (2002) and Taylor and Kent (2014) posit that dialogic communication allows organizations to better understand publics through open, genuine, and honest conversations that resonate with the interests and emotions of stakeholders. "Dialogue is more ethical because it is based on principles of honesty, trust, and positive regard for the other rather than simply a conception of the public as a means to an end" (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 33). When universities practice dialogic communication, students feel increased levels of support, care, trust, respect, inclusion, and understanding. In turn, students are more willing to voice frustrations, needs, and concerns. This study affirms that communication embracing openness, listening, genuineness, empathy, and responsiveness allows international students to feel more connected and engaged with the university.

Communication Channels and International Student Engagement (RQ2)

Participants preferred face-to-face and electronic communication channels. Those who favored face-to-face communication valued the immediacy of feedback, verbal and nonverbal cues, and natural language, while those who favored electronic communication appreciated its convenience and reviewability.

Both participant groups preferred face-to-face communication for discussing complex topics related to degree and graduation requirements, immigration regulations, campus resources, and dissertation submissions. Extending the findings of Men and Bowen (2017), the timeliness of face-to-face communication encourages deeper understanding with instant feedback and the ability to ask questions as well as clarify misunderstandings. Previous research asserts that face-to-face communication creates a more robust organizational environment where members develop a shared sense of belonging and understanding of the organization (Cameron & McCollum, 1993). In this study, the participants valued the ease of conversation and personalized interactivity of face-to-face communication. Differences between STEM/non-STEM students were minimal, despite differing preferences in communication channels. STEM students preferred the reviewability and convenience of e-mail, while non-STEM students preferred the informal and dialogic nature of face-to-face communication. Students' academic backgrounds could shape their communication preferences. STEM students may be more analytical and value reviewability and convenience, while those majoring in fields that place greater importance on social issues and dynamics may appreciate richer social interactions.

Electronic communication allows participants to transcend time and geographical constraints. Nonnative English speakers preferred its ability to review, revise, and retain a record of the correspondence. When interpersonal connections are not the priority, written correspondence is considered the most convenient form of communication (Westmyer & DiCioccio, 1998). Because of high student enrollment and staffing shortages, many staff members also preferred the convenience of e-mails. While not cited as a preferred communication channel by either participant group, universities should consider leveraging non-English social media platforms (e.g., Weibo and WeChat) to better engage students from Eastern countries.

Communication Tactics and International Student Engagement (RQ3)

Many university staff and student participants mentioned peer mentorship and conversation partnership programs as effective in developing friendships with domestic students and understanding cultural norms. Westwood and Barker's (1990) research found increased achievement and decreased dropout rates among international and domestic students when paired in peer mentorship groups in their first year. While many university representatives emphasized the importance of offering intercultural events throughout the year, students expressed frustration over the inconsistency of these events. Continuous and frequent interaction was found to be critical to developing and maintaining meaningful relationships. This finding aligns with McFaul's (2016) study, which found that facilitating regular interactions between domestic and international students enhances intercultural understanding and engagement. Furthermore, students cited preparatory summer bridge courses as an effective way to establish friendships, improve English skills, and understand cultural customs. For anyone who has not lived outside of their home country, it may be difficult to grasp the challenges associated with acclimating to a new culture and coping with feelings of isolation and culture shock.

Theoretical Implications

This study aimed to understand how communication strategies, channels, and tactics can enhance engagement and ameliorate the social, psychological, and academic difficulties confronting international students in the United States. This study explored the contrasting perspectives between university representatives and students on the university's approach to fostering international student engagement.

This study offers critical theoretical implications and contributes to the growing knowledge of dialogic communication and engagement. Based on Chaffee and McLeod's (1968) co-orientation measurement model, a co-oriented analysis allows scholars to evaluate and comprehend perceived and actual agreements and disagreements in the communicative viewpoints of organizations and their publics. Broom (1997) asserts that a co-orientational approach can reveal organization-public relationship problems of mutual concern and provide valuable insights to enhance communication messages and programs to mitigate these issues. The study uncovers discrepancies in perceptions between university representatives and international students, which helps identify areas for continued growth.

This study also contributes to dialogic communication theory by examining and applying the principles of openness, listening, genuineness, empathy, and responsiveness. While the public relations literature advocates for two-way communication, there is scant literature on engagement relating to dialogic

communication. The current study fills a research gap by evaluating the effectiveness of internal communication strategies, channels, and tactics on international students' levels of engagement. It offers a holistic understanding of how dialogic principles can enhance two-way communication. These principles include cultivating an open environment where students can safely express their thoughts and feelings with university representatives, listening to understand better and meet the needs of students, offering genuine interest and empathy to students, and communicating quickly and responsively to address and resolve concerns. Dialogic interactions foster a greater sense of trust and mutual understanding between universities and students.

Furthermore, this study broadens the theoretical influence and application of engagement in clarifying the critical role of communication in effective student engagement. Despite increased attention to public engagement, limited literature exists on engagement in the higher education institutional context. This study asserts that implementing dialogic communicative strategies, preferred communication channels, and successful communication tactics will enhance the engagement of international students. Engaging international students throughout their education can bring a wealth of cultural perspectives, promote inclusivity and diversity, and break down existing barriers to student success.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have practical implications for universities. A discrepancy exists between the viewpoints of university representatives and international students, highlighting the need for universities to evaluate the impact of engagement efforts. Universities must proactively engage international students to attract top talent and diversify the student body.

First, universities should engage students by listening to their needs, desires, and concerns and promote open, genuine, empathetic, and responsive communications. The responsibility for international student engagement falls on universities, not students, so universities should allocate resources for staff training in cross-cultural understanding, interaction with international students, and intercultural communication practices.

Second, universities should continually assess the effectiveness of social programs to enrich the international student experience. International students are more likely to feel isolated and alienated, so universities should focus on their social experiences by providing information on campus and community involvement opportunities. By offering programs that encourage continuous and frequent interaction between domestic and international students, international students will experience greater fulfillment and understanding of the culture.

Third, universities must provide information on resources and services to enhance international students' academic performance, professional competencies, and psychological well-being. For a holistic educational experience, these areas cannot be overlooked. Fourth, universities must involve influential stakeholders (e.g., administrators, faculty, and staff) to implement a comprehensive support system that collaboratively works to improve engagement efforts, especially at the beginning of a student's education. Universities should also consider facilitating peer mentorship and conversation partner programs so that

international and domestic students can build relationships and enhance their English-speaking skills, if applicable.

Finally, universities can consider recruiting and employing academic and professional staff who possess firsthand experience as international students or who have culturally diverse backgrounds. These individuals, with their unique perspectives and insights, can play pivotal roles in improving the overall international student experience, as their presence can help bridge process gaps, facilitate communication, and foster a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study offers a nuanced understanding of the engagement of international students from a communicative perspective, it has limitations. Limitations exist because of the exploratory nature of this study. The study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, possibly swaying participants' perceptions. The findings are based on a small sample within one public research university in the United States and are not considered generalizable to all international students at various global institutions. Future studies could take a quantitative or mixed-methods research approach and include a larger, more varied sample size at varying institution types. Future studies could further explore how other communication factors and styles impact engagement. Future research can investigate international students' role in improving their engagement level, consider how universities can engage other vulnerable populations, and apply findings to other states or countries. In sum, the study's findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on dialogic communication theory and the concept of engagement and also provide valuable insights and pragmatic suggestions. Based on these findings, this study urges higher education professionals and academic scholars to carry out universities' responsibilities to enrich the quality of education and experience for *all* students by continuing conversations on international student engagement.

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