

Engaging International Students Through Peer Mentorship

Elizabeth E. Ogar, eogar@purdue.edu, Purdue University

Neil A. Knobloch, nknobloch@purdue.edu, PhD, Purdue University

Hui-Hui Wang, huiwang@purdue.edu, PhD, Purdue University

Need for Innovation

The transition to higher education presents unique challenges for first-year international students, particularly in specialized disciplines such as agriculture. These students often struggle with adapting to new academic expectations, cultural differences, and social integration, impacting their motivation, academic success, and overall sense of belonging (Bullock et al., 2021; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Andrade, 2006). Studies show key difficulties, including cultural shock, isolation, knowledge gaps, and increased research expectations, making structured support essential for their academic and social adjustment (Settle et al., 2024; Henze & Zhu, 2012; Sawir et al., 2008). A major challenge is adapting to different academic norms. Many international students come from diverse educational backgrounds with varying teaching and assessment methods, leading to difficulties in adjusting to coursework, research, and hands-on learning requirements in agricultural sciences (Marginson, 2014; Settle et al., 2024). Without sufficient guidance, these challenges can lower motivation and hinder academic success. Cultural and social adjustments also play a critical role. International students frequently experience cultural shock, language barriers, and difficulties forming relationships, contributing to feelings of loneliness and exclusion (Berry, 2005; Sawir et al., 2008). A lack of belonging can further impact motivation and engagement (Strayhorn, 2012; Bullock et al., 2021). To address these challenges, the graduate students' organization at a US university was established with a faculty member as their advisor to provide support for students in their new environment. This approach aims to bridge knowledge gaps, foster motivation, and create a supportive academic environment for first-year international students in the College of Agriculture.

How it works

The Graduate Students' Organization (GSO) implemented a structured peer mentorship program to support first-year international students in the College of Agriculture. This initiative aimed to help new students navigate academic expectations, cultural adaptation, social integration, and research demands by pairing them with experienced graduate students who had successfully transitioned into the academic and social environment. The program was structured into four key phases: first, experienced graduate students within the College of Agriculture, particularly those who had previously navigated similar challenges, were selected as mentors and underwent a two-hour orientation focused on cross-cultural communication, academic navigation, and peer mentoring skills. Mentors know of the university resources available to international students, ensuring they can effectively guide their mentees. Second, mentor-mentee

students participated in a series of seminars with carefully selected topics aimed at building the capacity of the students using activities such as faculty-student networking events (brown bag seminars and social events), study groups, cultural exchange meetings, and research support sessions. Third, mentors met regularly with their assigned mentees through check-ins, informal meetups, and group discussions, ensuring that peer mentoring occurs organically. These interactions facilitated academic preparedness and social belonging, reducing feelings of isolation and enhancing motivation. Fourth, mentees were encouraged to share their experiences through written reflections and focus group discussions. Feedback was gathered to assess the program's impact on their adaptation, motivation, and academic performance.

Results and Implications

Preliminary findings indicate that the peer mentorship program facilitated through the Graduate Students' Organization has had a significant positive impact on first-year international students in the College of Agriculture. Mentees reported several key benefits, including improved academic performance, a stronger sense of belonging, cultural integration, and personal growth. These outcomes highlight the importance of structured peer support in enhancing the experiences of international students as they transition into a new academic and cultural environment. One of the most notable outcomes was improved academic performance. Mentees expressed that having a mentor helped them better understand academic expectations, research requirements, and discipline-specific coursework. With access to study strategies, research guidance, and time management tips from their mentors, students felt more confident in their ability to succeed academically. Additionally, the program facilitated connections with faculty members and research groups, providing students with valuable academic support networks.

The peer mentorship program also fostered a stronger sense of belonging among mentees. Regular meetings with mentors and structured social activities helped them build meaningful relationships, reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation. Social engagement with peers who had similar experiences created a supportive community where students felt valued and included, ultimately enhancing their motivation and retention. Cultural integration was another key benefit. Through peer interactions, mentees gained insights into local customs, communication norms, and cultural expectations. They reported increased confidence in participating in classroom discussions, networking events, and social gatherings, which was pivotal in integration into campus life. Finally, mentees highlighted personal growth as a major outcome. Beyond academic and social benefits, the mentorship experience encouraged self-advocacy, independence, and resilience. Many students expressed increased confidence in seeking academic help, adapting to new challenges, and setting long-term educational and career goals.

Future Plans

The peer mentorship program will continue as an annual initiative within the Graduate Students' Organization (GSO) to provide sustained support for new graduate students in the College of Agriculture. Future iterations will focus on expanding mentor training, incorporating more structured academic support, and enhancing faculty involvement.

Cost/ Resources Needed

The peer mentorship program incurs direct costs such as refreshments and printed materials totaling approximately \$300–\$450 per semester. Indirect costs include faculty advisor time, use of university facilities, administrative support, and volunteer time from mentors and mentees. Most indirect costs are absorbed by existing university resources, making the program highly cost-effective.

References

- Andrade, M. S. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities: Adjustment factors. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 5(2), 131–154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240906065589>
- Berry, J. W. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(6), 697–712. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.07.013>
- Bullock, J. H., Morgan, J. E., & Warner, W. J. (2021). Motivations and Challenges of Underrepresented Students Enrolled in a Post-Secondary Agricultural Education Program: Community through Diversity. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 62(3), 185–201. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2021.03185>
- Glass, C. R., & Westmont, C. M. (2014). Comparative effects of belongingness on the academic success and cross-cultural interactions of domestic and international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 38, 106–119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.04.004>
- Henze, J., & Zhu, J. (2012). Current Research on Chinese Students Studying Abroad. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 7(1), 90–104. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2012.7.1.90>
- Marginson, S. (2014). Student Self-Formation in International Education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(1), 6–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315313513036>
- Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Deumert, A., Nyland, C., & Ramia, G. (2008). Loneliness and International students : an Australian study. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12(2), 148–180. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307299699>
- Settle, Q., Schoeneman, J., Quinlan, L., & Cline, L. (2024). The Mentor Network for Junior Faculty in the Discipline. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 65(2), 209–225. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.v65i2.2490>
- Settle, Q., Wampler, A., Cline, L., & Quinlan, L. (2024). The Experiences of Mentors and Mentees with Mentorship in the Agricultural Education Discipline. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 65(4), 67–83. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.v65i4.2745>
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2023). Estimating Differences in the Effects of Living–Learning Community Participation on Black Students’ Sense of Belonging at Predominantly White and Historically Black Colleges and Universities. *Journal of College Student Development*, 64(2), 225–230. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2023.0019>