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Assessing the Mental Health of International Students at Penn State

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ABSTRACT

Penn State prides itself for hosting a diverse community of students at its University Park campus. Individuals from many different countries travel to Penn State each year to engage in undergraduate, master's and PhD coursework. This research seeks to assess how international students are emotionally supported by the university as they acclimate to a new country, environment, and culture. A total of eight international students participated in this research: three from Turkey, and one each from Indonesia, Russia, Egypt, Kuwait, and Brazil.

The interview begins with a general assessment of the students' emotional well-being based on a structured narrative approach where they are asked to describe their life before Penn State, and their life now. This is directly followed by a self-report measurement of their fundamental emotional state using the Differentiated Emotions Scale (DES). The DES was created by American research psychologist Carroll Izard in 1977 as a way to measure the mood of an individual during a specific life experience. The life experience measured in this research study is the student's time at Penn State. The students are asked a series of twenty questions, each consisting of three adjectives associated with either a positive or negative emotion. They rate the frequency to which they have experienced this emotion at Penn State from 0-4, using the respective DES system.

The results are positive as most of the interviewees associate more positive than negative emotions when reflecting on their time at Penn State. However, more than half of the students associate negative emotions when considering their experience with legal questions and the International Students and Scholars Advising (ISSA) office. I propose three possible solutions to better support international students on the University Park campus.

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Chapter 1

Literature Review

Hundreds of thousands of students studying at colleges and universities across the world suffer from mental health disorders. The exposure to a new environment often triggers feelings of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. For many undergraduate students, this is their first experience away from home for an extended period. It is not uncommon for students to struggle, which is why the presence and accessibility of mental health resources are vital for students' success at school. Resources include, but are not limited to, a place on campus that offers free counseling and psychological evaluations, access to experienced therapists virtually or in-person, and a student-only hotline which students are free to call or text.

While many academic environments do offer these resources, it is their effectiveness that is a cause for concern. Their presence is not enough. Students must be able to access these resources in a discreet, inexpensive, and timely manner. Furthermore, after utilizing said resources, there needs to be an appropriate follow-up protocol so the student's mental and emotional state can be maintained and reexamined. In this literature review, I will address recent research studies that examine the mental health of college students in America. First, I will examine the effectiveness of university mental health resources for student populations. Then, I will explore how the mental states of students and factors affecting them differ between national and international students. Lastly, I will cover Carrol Izard's *Human Emotions* (1977) and examine the Differential Emotions Scale (DES) as a tool for assessing the emotional state of individuals.

Previous Research Studies

As defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health “is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community” (June 2022). Using this definition, it is important to note that mental health is not just the absence of depression, anxiety, stress, etc. but the presence of traits like excitement and motivation to learn, work, and act well. Over the past two decades, universities across America have slowly built their arsenal of resources to spot mental health disorders amongst their students, and try to provide adequate healthcare services. The most common approach is systematic i.e, perceiving the issue from a global standpoint and providing broad resources rather than specialized programs. Penn State, for example, initially took a systematic approach to mental health resources for students. This included CAPS (the counseling and psychological service), drop-in groups for support, and a personal health and mental wellness library guide. These services are rather general and broad solutions that were imitated by universities all across the nation. Are they enough to make a real impact?

Geography and Earth Sciences professors Eric Windhorst and Allison Williams (2016) think that what the American universities are currently offering the students is not enough and propose a different approach to alleviate the mental health crisis affecting students in North America. After a thorough analysis of data provided by the American College Health Association in 2013 detailing the rather large anxiety, depression, and suicide rates of college students, Windhorst and Williams decided to examine this issue themselves. As geography professors they explore possible solutions in a less traditional manner, looking to the environment rather than people for help. For post-secondary students, Windhorst and Williams

found the nature-student relationship reduces levels of stress and encourages students to relax and focus (p. 235). This relationship consists of regular exposure to nature, both inside and outside. With this knowledge, they propose a variety of solutions to ensure better and enhance this relationship for all students across North America regardless of their geographical location and immediate outside environment. One way is for universities to create natural indoor settings. This includes installing “living walls into building architecture, installing windows overlooking natural settings; placing indoor plants in hallways, offices, and classrooms; and installing pictures or paintings of natural landscapes in a variety of public locations” (p. 235). The idea is for the simulation of nature to calm the students by connecting them with the natural world. They also propose nature-based therapies, known as ecotherapy. This style of therapy intervention can include therapy animals, guided nature meditations, and outside therapy sessions (p. 236).

The mental health resources provided by Penn State have evolved over time to include variations honoring the nature-student relationship. Therapy animals are brought to the HUB during finals week, the campus recreation facilities encourage outdoor activities and adventures, and a beautiful arboretum adorns the North campus, equipped with Wi-Fi and plenty of outdoor seating to create a serene study spot. However, are these measures focused and structured enough to actually have an impact on the mental health of students at Penn State? This study attempts to shed some light on the success rates of these resources and their effectiveness, specifically as they apply to international students under a unique amount of stress.

Consequences of the COVID 19 Pandemic

A very important event to consider when assessing the mental health of college students today is the coronavirus pandemic that ravaged the world in the early months of 2020. The sudden but necessary isolation increased the global prevalence of anxiety and depression by a

staggering 25%, according to the WHO (March 2022). At this time, students were asked to return home or isolate by themselves on campus. The college environment they were just beginning to feel comfortable in was uprooted and turned on its head as they were thrown back into the fight or flight mode they had, most likely, just escaped. A study of 419 first-year North Carolina university students found that after COVID-19, the prevalence of moderate-severe anxiety increased by more than 7%, and the prevalence of moderate-severe depression increased by more than 10% (Fruehwirth et al., 2021). The WHO concluded that “the pandemic has affected the mental health of young people and that they are disproportionately at risk of suicide and self-harming behaviors” (March 2022). When assessing the mental health and stability of college students today, the aftermath of the pandemic will likely be a very prominent factor in determining how healthy they are and why.

The burden and stress of the coronavirus was even more pronounced for international university students in America. Unlike most of the student population that lived somewhere in the United States, many hours of travel and layovers separated international students from their home and loved ones. When the pandemic first hit in March 2020, the US closed its borders to both ground and air travel. For international students, this meant many things. Either they had to stay on their school’s campus while the rest of the student body and faculty went home, or they had to quickly leave the country. Shortly after the coronavirus spread to America, the Trump administration restricted visas to international students unless they maintained their status as a full-time student (Pierce & Bolter, 2020). This affected both their status as a student as well as their eligibility for any financial assistance or economic relief, excluding them from the rest of the national population. One specific study researching the consequences of this exclusion found that an “overwhelming majority of international students reported mental health concerns,

including increased anxiety, feeling scared, feelings of loneliness, not belonging, feelings of frustration and fear induced by experiences of ‘othering’” (Maleku et al., 2021). The data for this study was collected from international students attending universities in Southwest, Southeast, and Midwest America. The goal of my study is to shed light on the emotions and mental states of international students from a university in Northeast America.

Methods for Measuring Emotions

There is an abundance of literature arguing, assessing, and supporting different methods and techniques for evaluating the emotions of the human mind. Some scholars place an unexpected value on food and neurogastronomy (Berčík et al., 2021), and how appearance and taste can drastically affect an individual’s cognitive abilities, memory, and quality of life. For international students hailing from different countries and cultures, the importance of food and its relationship to home should not be overlooked. However, to initially evoke a rich, emotional response from someone regarding their life and past and present life experiences, a narrative therapy technique is more effective.

Structured Narrative

A narrative is an account of a series of related events or experiences. In a single lifetime, they amount to the stories we tell about ourselves and the people, places, and things we encounter (Combs & Freedman, 2012). They can be long, short, sad, happy, miserable, motivational. Narratives are how we communicate with one another, especially in cases when both sides are experiencing something new and different (like traveling to a foreign country, for instance). It makes sense to include them in a thorough research study assessing the mental health of individuals experiencing a new culture and living away from home. Narrative therapy

(NT) skills used by scholars in educational environments have proven to bring about deeper critical reflection concerning life experiences (Edwards & Walker, 2019). By asking an individual to reflect on their life by using their story-telling abilities, they are more likely to provide an honest, detailed emotional response. NT is specifically helpful when measuring the subconscious mental well-being of students by evoking emotions they have forgotten or buried (Edwards & Walker, 2019).

NT is also rather useful when handling social justice and advocacy issues. It is hard for individuals to perceive problems as just problems, and not as a result of another person's shortcomings. When someone falls into this mind trap, their chances of changing the situation and helping the problem greatly diminishes as they are now blinded by the blame and responsibility they placed on another person. NT pushes individuals to speak about their relationship with the problem rather than their relationship with the people associated with the problem (Combs & Freedman, 2012). When this happens, therapists can better support their patient and their situation. Instead of changing their basic nature, the patient is being asked to change their relationship with the situation. This is a realistic solution and often produces genuine and emotionally ground-breaking results (Combs & Freedman, 2012).

Differential Emotions Scale

Carrol Izard, University of Delaware psychologist, offers a deeper insight into mental health in her book *Human Emotions* (1977) where she emphasizes the role and consequences of emotion as they contribute to an individual's quality of life and mental health. She first writes:

Despite the varying opinions of scientists, virtually all people (scientists included) readily admit that they experience joy and sadness and anger and fear, and that they know the difference between these emotions and the differences in how they feel and how they affect them. (p.3)

Mental health is important, but an even more important factor (or factors rather) contributing to the psychological well-being of an individual is their emotions: how well they acknowledge them, manage them, change them, and whether they give-in to or control them. Recognizing the importance of human emotions, Izard creates a way for them to be measured and assessed so that the mental well-being of an individual can be measured during a specific life experience. This method is called the Differential Emotions Scale (DES) and is a result of the differential emotions theory. This theory is based on the following five key assumptions (p.43):

1. Ten fundamental emotions constitute the principal motivational system for human beings.
2. Each fundamental emotion has unique motivational and phenomenological properties.
3. Fundamental emotions such as joy, sadness, anger, and shame lead to different inner experiences and different behavioral consequences.
4. Emotions interact with each other – one emotion may activate, amplify, or attenuate another.
5. Emotion processes interact with and exert influence on homeostatic, drive, perceptual, cognitive, and motor processes.

It is with this theory that Izard constructed the differential emotions scale as a way to measure how these fundamental emotions function to influence the mental state of individuals during specific life experiences.

The scale is a self-report tool and can be compared to a questionnaire in the 21st century. There are a total of twenty questions, ten associated with predominantly positive emotions and ten with predominantly negative. Each question is a repetition of a fundamental emotion posed through three synonymous words. For example, one of the questions is: “What is the most hopeful, optimistic, or encouraged you felt?” This question is derived from the positive

fundamental emotion interest-excitement (p. 46). The respondent must rate how often they have experienced this emotion on a scale from 0-4. The complete response scale and list of questions is displayed below in Table 1. The assessment of an individual's emotional response and mental well-being is dependent on patterns in their answers. If an individual continually provides a high answer (3 or 4) for the questions associated with negative emotions, then it can be assumed when considering a certain life experience, they were not well. On the other hand, if they respond with high answers for the questions associated with positive emotions, then it can be assumed that specific life experience was a positive and joyous time.

	0 = never, not at all	1 = a little bit	2 = moderately	3 = quite a bit	4 = always, all the time
1.	What is the most amused, fun-loving, or silly you felt?				
2.	What is the most angry, irritated, or annoyed you felt?				
3.	What is the most ashamed, humiliated, or disgraced you felt?				
4.	What is the most awe, wonder, or amazement you felt?				
5.	What is the most contemptuous, scornful, or disdainful you felt?				
6.	What is the most disgust, distaste, or revulsion you felt?				
7.	What is the most hopeful, optimistic, or encouraged you felt?				
8.	What is the most embarrassed, self-conscious, or blushing you felt?				
9.	What is the most guilty, repentant, or blameworthy you felt?				
10.	What is the most grateful, appreciative, or thankful you felt?				
11.	What is the most hate, distrust, or suspicion you felt?				
12.	What is the most inspired, uplifted, or elevated you felt?				
13.	What is the most interested, alert, or curious you felt?				
14.	What is the most sad, downhearted, or unhappy you felt?				
15.	What is the most joyful, glad, or happy you felt?				
16.	What is the most love, closeness, or trust you felt?				
17.	What is the most scared, fearful, or afraid you felt?				
18.	What is the most proud, confident, or self-assured you felt?				
19.	What is the most stressed, nervous, or overwhelmed you felt?				
20.	What is the most serene, content, or peaceful you felt?				

Table 1. Differential Emotions Scale

Chapter 2

Methodology

To begin my assessment of international students at Penn State, I sought out various individuals and organizations on campus to find a unique set of students to interview. The most important concern was finding students from an array of different locations so the study would not be limited to a specific country or continent. This is why extending the study to any and all willing international students was of utmost importance. Another consideration was the age and degree type of the students. As I wished this to be a comprehensive and well-rounded study, I knew the pool of students had to be representative of the various degrees that Penn State's University Park campus offered.

Participants

Table 2, which can be found below, details the participants for this research study. Listed are their names, country of origin, the type of degree they are pursuing, and how many years they have been at Penn State. This sample of eight students is representative of six different countries (Brazil, Egypt, Indonesia, Kuwait, Russia, Turkey) and four different continents (Africa, Asia, Europe, South America). The students fall into one of three degree types: undergraduate, graduate or PhD. The amount of time at Penn State varies from one year to five years. The degree type does not directly affect the amount of time the students have studied at Penn State as the university hosts international students through various exchange and study abroad programs.

Name	Homeland	Degree Type	Year in School
Alina Lebedeva	Moscow, Russia	Undergraduate	3
Berk Altin	Izmir, Turkey	PhD	1
Christabel Cilitonga	Jakarta, Indonesia	Undergraduate	3
Ege Altan	Izmir, Turkey	PhD	2
Hanan Alalawi*	Kuwait	PhD	5
Ilayda Onder	Izmir, Turkey	Graduate	5
Miriam Safyeldeen	Alexandria, Egypt	Graduate	1
Renata Carlos Daou	Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil	Undergraduate	4
* = interview conducted over Zoom			

Table 2. List of Participants

The interviews were one-on-one with no other participants. Except for the one interview conducted over Zoom, all other interviews were in-person and took place in a neutral space on campus. These spaces varied from a reserved room in the Pattee and Paterno library to a space in the Arts and Architecture building to a cozy spot in the HUB. While the locations may have differed, all of the interviews were recorded in a safe and private environment. Before the interview began, I made sure to have a genuine and casual conversation with each participant as they were about to reveal rather sensitive information about their experience as an international student at Penn State. For the integrity of the research, it was important the students were honest and open in their responses, and these conversations aimed to control that variable. Additionally,

before recording the session I asked their permission and kept the recording device visible, so they were aware when the recording was on or stopped.

Measurements of Emotion

The interview itself consisted of three parts: collection of background information, structured narrative, and the Differential Emotions Scale (DES). The background information was purely for record keeping, consisting of questions like their name, age, nationality, and years at Penn State. This was directly followed by two structured narrative prompts 1) Please briefly describe your life *before* Penn State and 2) Please briefly describe your life *at* Penn State. After the structured narrative came the DES. The student had a sheet of paper in front of them listing the values of the numbers 0, 1, 2, 3 and 4 from Table 1. After one question was asked, they provided a verbal response using the scale.

The idea behind the structured narrative is to time and assess how long the student talks about their life before coming to Penn State versus how they talk about actually living here. Do they speak more fondly of their time before coming to State College? Is there an obvious difference in their tone and excitement when they talk about one life experience over the other? Do they list what they miss or don't miss about home? Do they speak about both? These are the kinds of questions I had running through my head when listening to their story and assessing the interview data. By posing these two questions as an open-ended narrative response, the students were able to respond without the constraints of a specific question. The intent was to encourage them to respond honestly and genuinely without any guidance of how their response should sound.

After answering the structured narrative prompts, the students were introduced to the DES. They were asked, considering their time at Penn State, to rate how often they felt the specific emotions the question listed on a scale from 0 to 4. Table 1 details the questions and scale. For some students, the language barrier prevented them from initially understanding what the question was asking. When this happened, I elaborated on the emotion by providing other adjectives and general examples. For instance, “Question 1: What is the most amused, fun-loving, or silly you felt?” was particularly confusing as some didn’t understand what constitutes feeling silly. When moments like this occurred, I provided minimal clarification, and after another example or two every student was able to grasp the question(s) and provide a response.

The questions were split into two sections: the first ten following a positive, negative, negative pattern and the last ten following a negative, positive, positive pattern. The only discrepancy in the pattern is the last two questions of the second set which I switched so the scale would end on a positive question. I felt it was important to end with the student reflecting on positive emotions before jumping to the conclusion so the student would not feel distraught after their brief emotional journey. The questions were also ordered in this particular manner to reduce the likeliness of repetitive responses. Since there were only twenty questions, and the pattern switched halfway through, the students were not likely to expect whether a trio of positive or negative emotions was coming next.

After the first set of ten questions, I reviewed any high answers (3: quite a bit, 4: all the time) and asked the student to elaborate on their response. This is where the narrative therapy (NT) technique came into play. When asked why they responded with a high answer, the student was likely to recount the frequency and degree to which they experienced those emotions using their story-telling abilities. To be clear, the response and elaborative narrative did not have to be

related to a specific experience as an international student. Their responses were meant to reflect their entire Penn State experience and did not have to revolve around their identity as an international student. After they explained their high answers, this process was repeated with the final ten questions.

Chapter 3

Results and Analysis

After a quantitative analysis of the DES data, it is apparent the emotional well-being of the eight international students is generally positive. Of the eight questions which received a majority ($\geq 62\%$) of high answers (3,4), seven were associated with positive emotions. These questions are displayed below in Figures 1 through 7. Not only did most of the students respond with “quite a bit” or “always, all the time” but no student responded with 0 i.e. “never, not at all”. The instance where majority of the answers were high for a question associated with negative emotions occurred only once, as detailed in Figure 8. Furthermore, Question 7 (Figure 2) and Question 16 (Figure 6) were the questions which received the most four responses. Again, both of these questions were associated with positive emotions.

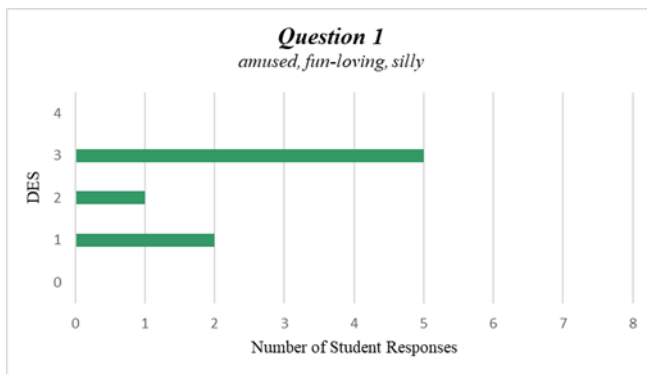


Figure 1. Question 1

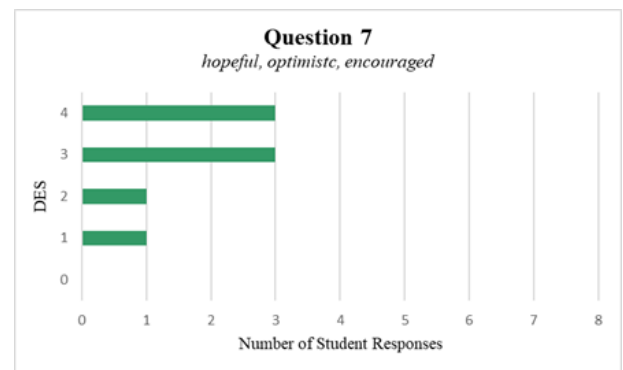


Figure 2. Question 7

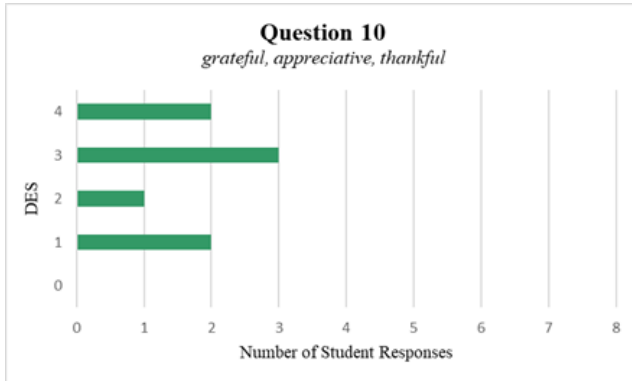


Figure 3. Question 10

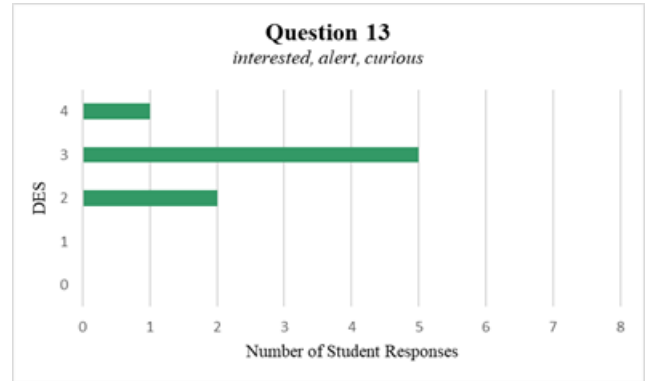


Figure 4. Question 13

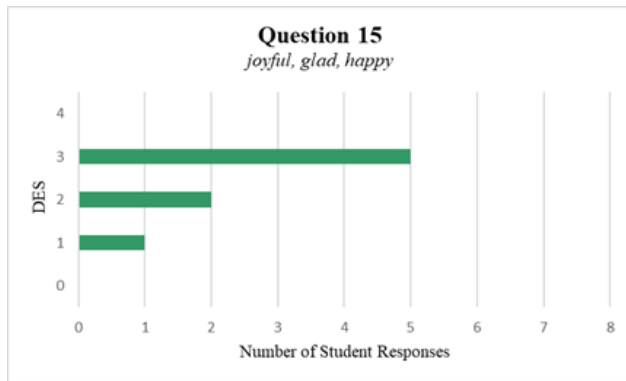


Figure 5. Question 15

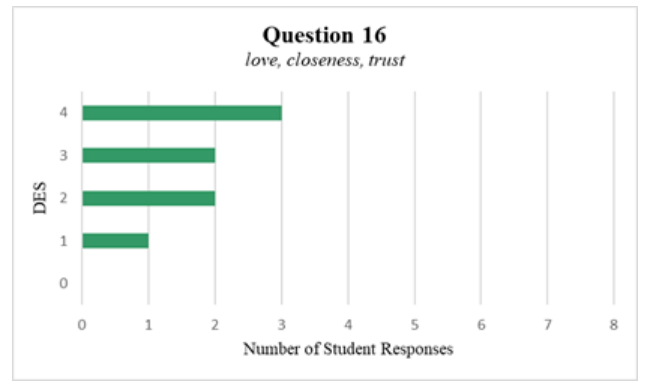


Figure 6. Question 16

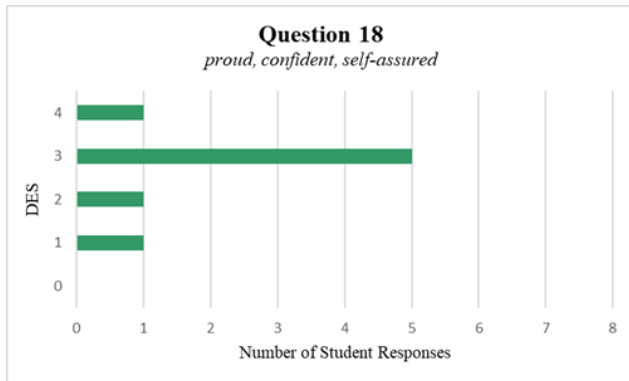


Figure 7. Question 18

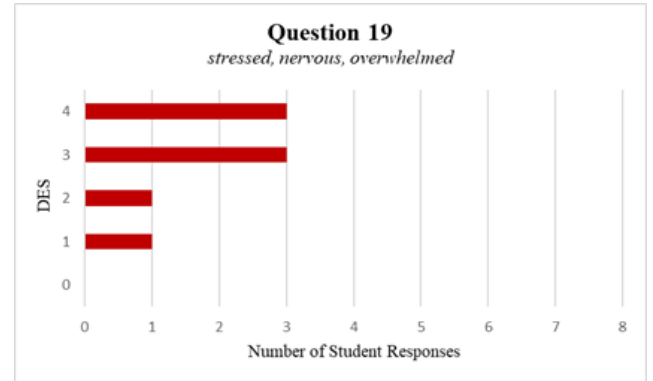


Figure 8. Question 19

Elaborative DES Narratives

When each student responded with a high answer of a 3 or 4, they were asked to elaborate why. For some, the narratives they provided were very similar with a common theme or two shared between them. For instance, when the five students who responded with a 3 for Question 1 – “What is the most amused, fun-loving, or silly you felt?” – were asked why they felt this emotion so often, all of them attributed the recurrence of these emotions to their friends and relationship with the people around them. Two of the students specifically mentioned their roommate(s) and the fun times they have together, while the rest generalized their response to friends. Table 3 details the main point of the student narratives for the questions with majority of high responses from Figures 1 through 9. For each category (Friends, PSU Academics, etc.) each X represents one student response. However, one student may have noted multiple categories for one question, so it is possible the number of X’s listed across for each question exceeds the number of students that responded with a high number from the scale.

Friends, PSU Faculty/Professors, and PSU Academia are the most influential aspects of the students’ lives considering the positive emotions they experience. Majority of the students feel amused, loved, supported, and encouraged by their friends. In response to Question 1, a student declared, “I had four random roommates my sophomore year. At first, it was awkward and different, but now we love each other. We would die for each other” (Interview, March 18, 2023). The students also feel supported, encouraged, and happy thanks to their professors and other Penn State faculty. To Question 10, one student in particular responded, “I feel it all the time. I am grateful to people who support me. I love the faculty, admin, and staff at Penn State. My department is wonderful. It’s a 4” (Interview, March 7, 2023).

	Friends	Family Back Home	PSU Faculty/Professors	PSU Academia	PSU Campus Environment
Question 1 <i>amused, fun-loving, silly</i>	X, X, X, X, X				
Question 7 <i>hopeful, optimistic, encouraged</i>	X	X	X, X, X, X	X	
Question 10 <i>grateful, appreciative, thankful</i>	X, X, X, X	X, X, X	X	X	
Question 13 <i>interested, alert, curious</i>	X, X			X, X, X, X	X, X
Question 15 <i>joyful, glad, happy</i>	X, X, X, X		X, X	X	X
Question 16 <i>love, closeness, trust</i>	X, X, X, X, X	X	X, X		
Question 18* <i>proud, confident, self- assured</i>			X	X, X, X	X, X, X
Question 19 <i>stressed, nervous, overwhelmed</i>			X, X, X	X, X, X, X, X, X	X, X, X

Table 3. Elaborative Narratives

Similarly, another student replied, “All the professors I am taking courses with are very encouraging people. They encourage me all the time. They are the ones who encouraged me to apply for an M.A., and they said, ‘You fit here’, although I didn’t think I would fit here.” (Interview, February 6, 2023). Not only does it appear that Penn State faculty and professors are kind and caring people, but they greatly contribute to the quality of life of international students by encouraging and helping them with their future. These responses were provided by undergraduate, graduate, and PhD students. This is very encouraging and supports the idea that Penn State – University Park faculty and professors positively contribute to the emotional well-being of international students of varying ages and degree type. Penn State academia is also a significant category of interest and curiosity for these students, showing the coursework and majors available at Penn State positively contribute to the students’ academic well-being.

However, there is another side to this coin. Question 19 is the only question in Table 3 that lists a trio of negative emotions: stressed, nervous, and overwhelmed. This question was the only one associated with negative emotions that received a majority of high answers. As detailed in the table, these emotions were influenced by PSU Faculty/Professors, PSU Academia, and PSU Campus Environment. Friends and Family Back Home did not have an influence on the high responses for any of the students. When asked to elaborate on their response, one student replied, “It has a lot to do with workload and uncertainty since I don’t know where I am going to end up.” (Interview, November 7, 2022). Uncertainty about the future was a common theme for the other students as well. This is not exactly surprising considering the environment and position these students are in, getting ready to graduate and/or having to make big decisions regarding their academic career and next steps. However, these high responses were more than just the stress of being a college student. Three students noted the support from Penn State

regarding future careers to be an issue as there are, according to them, very little resources for international students in particular. One student explained, “I need a job that sponsors a visa, and I don’t feel like Penn State helps a lot with that. It’s like the opposite. They’re expecting you to not get a job that sponsors a visa, so they’re trying to push you to do something else.” (Interview, January 16, 2023). Without receiving the necessary help from Penn State administration, this student turned to the alumni network in hopes of solving their problem. They spoke with former international students from Penn State who now have jobs with visa sponsorship and have since found the best way to find and apply for jobs.

Structured Narrative Analysis

The most informative structured narrative prompt to assess the mental health and well-being of these eight international students was the second one about the respondents’ experience at Penn State. The answers were mixed, both between the students and within the responses from the students themselves. In their opinion, there are both positive and negative sides to living in State College and attending Penn State – University Park. After a review of the interview data from the structured narrative portion, it is clear that undergraduate and younger international students struggle more with campus life than graduate and PhD students. For example, all three undergraduate students reported logistical issues before coming to Penn State, and now, while being here. After asking if they felt logistically supported by the university before arriving, one student replied, “No, not at all. I would be having so many questions and literally nobody would be willing to answer them... I would be calling ISSA [the International Student and Scholar Advising office] and they would say, ‘You might want to try this but we’re not sure’.” (Interview, December 6, 2022). This student confirmed it took until the middle of their

sophomore year to have their one question regarding a stipend and scholarship figured out. In the meantime, they continually stressed about their financial situation and status as a student on scholarship. Another undergraduate student recounted a similar experience with ISSA, stating “The most difficult part was navigating the legal stuff. For example, during COVID I had a lot of trouble with visa and travel restrictions. It was messy” (Interview, January 16, 2023). It is no surprise the university struggled during the pandemic as this was a confusing and uncertain time for everybody. However, it appears the visa status and information regarding international students was not exactly a top priority. At least it did not feel this way for the three undergraduate international students who participated in this study.

While graduate and PhD students did not exactly struggle with visa and pandemic issues, there was a running theme in their responses, particularly considering the International Student Orientation (ISO). This orientation is much like the New Student Orientation (NSO) Penn State mandates for all incoming undergraduate freshman but is tailored specifically to incoming graduate and PhD international students. After being asked what their life was like at Penn State, two PhD students credited their initial struggle(s) to the lack of useful information and guidance in the ISO. When reflecting on a problem they had with their taxes and being paid by the university, one PhD student describes, “It was very stressful, and I couldn’t find the right person because the international student orientation is awful... It is delivered by undergrad students who’ve just been here for a month, or so” (Interview, February 28, 2023). Another PhD student, comparing the experience to a similar international student orientation they attended as a student in the Netherlands, commented, “I think it could have been better. It was not that useful to me.” (Interview, March 1, 2023). The difference was the design of the orientation as there were multiple events where students interacted with one another, making the process of finding and

making friends much easier. This particular student described their current social life as “lonely and isolated”. They wish there were more events and on-campus activities during and right after the orientation so they could have met more people and fellow international students.

Chapter 4

Discussion

At the end of all the interviews, each student did take the time to express their well-being today. Regardless of their struggles and issues when they first arrived in State College and started their life as a Penn State student, all eight students say they are happier and have slowly begun to find their place on campus and in their college. While the goal of this research study was to conduct a well-rounded interview process assessing the mental health of international students on campus, there are notable limitations to this study. Regardless, there were enough patterns in the data to recognize specific issues in how international students are treated at Penn State. I propose three possible solutions to help eliminate these issues.

Study Limitations

First and foremost, the pool of students interviewed for this study could have been larger. Given the time after this thesis was decided upon and approved, there were serious time and schedule restraints restricting the number of international students that were available for an interview. I felt it was important to conduct all the interviews in person as this was likely to create a more open and comfortable environment for the students to divulge their struggles. However, even after making this a priority, one interview was conducted over Zoom during spring break as both the participant and I were traveling. Furthermore, there was not an even gender distribution in this study. Seven of the participants were female, and one was male. To conduct a more well-rounded study, I would have included both more male participants as well as nonbinary and gender fluid students. Penn State is a diverse campus, and this was not represented as well as it could have been.

Proposed Solutions

I propose three solutions to address three relevant issues international students have or are currently struggling with. Most importantly, Penn State needs to hire a lawyer or legal team to better support international students and their various legal questions. By hiring a specific expert or team of experts, their questions will be answered more efficiently and quickly. As highlighted in this study, international students struggle with many legal issues such as visa applications and sponsorships, stipends, scholarships, taxes, etc. There needs to be a better system and place on campus where an international student can call and have their issue fixed within a week or two. They should not have to wait months for a status update or solution.

Additionally, the International Student Orientation (ISO) needs to be updated to include more useful information other than the basic university history. These students have moved away from their home, their family, and everything they have known. They deserve a team of professionals ready to welcome and assist them in their journey acclimating to the campus and life as a Penn State student. This does not necessarily mean undergraduate students cannot run the orientation, but it would appear they are not currently equipped and informed enough to deliver a useful introduction. It would be better if the orientation is conducted by third- or fourth-year international students who have long and personal experience of adapting to life in a foreign country.

Lastly, I propose Penn State hosts an annual or biannual career fair with businesses and companies offering visa sponsorship tailored solely to international students. As an international student, these individuals need a job after graduating that offers visa sponsorship if they wish to stay and work in America. The current career fairs hosted by Penn State do not host a wide range

of companies, if any, that are willing to sponsor an international employee. It is vital the university understands the professional needs of the current diverse body of students it hosts and begins to implement solutions that will create a real change.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

As a university committed to its students and the idea of community prompted by its motto “WE ARE!”, Penn State must diligently monitor and support the well-being of its student body. Even more so, as a university committed to hosting a diverse group of students from over 130 different countries, specific attention must be paid to international students. After conducting eight interviews with students from Brazil, Egypt, Indonesia, Kuwait, Russia, and Turkey, I can confidently assert the Penn State faculty and professors are doing a great job encouraging and checking-up on their students. Not one student had a negative comment about any of the classes they have taken or the professors they’ve interacted with.

However, there is a lack of concern and consideration for international students and their mental health considering logistical, legal, and professional issues. Penn State needs to hire a lawyer to assist the International Students and Scholars Advising (ISSA) office, as well as update the information provided in the International Student Orientation (ISO). Many international students have questions and concerns that are being left unanswered. Lastly, Penn State needs to host a unique career fair for international students with companies willing to sponsor their visa applications.

Appendix A

Differential Emotions Scale (DES)

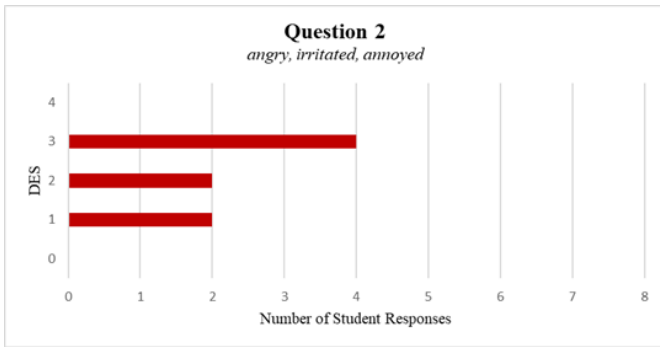


Figure 9. Question 2

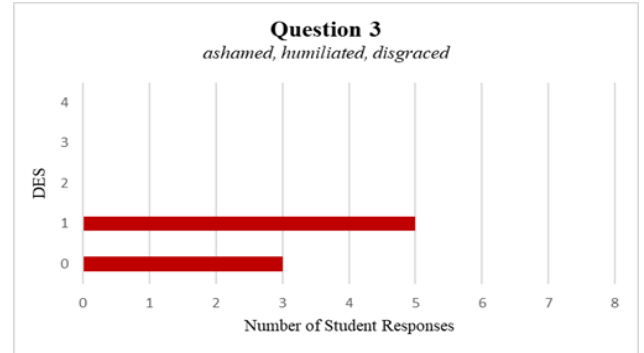


Figure 10. Question 3

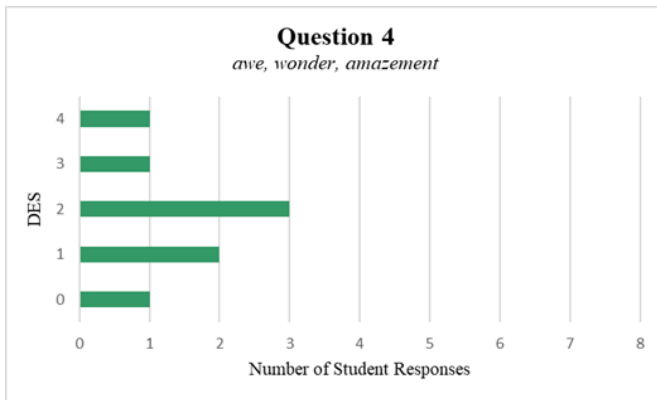


Figure 11. Question 4

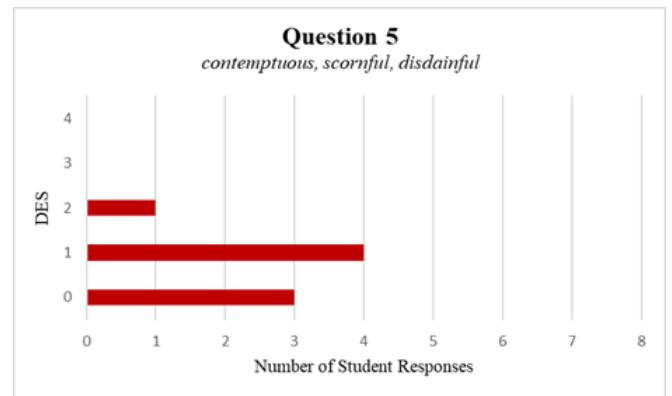


Figure 12. Question 5

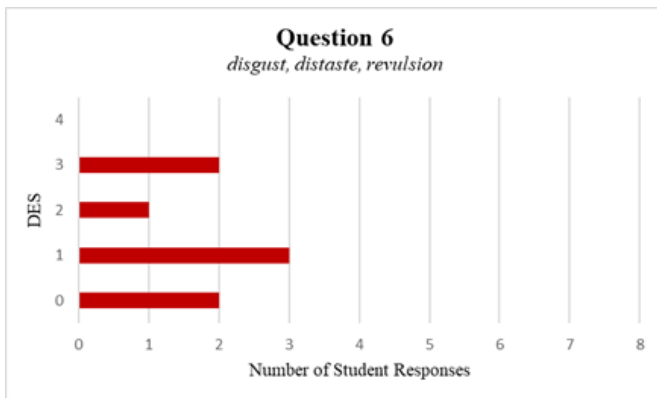


Figure 13. Question 6

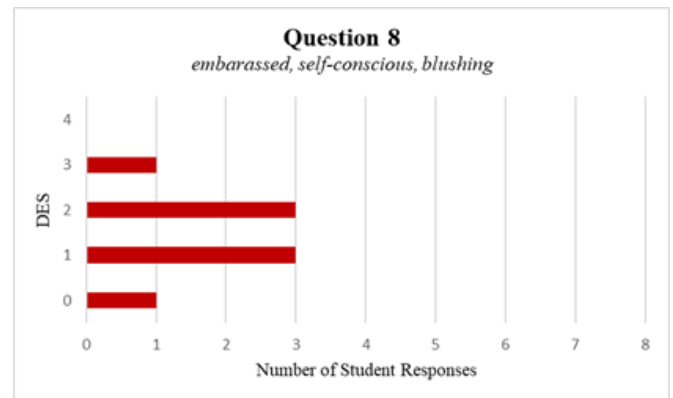


Figure 14. Question 8

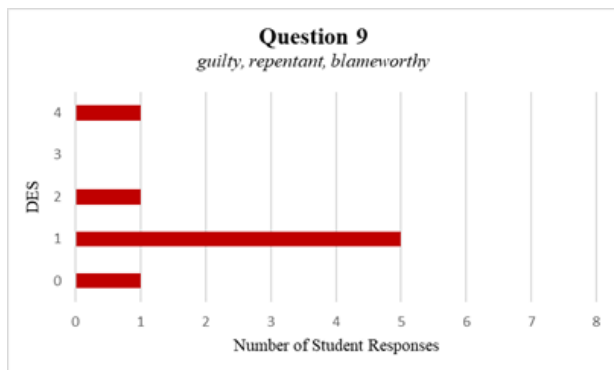


Figure 15. Question 9

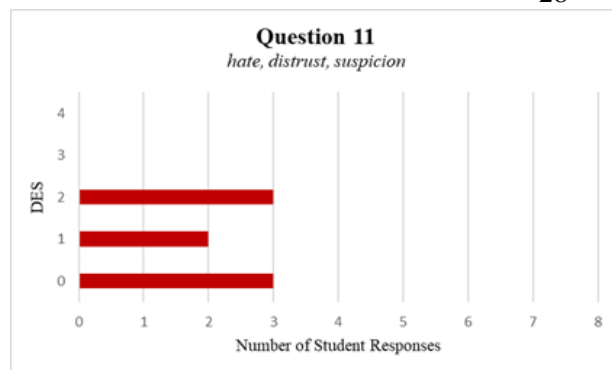


Figure 16. Question 11

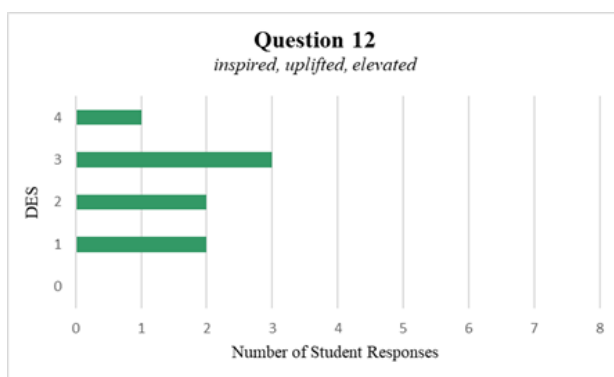


Figure 17. Question 12

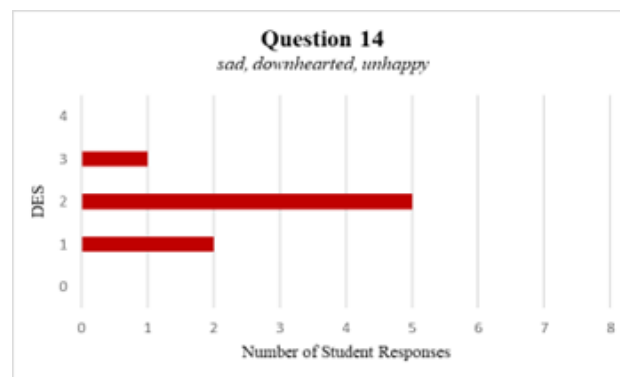


Figure 18. Question 14

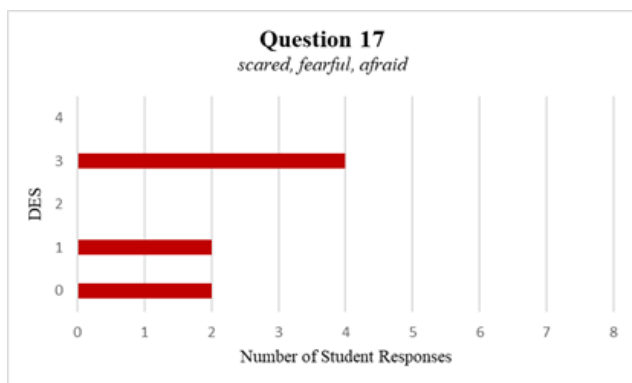


Figure 19. Question 17

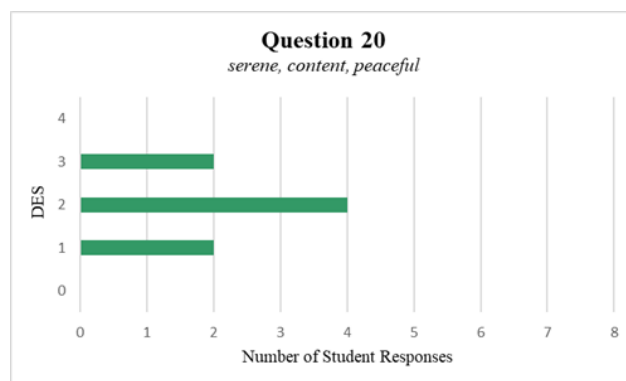


Figure 20. Question 20

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ACADEMIC VITA

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College of the Liberal Arts | Bachelor of Sciences in Global and International Studies *Class of 2023*
Schreyer Honors College

Research Experience

Schreyer Honors College Undergraduate Thesis

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August 2020 – Present

- Conducted research on the mental health of international students at Penn State – University Park campus

Research Assistant | Boliang Zhu

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- Responsible for conducting research on the behavior of international firms during the Russia-Ukraine War and the Trade War with China
- Collaborating with a team of fellow undergraduate Penn State and Texas A&M students

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Center for Global Studies

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- Responsible for collecting research on the success rates of global nonviolent protests throughout history
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University Activities

Vice President of Finance

University Park, PA

Alpha Omicron Pi, Epsilon Alpha Chapter

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- Responsible for managing a \$100,000+ budget for the organization
- Financially managed over 170 club members

Paterno Fellow

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Schreyer Honors College

September 2019 – May 2020

- Honors program that included advanced academic coursework prior to entry to Schreyer Honors College

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