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### Exploring Chinese International Students' Sense of Belonging in North American Postsecondary Institutions

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Exploring Chinese International Students' Sense of Belonging in North American  
Postsecondary Institutions

By

Jia Chen

A Major Research Paper

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

through the Faculty of Education

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Education

at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2018

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Exploring Chinese International Students' Sense of Belonging in North American  
Postsecondary Institutions

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January 16, 2018

### **Author's Declaration of Originality**

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### **Abstract**

Since 2000, an increasing number of Chinese international students have been entering North American universities, and many have experienced issues with a sense of belonging, which can in turn impact their academic, social performance, and psychological wellbeing. However, there is limited research on this topic that is exclusively focused on Chinese international students. Therefore, in order to establish the direction that future research should take, a thorough literature review has been conducted with the aim of establishing the factors that shape this phenomenon, the impact it has on students and institutions, and strategies that help to overcome this issue. Based on this research, it is clear that should universities hope to improve student outcomes and retention rates, future studies need to explore factors such as cultural impacts, campus climates, information availability, and strategies from the perspective of educational institutions, teachers, students and local governments.

**Keywords:** Chinese international students, sense of belonging, integration, student retention

**Dedication**

**To myself**

**To my parents**

**To all the people who have supported me through the process**

**To all Chinese international students**

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Background Information**

Since 2000, an increasing number of Chinese international students have been pursuing tertiary education in North America. In the United States, the number of international students for higher education reached 1, 043, 839 in the 2015/2016 academic year, which marked a 7.1% increase from the previous academic year. China remained the top source country in this regard, contributing 31.5% of the total number of international students in America (Institute of International Education, 2016). In Canada, there were 353, 570 international students in 2015, which marked an 8% increase over the previous year. Among these students, approximately two-thirds were from Asia, with China being the highest sending country (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2016). This trend was also demonstrated by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (2015), which found that 88% of Canadian universities consider China as their first choice in terms of their expansion of international markets.

Several factors contribute to this robust phenomenon. For instance, higher education institutions in host countries have been increasingly focused on campus diversity and the international market (Massey & Burrow, 2012; Chao, Hegarty, Angelidis, & Lu, 2017). International students bring their diverse cultures and values to the universities of host countries (Zhou & Zhang, 2010; Liu, 2016) while universities of North America seek to promote a global reputation so as to enroll more students and reap the financial benefits (Calder et al., 2016; Zhou & Zhang, 2010; Liu, 2016). For example, in 2010, international students contributed approximately \$4.2 billion to the gross domestic product for Canada, taking up about 7% of the total education sector (Calder et al., 2016).

In 2015, the international students enrolled in higher education infused America's economy with more than \$35 billion (Institute of International Education, 2016). These financial factors are of particular importance for the existence of educational institutions in host countries, especially considering that the funding for higher education has been reduced in recent years (Gopal, 2012).

From international students' perspective, Obst and Forster (2004) outline five motivational factors in choosing to study overseas: the experience of new ways of thinking and performing in learning, promising international careers, more flexible education, the development of an independent personality, and an increase in the chance of securing an ideal position in their field when returning to their home countries. In terms of the external factors, economic growth in China has produced a larger middle class with the financial resources required to pay for, and the desire to obtain higher education both inside and outside of China (Austin & Shen, 2016). In this regard, Sánchez, Fornerino and Zhang (2006) found that for Chinese international students, the primary objective of receiving a foreign education is to enhance their social acceptance in their home country, which is followed by a search for new experiences, liberty, and pleasure. Students who choose Canada as their study destination indicate that there are six reasons they favor Canada: its safe environment, its attractive immigration policies, its multicultural components, its relatively lower tuition fees, its plentiful research opportunities, and its quality academic and research facilities (Liu, 2016; Chen, 2006). Likewise, Chao et al. (2017) examined Chinese international students' motivation for studying in the United States and found that Chinese students desire to pursue education with a different world

view and experience a pedagogical approach that differs from China's teacher- and examination-orientated approach.

### **Problem Statement**

As a result of globalization, international study has been increasingly popular since the late 1970s (Massey & Burrow, 2012). Consequently, students' sense of belonging and engagement have been emphasized in the context of this ever expanding and diverse higher education population (Masika & Jones, 2016), since a sense of belonging in university exerts significant influence on students in multiple aspects (Slaten et al., 2014). As for Asian international students (AIS), Slaten et al. (2016) point out that belongingness can help them reduce distress and more effectively acculturate to host campuses. Given that international students from China represent the largest international population in higher education of North America, and that they continue to increase in number, it is vital to understand their overseas learning and living experiences, particularly how they perceive a sense of belonging in a foreign environment.

Post-secondary school students who have a greater sense of belonging on campus would feel more capable academically, evaluate themselves more positively, and are less likely to externalize problems (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). Similarly, Baskin, Quintana, and Slaten (2014) note that students who possess a strong sense of belonging on campus tend to be better able to adjust themselves academically and have a lower likelihood of depression. Strayhorn (2012), argues that a sense of belonging is of particular importance for individuals who live in a perceived unfamiliar or foreign environment. Students who are not able to have a sense of belonging tend to have negative outcomes. As Strayhorn (2012) points out "Deprivation of belongingness needs often leads to diminished interest

in life activities, loneliness, self-hatred, disengagement from life (often through suicide)” (p. 23). This suggests a need to examine the extent to which international students including Chinese, perceive and experience belongingness in foreign educational settings in order to facilitate their positive learning experiences in general.

A broad study of international students in general is likely to result in an overgeneralization of a diverse population, so the nuanced cultural differences of groups like AIS may not be properly understood (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, & Kumar, 2014). Previous studies either explored international students’ acculturation process and corresponding challenges as a whole, or Chinese international students at any academic levels in a foreign environment. However, limited research is found that focuses exclusively on Chinese international students in post-secondary institutions in North America. Thus, the aim of this study is to focus on the perceptions and experiences toward sense of belonging for Chinese international students in North American post-secondary institutions.

From students’ perspective, exploring their perceptions of belongingness and identifying the factors that impact their sense of belonging on campus are vital to support their adjustment process in a university (Slaten et al., 2016). It can also elucidate students’ life out of school, such as career development and life satisfaction (Chiu et al., 2016). Therefore, investigating a sense of belonging among Chinese international students offers the potential to improve their positive outcomes in both academic and social aspects. Furthermore, students’ perceived sense of belonging is also a strong predictor for higher education institutions in understanding how well their practices and programs serve to

meet those students' basic needs, thereby improving international students' overall learning experience.

**Research Questions:**

1. How do Chinese international students perceive their experiences and sense of belonging in North American post-secondary institutions?
2. What factors impact Chinese international students' adaption and acculturation to North American post-secondary institutions?
3. What corresponding strategies can be used to facilitate a sense of belonging for Chinese international students in North American post-secondary institutions?

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Literature Search Method**

An exhaustive search for papers was carried out to answer the proposed research questions. Four research strategies were applied: a database search, a search terms strategy, selection criteria, and a hand search.

#### **Database Search**

The electronic inquiries were conducted to locate peer reviewed journals via the University of Windsor's Leddy Library. The researcher searched for articles that were identified as relevant to education, social science and psychology. The databases included Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest Social Sciences, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar.

#### **Search Terms**

Several keywords were utilized to ensure the results offered broad coverage. The initial search terms were "Chinese international students" and "belonging". Synonyms for belonging were also included in this process as "sense of community", "connectedness", "affiliation", "engagement", "integration", and "fit in". The key terms were then entered into the search engine in conjunction with locational terms such as "Canada", "America", "U.S.", and "North America". These search terms help to determine the scope of the study destinations for those students. Terms related to cultural aspects were then added. These included "culture" and "acculturation". To further narrow the scope, three terms related to subjective evaluations were also used: "experience", "perception", and "attitude". The main search terms were likewise combined with possible outcomes or

effects on students, such as "positive experience", "negative experience", "challenges", "wellbeing", "health", "persistence", and "retention".

### **Selection Criteria**

Further criteria were specified in order to select studies appropriate for the current research. To be included in the review, the literature needed to meet four criteria: it must be written in English; it must be published in the past 15 years; it must focus on Chinese international students on North American campuses; and it must report on undergraduate or graduate Chinese international students. These inclusion criteria limited the research to 45 studies.

### **Hand Search**

In order to ensure that "gray" literature was included during the search process, reference lists of retrieved studies were reviewed. Search of websites of organizations related to international education were also incorporated. These included the Institute of International Education, the Canadian Bureau for International Education, and the Association of Universities Colleges of Canada.

Upon categorizing the findings of numerous studies on belongingness among Chinese international students studying in North America, several themes emerged: the need to belong, the link between a sense of belonging and student retention, the sense of belonging among diverse student groups, the sense of belonging for Chinese international students, and the common factors that influence the sense of belonging for Chinese international students.

### **Need to Belong**

The need to belong has long been regarded as an essential drive for human beings. One commonly known model in this regard is hierarchy of needs proposed by Abraham Maslow (1954), which consists of five levels of needs from the most immediate needs to more subjective needs: physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. This model indicates that one must satisfy lower level needs before progressing to meet higher level needs. Maslow (1954) suggests that the physiological needs are human's fundamental needs, and love and belonging are being positioned in the third level as the psychological needs. However, his conceptualization of belonging has been considered deficient (Slaten et al., 2014), and there is an emerging body of literature that frames belongingness as a fundamental need.

For example, Baumeister and Leary (1995) propose that humans are driven to establish and maintain significant, long-term, positive, interpersonal relationships. Unlike Maslow's hierarchy of needs, in which the needs for love and belonging are positioned at the center of the pyramid and are considered as less fundamental than physiological and safety needs, Baumeister and Leary (1995) believe that belongingness is almost as fundamental as the need for food. Based on this hypothesis, they propose that individuals who are well-engaged in social relationships have less need to pursue and establish additional ties than people who are socially deprived. They also describe two main characteristics of the need to belong: people need to have persistent interpersonal communications with other people, and they need to feel a stable and affective bond with others that will last through a predictable future. Kelly (2001) notes that the need to belong differs among people: some people tend to have lower need to belong, which can be met by just a few contacts, whereas others who have greater need to belong require



more contacts. Thus, the lack of satisfaction toward personal relationships regarding the need to belong puts some individuals at risk of loneliness. Lambert et al. (2013) however, suggest that the definition of belonging should go beyond a general need like forming a positive social relationship. Instead, belongingness is referred to as subjective experiences based on relationships that offer security through a sense of belonging (Lambert et al., 2013). In their study, correlational, longitudinal and experimental evidence was analyzed to determine the correlation between a sense of belonging and meaningfulness in life. Their results indicate that a strong sense of belonging is highly related to a high level of meaningfulness in life. In other words, a sense of belonging is especially likely to enhance the meaning of lives for individuals.

Alternately, Ryan and Deci (2002) developed the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which suggests that the need for relatedness is one of the fundamental psychological needs. SDT defines relatedness as a feeling of connection and belonging with others and one's community, which considers how homogenous inclinations shape people's tendency to seek out connections and feel not only accepted by others, but integral to them. This theory suggests that the social environment either fosters or impedes integration. They state that because needs are universal by their very nature, all cultures should share the relationship between satisfying needs and well-being. However, because values and goals vary from culture to culture, the way people fulfil their needs can also vary (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Strayhorn (2012) focuses on the sense of belonging for post-secondary school students. He regards a sense of belonging as both a cognitive evaluation and a basic need and motivation for human beings, and notes that it leads to affective responses. He

likewise deems it to be a dynamic, reciprocal relationship between an individual and a group that must be satisfied on a continual basis. Strayhorn (2012) calls this an “I am we and we are each” phenomenon (p.3), in which the group benefits from the collective effort of its members through their membership, and individuals benefit from the group, which fulfills individuals’ needs. He also argues that a sense of belonging is context-based, meaning that it can be especially significant in a perceived unfamiliar or foreign environment and it tends to change over time. A sense of belonging is of particular importance for students who are marginalized in the educational settings, such as those who are racial-ethnic minorities, economically-disadvantaged, members of the LGBTQ community, and first-generation students (Strayhorn, 2012).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that those who are socially deprived are more likely to suffer behavioral, psychological, and physical problems, including mental illness, criminal tendencies, and social isolation. Individuals who commit suicide often had higher rates of social isolation, suggesting that a lack of belongingness may lead to suicidal ideation (Van Orden et al., 2008). Similarly, Durkheim (1961) argues that individuals who are not integrated into society are more likely to commit suicide. He outlines two reasons people fail to integrate into society: insufficient moral integration, and insufficient collective affiliation. Insufficient moral integration occurs when a person maintains divergent values that do not conform to society’s values, while insufficient collective affiliation occurs when a person does not sufficiently engage in personal interactions (Durkheim, 1961). In order to satisfy the need to belong, people need to be ensured that others care about their welfare (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

### **Sense of Belonging and Student Retention**

Tinto's (1975) model connects a sense of belonging to student persistence. He asserts that for students, a higher level of integration into the college system indicates a higher level of commitment toward their institution and their degree persistence. He points out that integration into the college system is a function of both formal and informal interactions for students in both academic and social realms. Inversely, dropping out is the result of a longitudinal process where students do not adequately interact with the institution, which may include peers, faculty, or the administrators. Tinto (1975) suggests that though academic integration is the most influential factor in student retention, social integration also has an important role to play in one's degree fulfillment. This, he states, is because failing to integrate into the social system of the college results in low commitment to the social system and high possibility that individuals will depart college and make alternative choices. He defines social integration as "informal peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and administrative personnel within the college" (p. 107). He argues that when individuals successfully engage in these activities, they can gain personal support through friendships, professional relationships with faculty members, or through collective affiliations while enhancing their social communication. These social rewards can shape how people evaluate the benefits of college and consequently influence institutional commitments (Tinto, 1975). The importance of informal social ties on campus is also emphasized by Fischer (2007), who believes that it can be achieved by establishing friendships, which not only provides companionships, but can also help individuals integrate into their academic surroundings and can "provide a potentially valuable source of support, advice, and information" (p.136). Fischer likewise notes that formal social integration takes place

when students participate in campus organization, through which students can generate a sense of belonging on campus.

Building upon Tinto's pivotal work, studies on the relationship between a sense of belonging and student retention have been frequently documented in the literature (O'Keeffe, 2013; Cooper, 2009; Cheng, 2014; Masika & Jones, 2016; Fischer, 2007). For example, O'Keeffe (2013) found that the student attrition rate in the United States had reached between 30 and 50% across higher education, making student persistence a vital issue. This study also found that a sense of belonging is considered as an important predictor of student retention and that universities that endeavor to create a caring and supportive environment for students can facilitate a sense of belonging. Similarly, Cooper (2009) brings sense of belonging into the context of a diverse campus community. He proposes that students' sense of belonging on campus significantly impacts their educational persistence; therefore, students need to perceive the campus community as supportive one where they can have both a sense of identity and affinity. The psychological feelings of sense of belonging on campus was also noted by Cheng (2014), who claims that "students' sense of community is closely associated with their feelings of being cared about, treated in a caring way, valued as an individual and accepted as a part of community and the quality social life on campus" (p. 216). In all, students with more engagement and who feel a sense of belonging on campus life have higher levels of college persistence and better academic performance (Fischer, 2007). Though the studies often employ a slightly different lexicon, with terms such as 'sense of community', 'acceptance', 'support', 'care', and 'engagement' being used in place of 'sense of

belonging', they each discuss a kind of psychological satisfaction in the form of a subjective feeling of integration on campus.

The retention issue is even more problematic among first-year college students. According to Yao (2016), university students' sense of belonging includes two categories: their "perceptions of institutional support and relationship with others" (p. 78). She notes that when combined, these factors can facilitate feelings of connectedness and affiliation with their academic community. Malinga–Musamba (2014) expounds on this, stating that first-year students have to cope with transitional dilemmas by finding their position and learning how to negotiate cognitively and socially on campus. Similarly, while new university students face levels of independence and responsibility they have not experienced, Pittman and Richmond (2007) observe that they must also simultaneously struggle with a multiplicity of transitions: domestic arrangements, academic settings, and social networks. Consequently, when they enter university, they may also be facing instability, which can negatively impact student retention (O'Keeffe, 2013). Complex curricula and disciplinary knowledge are also found to be the barriers to first-year college students in higher education. Meanwhile, learning approaches may be not so adaptive for first-year students, making academic adjustment a challenge (Malinga–Musamba, 2014). A study conducted by Mamiseishvili (2012) using the combination of survey and explanatory correlational research indicates that supports from academic advisors and the faculty are crucial for international students in their first-to-second-year academic persistence. Also, inadequate social interaction may primarily result in voluntary withdrawal (Tinto, 1975). Since a sense of belonging is central to student retention,

developing a sense of belonging is essential to student success, especially for those who are at risk of non-completion (O'Keeffe, 2013).

### **Sense of Belonging among Diverse Student Groups**

Though a sense of belonging is crucial to all students, there are three categories for whom it is especially important and who face unique challenges: international students, students from minority ethnic/racialized groups, and students with disabilities.

#### **International Students**

International students differ markedly in terms of race, nationality, ethnicity, cultural norms and linguistic background. Yao (2016) states that how students experience a sense of belonging can vary due to the differences across gender, race, culture and identity. Specifically, she points out that having a sense of belonging is critical to international students attending post-secondary institutions in a foreign environment. Pittman and Richmond (2007) argue that school belonging goes beyond school affiliation: it speaks to how individuals perceive their personal friendships, and how they fit in with other students and the larger community. International students rely more on host universities compared to local students due to insufficient sources of support (Yan & Sendall, 2016). Therefore, they need far more support than domestic students to compensate for decreased security and even social exclusion (Paltridge, Mayson, & Schapper, 2012). To determine the scope of challenges these students face, Gebhard (2012) collected on-going interviews, field notes, and student narratives to analyze international students' adaption process. The findings show that international students encounter challenges in academics, social interactions as well as emotional responses to the new life. Numerous studies further identified some of the main challenges encountered by international students are

widely cited as academic pressure, language barriers, cultural shock, and financial issues (Yan & Sendall, 2016; Calder et. al, 2016; Liu, 2016; Slaten et. al, 2016; Wang, 2016).

When facing such challenges, having a sense of belonging can mitigate international students' struggles and facilitate improved integration into local universities (Slaten et al., 2016).

Slaten et al. (2014) applied consensual qualitative research to investigate university belongingness among undergraduate international students in the United States. The results stress the importance for international students to meaningfully interact with domestic peers, faculty members, and campus organizations and groups. It also highlights universities' function in fostering a supportive environment for diversity. However, studies have found that many international students are only inclined to approach co-national fellows or international peers of other origins for support. International students tend to establish the social network with the international student groups in order to replace the social capital that they had in their native settings (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Zhou & Zhang, 2010). For instance, Zhou and Zhang (2010) report that when seeking assistance with an academic concern, international students often approach their home country fellows first, instead of faculty and staff. This might be due to the fact that international students might feel less confident in turning to faculty members for help, or that they fear revealing personal issues to faculty staff (O'Keeffe, 2013). For these reasons, international students tend to have social exchanges with other international students who are supportive in academic assistance and emotional encouragement (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009).

### **Students from Minority Ethnic/Racialized Groups**

Fischer (2007) explored racial and ethnic differences in terms of students' adjustment to college. He argues that racial and ethnic differences exert a fundamental influence on the college experiences and the adjustment process for minority students. In this study, he concludes three key factors that affect college adjustment and success: minority status, socioeconomic disadvantage, and being a first generation college student. Specifically, he found some variabilities among different race/ethnic groups. For example, among Hispanics, informal social bonds were negatively correlated with academic performance, while it was positively correlated to the academic performance of Asians. However, more common features among minority groups have been identified. Formal social ties on campus enhance academic results for Asians, Hispanics, and Blacks. Despite racial/ethnic differences, more frequent interactions and connections with professors all lead to higher grades, and students who engaged with professors tended to be better integrated into the courses and the campus environment. Moreover, both formal and informal social bonds result in higher levels of satisfaction toward campus across all groups, and minority students who were more involved in formal social ties on campus, which includes extracurricular activities, are significantly more likely to persist in university (Fischer, 2007).

However, it is worth noting that students of minority groups may encounter racial discrimination on campus, which impedes their college adjustment. Johnson et al. (2007) surveyed a sample of 2,967 first-year students with different racial/ethnic groups to examine their sense of belonging on campus. It was revealed that first-year students of color generally had a less sense of belonging compared with their Caucasian peers. However, it is found that co-curricular activity engagement only significantly influenced



a sense of belonging among Asian Pacific American and Caucasian students. Johnson et al. (2007) assume that this is possibly because Asian Pacific American students developed their sense of belonging in those activities that particularly value and celebrate their ethnic identities.

### **Students with Disabilities**

Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, and Newman (2015) examined how a sense of belonging in university impacts students with disabilities. They point out three factors that facilitate campus belonging: self-advocacy, mastery of the student role, and social relationships. As students cultivate a sense of belonging, they develop the abilities required to master their roles as students, become self-advocates, and build social relationships. The student participants in this study pointed out that being able to cope with different tasks as college students, helps to generate a sense of belonging on campus. The study's participants each reported that it is important to manage the demands of post-secondary school in order to develop a sense of belonging in their academic settings. Vaccaro and Newman (2016) compare privileged and minority student groups in terms of how they define belonging in their first-year transition in a predominantly Caucasian university in America and found two common themes: being comfortable and fitting in. However, minority students revealed two additional themes: safety and respect. For instance, one student noted that belonging on campus meant fitting in and feeling safe where you studied and lived. Another student argued that respect and acceptance are central to belonging, to not belong make her feel "inadequate and disrespected" (p. 932). Thus, although all participants highlight the importance of interpersonal relationships in terms of the construction of a sense of belonging, students with disabilities demonstrated a

desire for “deeper, authentic relationships rooted in self-awareness” (p. 933). In addition, activity involvement facilitates a sense of belonging for those students only when organization members acknowledge and value their real selves (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

### **Sense of Belonging among Chinese International Students**

Upon leaving the comforts and social support of their native countries to study abroad, international students lose their sense of social connectedness (Cao, Zhu & Meng, 2017; Du & Wei, 2005). Facing a new sociocultural environment can lead to social isolation (Yan & Sendall, 2016), and as Yao (2016) notes, Chinese international students often find themselves excluded in their collegiate environment because many view them as temporary visitors and therefore are disinterested in forming meaningful social bonds with them. Cheng (2004) expounds upon this, noting that Chinese international students not only crave a sense of belonging, but also want their cultural values and differences to be acknowledged, accepted and respected. The absence of a sense of community may be due to the fact that they do not perceive the feeling of being cared for/about or that they are recognized for their individual values (Cheng, 2004). Cross (1995) mentions that East Asian students studying in America are also more vulnerable to psychological issues as they encounter more difficulties in the acculturation process than international students from Europe due to the increased number of cultural variables.

Du and Wei (2015) applied a longitudinal design to survey 213 Chinese international students at an American university to explore how students’ acculturation orientation impact their subjective well-being via the social connectedness in mainstream society and in the ethnic community. These acculturation orientations were broken down into two

categories: acculturating to America culture, or enculturating to the ethnic culture. It was found that when some Chinese international students tried to acculturate into mainstream society, their participation could foster their sense of belonging, which led to increased social connectedness. Alternately, the study reports some Chinese international students may still want to be socially connected with co-national peers from their home culture in America. Du and Wei (2015) conclude that when Chinese international students acculturate, they tend to have higher levels of life satisfaction with respect to seeing the benefits of adapting to mainstream society. In contrast, when Chinese international students enculturate, they reported fewer negative outcomes regarding ties to their native culture. Moreover, when Chinese international students enculturate, they also tended to have lower levels of life satisfaction and saw fewer benefits to adapting to mainstream society.

Cao et al. (2017) also examined Chinese international students' acculturation experiences by analyzing the relationship between sociodemographic factors and social ties, specifically host-national, international, and co-national ties. The results imply that English proficiency and previous adaptation experience are important indicators for Chinese students' social ties. To be more specific, Chinese students primarily choose co-national ties, followed by host-national ties and international ties. The study demonstrates the need for Chinese international students to interact with domestic students and other international students as these social ties can facilitate positive attitudes toward the host culture and better integration into the mainstream society.

In addition, Bertram et. al (2014) found that the most prevailing acculturative stressors among Chinese international students were the feeling of isolation from their

surroundings, cultural differences, and the language barrier. Moreover, Chinese international students who participated reported lower levels of satisfaction with respect to social support than their American counterparts. Liu (2016) reports similar findings in Canada, where Chinese international students who participated reported having a limited number of local friends and perceived themselves as disconnected to the Canadian environment. A participant in this study revealed that even attending campus activities did not guarantee her friendship development with natives, nor did volunteer work help to build such relationships.

Another study examined how adult attachment and acculturation impact Chinese international students' psychosocial adjustment in America (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). The data demonstrate that "high attachment anxiety and high avoidance were significant predictors for both sociocultural adjustment difficulty and psychological distress" (p. 428). Chinese international students with attachment security are more likely to adjust to a new environment. They argue that, when in unfamiliar environments, adults with secure attachment can access attachment figures and imagine 'home' by creating reassuring mental representations, even if loved ones are not present. However, when individuals lack secure attachments, they struggle to explore social surroundings they are not familiar with as they cannot adequately regulate their emotions. Secure attachment allows Chinese international students to more effectively navigate stressful environments, difficulties, and unfamiliar social settings, and network with people in their social environment, thereby allowing them to develop a social support system and allowing them to better adjust to their new environment. In contrast, Chinese international students with higher levels of attachment avoidance are not likely to seek help when encountering

acculturation difficulties as it deters them from establishing social networks in the host country (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

Zhou and Zhang (2010) explored Chinese international students' perspectives, expectations, and experiences at a Canadian university, with particular focus on their challenges during the acculturation process. A mix-method approach was applied in this study, which included a questionnaire, individual interviews, and focus group discussions. The results showed that English language proficiency, previous education background, peer interaction, and cultural issues, all impact their adjustment in a host campus. For instance, Chinese international students are accustomed to the behaviourist-oriented teaching approach, which is the opposite of the social-constructivist learning approach in Western educational system, making it a big challenge in learning adaption among Chinese international students. In addition, language barriers and cultural differences discourage these students from befriending English speaking peers, sharing residence rooms, and getting involved in group work. Zhou and Zhang's (2010) inferential analysis indicated that establishment with native English speakers is significantly related to Chinese international students' satisfaction with university learning experiences.

A study conducted by Slaten et al. (2016) used consensual qualitative research methodology to explore factors that contribute to belongingness on campus among 11 AIS, including Chinese students, in an American university. The findings indicate that students' university belonging were impacted by five key factors: interpersonal interactions, acculturation process, campus environment, academic performance, and intrapersonal factors. This demonstrates that campus facilities and resources facilitate the process of studying and socializing for students. For instance, a participant reported

having a greater sense of belonging toward the university when she received appreciation and personalized care from the academic advisor (Slaten et al., 2016). In addition, the academic performance turned out to be the center for the identity construction for them as university students because students feel most connected to campus when being engaged in study. Consequently, a low GPA is likely to have a negative impact on campus connectedness (Slaten et al., 2016). The negative experiences have also been reported in this study, where participants reported the discrimination they had been through as international students, such as being rejected by domestic students when seeking partners in group work. Such negative experiences result in the feeling of rejection and disconnection for international students in a foreign campus (Slaten et al., 2016).

Han, Han, Luo, Jacobs and Jean-Baptiste (2013) surveyed the mental health issues and the perceived counseling services among 130 Chinese international students at Yale. They found that 45% of the students surveyed had depression symptoms, 29% had anxiety symptoms, and 27% of those students were even unaware of on-campus counseling services. Depression and anxiety were more common among students who failed to develop a positive relationship with the advisors or express regularly, and these students often had negative self-evaluations of their health. Therefore, Han et al. (2013) stress the importance of student-advisor relationship, and the necessity to improve awareness of mental health and counseling services for Chinese international students.

In order to understand the learning and living experiences of Chinese international students who dropout from a pre-university English improvement program, Wang (2016) applied case studies in order to explore their academic and social challenges, explain dropout behavior, and seek strategies to help Chinese international students better

integrate into a new educational system. She discovered that English speaking and writing were the main obstacles to students' academic success. As for oral English, participants frequently mentioned that they did not receive adequate oral English training in Chinese schools. Consequently, their limited oral English ability hindered their communication with instructors and domestic peers in class, as well as their engagement in group discussions. In terms of English writing, participants reported that the writing style and format in English are significantly different from that of Chinese, which created significant academic challenges for them. With respect to social aspects, participants were more likely to stick to an ethnic group and presented less engagement in the host culture, which hindered them gaining positive social experiences in the host country. Consequently, most only socialized with peers from the same cultural and linguistic background and did not make friends with domestic students. Wang (2016) found that these participants generally had inadequate social support from friendship networks. Moreover, all Chinese international students who participated in the study, reported that they were dissatisfied with teacher/student relationships and lacked interactions with their teachers both inside and outside of class. Therefore, the weak teacher-student relationship was a significant factor in students' dropout decision. In addition, participants involved reported to experience discrimination at times and found no place to comfortably search for help.

In order to ensure that Chinese international students had a voice on campus, Heng (2017) sought to develop an understanding of their overseas college experience to improve transcultural understanding. The study of 18 mainland Chinese students specifically explored their perceptions of how their institutions could better support them

and enhance their college experience. The study found that Chinese international students long for the cultural background acceptance from their professors, and domestic peers' effort in initiate interacting, as well as better international student services to interpret academic norms. Heng (2017) concludes that the seeming reluctance of Chinese international students to communicate orally, is often understood as disinterest and their struggles are dismissed as the consequence of their own lack of motivation or interest. This attitude is likely due to the fact that higher education institutions do not seek feedback about or investigate the lived experiences of Chinese international students. Consequently, post-secondary institutions unintentionally foster a culture of silence among international students as they fail to proactively solicit feedback from the students to determine what their needs are (Heng, 2017). The voices of Chinese international students who have been surveyed, indicate that they encountered academic uncertainty and suffered emotional stress as they desired patience and encouragement from teachers. Additionally, the demonstration of care and inclusion from domestic peers would enhance these students' motivation, self-esteem, and mental health (Heng, 2017). Thus, participants hoped that their teachers and host peers would discard stereotypes and make an effort to understand the complex challenges that international students face.

### **Factors Influencing Sense of Belonging among Chinese International Students**

Among the factors that impact a sense of belonging among Chinese international students, there are four that are most common and that are most likely to shape how Chinese international students perceive their connectedness with their academic settings: cultural impacts, language barriers, campus characteristics, and information accessibility.

#### **Cultural Impacts**



A cultural distance ensues when one's personality does not fit in a new environment (Lee & Ciftci, 2014), and such a cultural distance between East and West is most notable when comparing and contrasting language and cultural customs and practices (Yao, 2016). Zhou and Zhang (2010) note the role of cultural differences saying:

International students who grew up in another culture usually possess different personal interests, ways of communication, sense of humour, daily routines, and perceptions on many things such as friendship, sexual relationships, and privacy concerns which will negatively influence their willingness and attempts to make close friends with domestic students (p.13).

The influence of cultural collectivism has been highlighted in several studies. Lee and Ciftci (2014) state that "in collectivistic cultures, compliance to the group norm is seen as a desirable quality" (p. 99). Likewise, group identification contributes to the improvement of psychological health and well-being; thus, people from collectivist cultures are more likely to receive social support from groups than those from individualist cultures (Lambert et. al, 2013). For example, perceived group support would be more likely to enhance in-group cohesiveness for individuals in collectivist cultures compared with members in individualist cultures (Lambert et. al, 2013).

Students from China are generally embedded with the collectivistic culture (Bertram et al., 2014), which means students are taught to be respectful to teachers and accept the knowledge uncritically. It is observed that most of the Chinese students act cautiously and in a reserved manner in American classrooms (Zhang & Xu, 2007). Similarly, Gebhard (2012) points out that international students, particularly Asian students, face

big difficulties during the seminars where students are supposed to ask and answer questions and discuss issues.

A student participant in a study by Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) mentioned that it took a lot of courage even to raise her hand in class. In a collectivistic cultural environment, Chinese students are required to be obedient and quiet in class and are not encouraged to articulate viewpoints or ask questions unless their teachers ask for it. However, Western students are characterized as being direct in expressing their feelings, opinions, as well as revealing more personal information (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). Liu (2016) also notes that due to the lack of a clear concept about the Canadian education system, Chinese international students have no idea how to answer a question in a particular educational context. It can be concluded by what Chiu et al. (2016) note, that students coming from collectivist cultures exhibit more sensitive reactions than students in individualist cultures toward the behaviors and judgments of their classmates. As a result, these students have to temporarily abandon traditional academic norms developed back in China and look for adapting to new academic behavior (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

Power distance has also garnered particular attention in explaining cultural differences. People from egalitarian cultures are assumed to be treated equally despite of their status; however, in terms of hierarchical cultures, people who possess less power have to accept the inequality across different statuses in society (House et al., as cited in Chiu et al., 2016). Chiu et al. (2016) suggest that students from egalitarian cultures are more likely to have a sense of belonging at school than those from hierarchical cultures. For instance, students in hierarchical countries perceive greater status differences

between student and teacher, which results in fewer interactions between the two. This weak teacher–student relationship can reduce students’ sense of belonging (Chiu et al., 2016). Moreover, Zhang and Xu (2007) note that North American culture is considered a ‘small power distance’, while Chinese is characterized as ‘large power distance’. They note that this is manifested by the fact that a typical American classroom is defined by an atmosphere where teachers and students are equal in interacting with each other. In contrast, Chinese classrooms are teacher-centered. Students of North America are characterized as valuing critical thinking and discussion, while Chinese students tend to only listen to instruction, take notes, and being less willing to participate in discussion with classmates. Western classmates may perceive such an approach as indifferent (Liu, 2016; Wang, 2016). Consequently, Chinese international students may find it difficult to adjust to the academic and social experiences in a host culture. Liu (2016) concludes that cultural differences come with varying pedagogical approaches, curriculum content, and evaluation standards, all of which can impact the academic outcome of Chinese international students. Similarly, Zhang and Xu (2007) argue that the Chinese students need to make a transition from teacher-oriented and passive-learning approaches to a student-oriented and active-learning approach when immersed in a Western learning environment.

The cultural changes may block the establishment of new close friendships when people move abroad; thus, people would be prone to maintaining a friendship with old friends (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In this respect, Gebhard (2012) points out that one facilitative behavior used by international students is doing things that remind them of their native culture. This may include hanging out with students of similar cultural

background when they feel lost in the host culture. The establishment of a new social bond in a new country is an important criterion of acculturation (Liu, 2016). Slaten, et al. (2016) note that acculturative stress was characterized as having social, academic, or emotional challenges associated with students' "international status" and "the host cultural norms" (p. 394), and they impact whether students feel connected to a campus or not. Berry (2015) defines acculturation as "the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (p.698). According to his theory, four strategies ensue when non-dominant people pursue acculturation: (1) integration, in which individuals maintain the traditional culture as well as accept the host culture; (2) assimilation, in which individuals value the host culture and do not want to maintain the heritage culture; (3) separation, in which individuals stick to the indigenous culture and do not want to accept the host culture; and (4) marginalization, in which individuals refuse both the host culture and the heritage culture. Thus, integration is a collective effort of mutual accommodation from both cultural groups, it requires acceptance by both cultural groups to admit each other's cultural characteristics.

### **Language Barriers**

Although newly arrived international students are likely to encounter different kinds of barriers when coming to North America, at least at the beginning, a significant barrier for those non-native English speakers appears to be the insufficient mastery in English. Cao et al. (2017) note that language proficiency has always been found to impact an individual's acculturation process and intergroup interaction. They also state that foreign language proficiency is highly associated with Chinese international students' social

bonds. Yao (2016) adds that students' academic adjustment on campus can impact their sense of belonging. For mainland Chinese international students, English is their second language and they learned in a Chinese school. Consequently, they rarely have a chance to use in daily life and do not speak the language well. This inadequate language proficiency has been marked as the primary acculturative stressor (Slaten et al, 2016; Liu, 2016), and it significantly impacts how an individual effectively deals with academic and social life (Liu, 2016).

For many Chinese international students, the language barrier is the source of embarrassment, a way of disconnection in terms of making friends with local peers (Liu, 2016). For example, in terms of social aspect, Wang (2016) found that English language proficiency impacts Chinese international students when befriending domestic students, resulting in their disconnection with host culture experiences. This failure to establish friendship with local peers, in turn, increases their feelings of loneliness and homesickness. As for academics, Liu (2016) explored the learning experiences of Chinese international students of a master program in a Canadian university and found that the language barrier significantly affected their reading and writing efficiency. A student in her study reported that she was quite confident in English proficiency before coming to Canada, but it turned out to be too difficult for her to figure out a sentence in some assignments, even in instances where she knew every word. With respect to writing, participants reported that they were not familiar with academic writing styles and formats in Canada. Academic requirements in Canada are more demanding than in China, and the difficulties in grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary exacerbate the issue. In addition, Liu (2016) notes that English speaking and listening are also considered a challenge for

many Chinese international students, as English teaching in China is exam-oriented, and relevant tests are not adequately developed for these skills. She likewise reports that participants who have higher language competence perceived their courses to be less difficult.

### **Campus Characteristics**

Tinto (1975) argues that an institution's resources, facilities, and staff/faculty composition will influence individual integration into the academic and social aspects of the institution. This will in turn impact the quality of education, the composition of the student population, and the number of students (Tinto, 1975). He points out that large institutions typically have a more diverse student population and are therefore accustomed to providing support to more diverse student subcultures. Consequently, such schools can more effectively facilitate social integration (Tinto, 1975). Fischer (2007) has expressed a similar viewpoint: a greater size of the student body on campus brings about more opportunities for representing diverse backgrounds, leading to different social dynamics compared with those of small campuses. Strayhorn (2012) argues that people search for a particular environment where individuals' values, expectations and attitudes can be consistent with the normative congruence in that environment; so if a campus has wide and diverse values, students are better able to generate greater sense of belonging by locating and constructing their particular affiliation on campus. Jensen (2011) also highlights the importance of a culturally diverse campus, arguing that when the dominant culture shapes the values of the student population, the institution excludes other worldviews and defines academic success in homogenous terms. However, when other perspectives are acknowledged, more inclusive and effective retention theories can be

developed (Jensen, 2011). Slaten et al. (2014) state that a campus without an inclusive environment may be less likely to satisfy students' need to relatedness, and lead to less campus participation. Students involved in their study showed appreciation for individuals or groups who acknowledge their similarities as well as differences, so university staff are well-advised to create an environment of acceptance to individual uniqueness on campus. The perspectives and experiences of Chinese international students call for a greater responsibility on the host institutions for reducing academic, social, and emotional barriers to student success.

Oseguera and Rhee (2009) build on this, arguing that faculty shapes the institutional climate and character that students are exposed to and engage with. Similarly, Maestas, Vaquera and Zehr (2007) observe that when international students have problematic interactions with their instructors, it is likely to inhibit their connectedness with the academic environment, given that staff and faculty are the primary contact point between students and the institution. In order to support and facilitate belonging, Cooper (2009) underscores how important it is for universities to understand their students' needs so that they can provide the comfort and care students require through both internal and external resources. For example, students' learning experiences can be improved when administrators increase the interactions between students and faculty in order to offer academic guidance and develop some other academic and social activities (Cheng, 2004). This may also include being recognized academically by faculty members and peers, as this enhances students' sense of belonging (Vaccaro et al., 2015). It is likewise critical to maintain frequent and regular interactions with academic advisors and faculty members to increase retention among international students (Mamiseishvili, 2012). As a result, the

support and interest in student development from academic support programs and faculty can increase a student's sense of belonging (Maestas et al., 2007).

Chiu et al. (2016) found that teachers' characteristics are the strongest predictor of students' sense of belonging: students who develop closer relationships with their teachers receive more teacher support or come from more well-organized classrooms perceive greater sense of belonging at school. In searching for Chinese international students' opinion on how U.S. higher education institutions can improve student college experiences, Heng (2017) found that one third of participants wished their teachers were aware of their backgrounds during teaching and assessment process, one quarter of participants wished their teachers considered their language barriers, especially during the first semester. The participants wanted to not only write essays, but desired feedback before submission. This empowered them by providing students with more academic choices. Furthermore, a quarter of participants wanted teachers to have more patience with respect to communication. They stated that displays of impatience intimidated them, discouraging them from contributing to class discussions or asking questions. This was consistent with the findings of Liu (2016), who succinctly summarizes this concept: "Changing demographics in education requires more acceptance of diversity, multicultural competence, and social equity and justice among educators" (p.14).

### **Information Availability**

Caidi and Allard (2005) view access to information that the literacy skills required to utilize them effectively as essential components of social capital. By extension, this form of social capital is influential with respect to campus belonging for international students. However, the current literature suggests that Chinese international students possess



insufficient information. For instance, Carey and Denise (2013) surveyed the health related needs and the barriers to the access of health care services on campus among the Chinese international students at an American university. They found that 16% of participants had no information on the location of student health service, 45% reported that they had no idea what services the student health services provided, and that Chinese international students tend to be reluctant to use related services that were available to them. Heng (2017) found that students also desire a greater clarity about administrative information, such as tax and immigration information to reduce the stress associated with their status as international students. Yan and Sendall (2016) analyzed how the first-year experience (FYE) program in a Catholic college influence international students in higher education, which provides first-year international students with information on topics such as academic resources, healthy relationship, cultural diversity, social justice and values. The findings indicate that such a program serves to enhance students' awareness of school resource information, deepen their understandings of host and other cultures, facilitate friendship establishment and development, and improve English speaking. The need for information availability is also reflected in students' housing issues. Students involved in Cheng's study (2004) considered residence halls to be the ideal place where academic, social, and cultural integration takes place and where students develop their sense of community. Through a multi-layered approach that included a survey, document analysis, and interviews, Calder et al. (2016) identified issues related to international students' housing and support needs. They revealed that more than half of international students had no access to the accommodation support. This is particularly important as the majority of the study's participants agreed that housing issues influenced their health

both physically and mentally, as well as their academic success. The students involved, therefore, were eager for more information support, particularly from faculty members and administrators.

## **Chapter 3: Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **Conclusion**

Research has provided evidence that a sense of belonging on campus in post-secondary institutions is closely related to positive academic, social, psychological, and persistence outcomes for Chinese international students in North America. A limited sense of belonging on campus and the diminished feelings of affiliation toward the community greatly impact the learning and living experiences among Chinese international students. A variety of studies make compelling arguments that a sense of belonging is essential in and to understanding student success in overseas higher educational institutions, especially considering the fact that “international students are a heterogeneous group with changing needs that require further understanding and differentiated support” (Heng, 2017, p. 846). The current study has demonstrated, through its literature review, that a perceived sense of belonging is beneficial to the well-being of students in terms of their emotional, motivational, and academic functioning. It helps to reduce anxiety, distress, and thoughts of dropping out while enabling students to address challenges with confidence. Alternately, from the institutional perspective, it is indicated that the robust global trend, along with the increased emphasis placed on higher education, necessitate the well-developed programs that serve to better manage and support international students. The well-being of students would be negatively impacted if universities simply neglect to construct an environment that foster a sense of belonging and provide sufficient support. Heng (2017) even notes that institutions should eliminate their authoritative and deficit perspectives and give international students agency by

making them part of the decision-making process. This will encourage institutions to recognize the impact of socio-cultural contexts and facilitate equitable exchanges.

### **Research Questions**

#### **Question 1: How do Chinese international students perceive their experiences and sense of belonging in North American post-secondary institutions?**

Literature review has indicated that in general, Chinese international students have a limited sense of belonging and diminished feelings of affiliation toward their community. This is reflected in several practices: impaired interpersonal relationship with local peers, preferred socialization merely with co-national fellows, limited participation in the host culture, academic uncertainties, communication obstacles, vulnerability to psychological issues such as anxiety and depression, discrimination, limited support, and insufficient information access to important issues such as course selection issues and tax information.

#### **Question 2: What factors impact Chinese international students' adaption and acculturation to North American post-secondary institutions?**

Several factors are found to impact sense of belonging for Chinese international students: cultural impacts, language barriers, campus characteristics, and information availability. First, Cultural impacts are based on the concept of collectivistic and hierarchical culture presented by Chinese international students. These students tend to perform in a reserved and obedient way in class, have less courage to challenge authority, and have underdeveloped critical thinking skills, which impact their academic performance.

Second, the language barrier is deemed the most influential factor in acculturation process. English language proficiency impacts Chinese international students in both

academic and social realms. Academically, students reported being unfamiliar with academic writing styles and formats in the host country, and had difficulties with grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary. English speaking and listening are also challenges for many Chinese international students in study. Socially, English language proficiency impacts Chinese international students when making friends with domestic students and the larger community, leading to disconnection from the host culture.

Campus characteristics is likewise critical. A campus with a large student body or that advocates cultural diversity tend to facilitate students' sense of belonging, as students eager for identity construction and diversity appreciation on campus.

Lastly, information availability is considered a source of social capital. Chinese international tend to lack of necessary information access, either for academic issues or administrative information. Thus it is vital to ensure these students have access to such information.

**Question 3: What corresponding strategies can be used to facilitate a sense of belonging for Chinese international students in North American post-secondary institutions?**

Increasing a sense of belonging among Chinese international students requires collective efforts from faculty member and student service personnel, institutional administrators, teachers, students themselves, and local governments. Faculty members must assume the responsibility to increase faculty-student interactions and facilitate the interactions between Chinese international students and domestic peers. Moreover, campus counselling services should be available to international students to provide the support that they need. Institutional administrators must ensure a campus atmosphere that

embraces cultural diversity and better integrate international students in meaningful ways. It is also important to ensure the information availability among Chinese international students, such as providing them necessary academic and administrative information proactively. Teachers need to develop a culturally relevant pedagogy and eliminate cultural stereotypes and biases to improve positive learning experiences for Chinese international students. Students themselves should be able to develop greater self-efficacy, pay attention to personal growth with respect to personal independence, maturity, and confidence, and they must also initiate interpersonal relationship with domestic peers. Additionally, efforts should be made to improve English proficiency for better integration both academically and socially. Finally, local governments should consider human-related services that integrate multicultural approaches to support international students and ensure that the voice of international students can be heard.

### **Recommendations**

Solving this issue requires a collective effort from all parties involved. This, when considering the data, is not only important to develop recommendations for faculty members and other student services personnel, institutional administrators, and teachers, but for students and the host government as well.

#### **Faculty Members and Other Student Services Personnel**

Literature has suggested that faculty-student interaction needs to be enhanced since inclusion and recognition from faculty members have a profound impact on students' sense of belonging with respect to their academic and social integration into university. If students are treated as individuals rather than a collective of student ID numbers, they would naturally feel more connected to faculty, which in turn is beneficial for their

educational outcomes. Therefore, faculty members should receive proper training so as to understand issues that relate to international students. They must also make an effort to enhance their relationships with international students. Faculty orientations and faculty learning seminars can be opportunities to offer training to relevant personnel to be more culturally aware of Chinese international students and to propose strategies that better support faculty-student interaction. Faculty members may consider to incorporate Chinese social media such as WeChat and Weibo in disseminating information and facilitating interactions. This could be especially helpful in providing the international student center with necessary information about Chinese international students.

Faculty members are also well-advised to facilitate interactions between Chinese international students and domestic students. Meaningful interactions with local students and international students from other countries can reduce mutual prejudice by focusing on common goals and cooperation. Creating diverse social networks not only facilitates communication and social connectedness, but also improves the attitudes international students have about the host culture. This may encourage international students to conform to social expectations, participate in their new community, and appreciate the local culture. Scholars (Du & Wei, 2015; Zhou & Zhang, 2010) have recommended initiating group activities for these students to interact with other domestic peers; presenting these students with cultural-related knowledge during the teaching process; and informing international students about available campus resources. Staff from international student offices also can provide more on-campus opportunities for Chinese international students to learn about North American culture and improve their social bonds with ethnic culture members. This would facilitate discussions, improve

international students' experiences, reduce acculturative stress, and improve social support and communication. Heng (2017) argues that Chinese international students desire activities that help them to better understand the dominant culture, through a culture shock introduction class or other means. Given the fact that some domestic and international students feel hesitant to interact with the other group concerning the problem caused by the cultural difference, diversity training should be advocated in order to decrease intercultural anxieties and facilitate interaction.

O'Keeffe (2013) notes that well-resourced on-campus counselling support is essential for international students' overall well-being, especially for those who suffer from mental health issues. An increasing proportion of international students in higher education requires campus health care service personnel to provide necessary evaluation and intervention to those students. University counseling professionals need to be able provide acculturation-related instruction to international students so that they can develop the social skills required to establish social self-efficacy for improved campus integration. In doing so, universities need to advertise and promote information on mental health and counseling services on campus to international students during the orientation. Moreover, schools should make mental health and counseling services accessible and ensure that international students are aware of these services, either through related workshops or other means. As for the academic support personnel, Heng (2017) calls for greater clarity on course availability/selection, facilities/classroom locations, and services that provide academic and non-academic help for Chinese international students. In terms of language proficiency, which is proven to greatly impact academic achievement of Chinese international students, universities' international student centers should be able to provide



English conversation groups, writing format workshops, and culturally responsive provisions so as to better prepare Chinese international students about their academic requirements. This could serve to reduce their academic uncertainties.

### **Institutional Administrators**

Post-secondary institutions must ensure that they are transculturally aware and embrace diversity. Cooper (2009) proposes suggestions for institutions to enhance students' sense of belonging including, recognizing cultural differences among students while fostering shared values on campus that can be presented in various ways by students. In doing so, the vital component is to promote a campus culture in which students can construct their identities as college students. However, a sense of belonging would be difficult to achieve if students are required to compromise who they are in order to integrate into their campus culture. Hence, being able to find self-identity and collective university value are equally important. In terms of creating campus culture, creating school logos in items like clothes and hats, serves to enhance collective identity of students in campus, thereby improving their engagement and persistence (Cooper, 2009). Consequently, every student can find a place where they feel they belong to under the multi-cultural campus environment. Higher education institutions can also facilitate socialization among unfamiliar groups, since interacting with different racial/ethnic groups other than one's own can positively impact on sense of belonging. In this regard, institutional administrators can develop intercultural activities for students of different groups. This serves to decrease bias and deficit stereotypes, overcome cultural barriers, and enhance inclusion.

In addition, efforts should be made by institutional administrators to improve information availability. During student orientations, universities can teach new students about extracurricular activities and encourage more participation. International student centers should proactively provide administrative information to students, such as study visa issues and tax information. As for the housing issues, in order to facilitate the psychosocial adjustment of Chinese international students, departments of housing and residence need to introduce social activities which promote Chinese international students' social connections. University residence services also need to improve the environment, so as to control noise, provide more food choices, and offer more opportunities for Chinese international students to communicate with international students of other origins, including domestic students (Zhou & Zhang, 2010).

Another urgent issue is campus discrimination. Students who have experienced negatively in terms of racially charged campus climates have lower levels of satisfaction on campus. In order to reduce the rates of discrimination encountered by international students, it is essential to facilitate cross-cultural communication, to show respect among different cultural groups, and to construct a global community. Institutions, in this regard, need to provide interventions to improve campus racial climate for minority students. Institutions should likewise offer workshops and seminars to faculty members and students to cope with racism and eliminate racial stereotypes. Hanassab (2006) notes that programs designed to embrace cultural diversity must “promote both multicultural and international learning for all students, a more favorable climate for both cross-national and interracial relations on campus, and specialized opportunities for domestic students and international students to learn from each other” (p. 169).

## **Teachers**

Academic performance is essential in establishing sense of belonging on campus. Therefore, teachers assume responsibility in improving learning experiences of international students. In particular, there has been instances where teachers develop some inaccurate assumptions about Chinese international students based on their learning style in class, and these inaccurate perceptions might lead to a kind of cultural discrimination. (Wang, 2016). For example, Chinese students were taught to raise their hands before answering teachers' questions while native students would speak out the answers without being called upon by teachers, thus Chinese international students often miss the opportunity to answer questions on time, they also present less engagement in group discussion. As a result, some teachers would perceive them as lack of the ability to properly answer questions in general (Wang, 2016). Therefore, teachers should be able to develop culturally relevant pedagogy, value international students as resources rather than burdens, and prioritize equity and symbiotic social relationships. When teachers employ these techniques, they can create a learning environment and campus culture that help international students better integrate into the campus community. However, Heng (2017) also stipulates that it is unfair to solely rely on teachers; instead, institutions are supposed to provide supportive resources for teachers, in addition to rewarding quality teaching that enriches student-faculty relationships.

## **Students**

A higher level of belonging on campus is achieved when students have "greater self-efficacy, self-concept, or reading achievement" (Chiu et al., 2016, p.191). Students with higher social self-efficacy tend to have more willingness to expose themselves to

academic and social interactions in host culture and thus are better able to make friends, improve English proficiency, and have positive experiences. Meanwhile, personal growth related to independence, maturity, and confidence is also deemed to be a positive factor that links international students with their peers and university (Slaten et al., 2016). It serves as a facilitator to the development of the identity as a university student. Therefore, in order to facilitate self-efficacy, participants are advised to adjust their negative mindset, step out of their comfort zone and make any necessary changes. For example, they can regularly write down skills that they have learned in a particular course, then compare their current abilities and understanding with their past abilities and understanding. They must observe any new progress they make in a visible and encouraging way. This will make them more likely be motivated and develop higher self-efficacy, which leads to higher rates of academic persistence. Additionally, the interpersonal relationships both inside and out of classroom contribute to a sense of belonging. Social support can serve as a buffer to overcome psychological pressure. The peer-group association is the strongest predictor regarding individuals' social integration, and this is followed by extracurricular activities and faculty interactions with regard to developing institutional commitment (Tinto, 1975). Therefore, it is important that Chinese international students pay attention to the interpersonal relationships, seek relevant information from faculty members, and proactively develop and sustain friendships with co-national peers, local peers, and international students of other origins.

In addition, the literature review has noted that language proficiency exerts a great influence on international students' academic performance, social life, and sense of belonging. Based on the learning experiences of Chinese international students who

dropout from an English language learning program, Wang (2016) postulates that there is a need to develop time-management skills and self-regulation for Chinese international students since the lack of self-regulation partially explained why they spend too much time on negative leisure activities, which lead to dropout behaviour. Therefore, Chinese international students should be more aware of the necessity of English proficiency and practice English outside of Chinese classrooms in listening, speaking, reading and writing as they prepare to live and study in another country. They are also expected to sustain such a practice after arriving at the study destinations through sustained efforts.

### **Local Governments**

Local governments can provide international students with off-campus social support so as to ensure their integration and security while away from academic institutions. Paltridge et al. (2012) state that local governments should bear the responsibility of improving international students' social inclusion and overall experience for both economic and moral reasons. With respect to economics, they argue that providing support to international students can improve their experiences, thereby enhancing the area's reputation. This will in turn give the area an advantage in the competitive international education market. With respect to the moral implications, they argue that it is unethical to accept money from international students only to abandon them when they need help adapting to their new environments, both academically and socially. What is more, as immigrant countries, America and Canada both have a long history of adopting qualified candidates by offering permanent residency or work visa from a wide diversity of source countries. In this regard, the international student group is deemed as skilled labour force (Government Accountability Office, 2009). Thus, governments, from the

municipal level to the national level, should make an effort to establish policies that help international students acculturate to the new environment so that they have the tools required to succeed academically and socially in the host country. Paltridge et al. (2012) point out that local governments should endeavor to facilitate social support services geared to international students, particularly with respect to provisions related to human services. They should integrate multiculturalism into core services to support international students, and the most effective and financially efficient measure that a local government can take is to “give them a voice through the creation of a local consultative body, and to listen to that voice” (p. 37). Local governments may consider sponsoring cultural festivals locally, or offering rebates on housing rents and tuition fees to help ease the financial burden for international students.

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