



Structural Components of Inclusive Counseling Services for International University Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the structural components of higher education counseling services for international students through an inclusive approach. Data were collected via in-depth interviews with 32 participants including faculty, staff, and students and analyzed thematically. The themes that emerged included the necessity of aligning counseling services with the mission of education; the value of universal support and guidance; the benefits of collaboration among counseling units and other service providers; the need for counseling services to be designed for both providers and students; economic constraints and staffing shortages; impact of social, historical, and cultural factors on international students' counseling needs; and the importance of international counselors in providing culturally responsive care. This study highlights the importance of inclusive counseling services for international students in higher education and provides valuable insights for developing and improving such services.

Keywords Inclusive counseling · Structural components · Higher education · International students · Qualitative research

In recent years, the number of international students studying at universities has been increasing steadily due to the internationalization of higher education, which refers to the process of integrating global perspectives, cross-cultural experiences, and international collaboration into the core functions of universities (Bista, 2018).

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This includes attracting international students to study at universities and fostering their integration into the campus community through various support services, cultural exchange programs, and interactions with domestic students (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). For example, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) highlighted a significant increase in the number of students studying abroad. The number of international students enrolled in tertiary education globally nearly doubled between 2000 and 2018 (OECD, 2020).

International university students face unique challenges such as language barriers, cultural shock, homesickness, and adjusting to a new academic environment that can impact their mental health and academic performance (Bemak & Chung, 2017; Mori, 2000). As a result, universities are increasingly faced with the challenge of providing adequate support services to meet the needs of these students, particularly in the area of mental health and well-being (Bender et al., 2019). Given the growing number of international students at universities (Huynh & Grossmann, 2021), universities would benefit from focusing on providing inclusive counseling services that could contribute to supporting the mental health and well-being of all students. Inclusive counseling services are accessible to all students, regardless of their background, and consider their unique needs and experiences (Sakiz et al., 2015). These services respect cultural differences and consider how culture can impact individuals' mental health (Ridley et al., 2021).

Given the importance of counseling services in higher education, the structural components of these services must be examined. This may include evaluating the availability of resources, the training and qualifications of the counseling staff, the scope of services provided, and the accessibility of these services to all students, regardless of their cultural background (Taliaferro et al., 2020). This study aims to investigate the structural components of higher education counseling services while identifying the current practices and gaps in counseling services to improve the quality of these services. This research aims to contribute to developing more inclusive and effective counseling services that support the mental health and well-being of students in higher education.

Structural Organization of Higher Education Counseling Services

International students may face unique challenges when studying in a foreign country, which can impact their mental health and academic success. Research showed that international students are at an increased risk of developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Mofatteh, 2021). For instance, a systematic review conducted by Stallman (2010) found that international students had higher levels of psychological distress compared to domestic students. These problems can be due to various factors such as cultural adjustment difficulties, language barriers, homesickness, and isolation (Taliaferro et al., 2020). International students may exhibit a reluctance to seek counseling services due to potential cultural differences and perceptions that counseling could carry a negative stigma (Kourgiantakis

et al., 2019). This reluctance may arise from concerns about sharing personal issues with unfamiliar counselors, leading to hesitancy to approach counseling as a resource. This phenomenon underscores the need for culturally sensitive counseling approaches that foster trust and understanding, encouraging international students to view counseling as a positive and supportive process that can address their well-being concerns (Onabule & Boes, 2013).

Universities can provide comprehensive counseling services to support international students in overcoming these difficulties. These services should be designed to meet the specific needs of international students, considering their unique challenges and cultural context (Jing et al., 2020). This may involve, for example, providing support for cultural adjustment and offering resources and strategies for coping with the challenges of being away from home. By addressing the needs of international students, universities can improve their academic outcomes and contribute to their overall sense of belonging and satisfaction with their university experience (Rivas et al., 2019).

Despite the importance of counseling services for international students, these services often need a better structural organization (Mori, 2000). One way that poor structural organization can impede international students is by creating barriers to accessing counseling services such as unfamiliarity with the counseling practices, limited financial and human resources, and lack of awareness about available counseling services and the procedures for accessing them (Lau et al., 2019). This can lead to frustration, misunderstandings, and a lack of trust in the counseling centers, which can discourage international students from seeking help in the future (Han & Pong, 2015).

Students who receive support from counseling services are more likely to persist in their studies, achieve higher grades, and report higher satisfaction levels with their university experience (House et al., 2020). Furthermore, international students with access to counseling services report better mental health and a greater sense of belonging in their new community (Keum et al., 2022). While considering counseling, international students may benefit from group work (Yakunina et al., 2010), developmental approaches (Yoon & Portman, 2004), and person-centered counseling approaches that foster a warm, supportive, and confidential climate (Onabule & Boes, 2013). Despite such few research outcomes, the extent of research specifically addressing counseling considerations for international students is limited.

Another way that poor structural organization can impede international students is by failing to provide culturally sensitive and inclusive counseling services. For example, a study by Keum et al. (2022) showed that international students reported significantly higher distress at the end of their therapy compared to domestic students, suggesting that therapists could be less effective in working with international students. However, if the counseling center has a diverse staff that understand and respond to the needs of international students, this can create a sense of connection and trust (Bemak & Chung, 2017). Additionally, if the counseling center does not provide resources or support for cultural adjustment and well-being, it may not effectively address international students' unique challenges (Ridley et al., 2021).

Structural Components in Higher Education Counseling Services

In higher education counseling services, structural components refer to the underlying framework that supports delivering these services. These components encompass various elements, including the physical infrastructure, staffing, funding, policies, and procedures that shape the organization and delivery of counseling services for international students. The effective management and integration of these components are essential to creating a supportive environment that meets the unique needs of international students and helps build trust and rapport between counselors and students (Keum et al., 2022; Mori, 2000).

A diverse and culturally competent staff is a key component of higher education counseling services for international students. This includes having counselors trained in cross-cultural communication and understanding international students' unique challenges, such as language barriers and cultural adjustment (Amparbeng & Pillay, 2021; Hannon et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2019). Another crucial component is a comprehensive outreach program tailored to the unique needs of international students. Given that international students may be less inclined to utilize counseling services compared to their domestic counterparts, due to potential cultural barriers and unfamiliarity with the process, the necessity for education becomes more pronounced (Poyrazli, 2015). To bridge this gap, the outreach program should encompass targeted methods for educating international students about the available support services. Classroom presentations, information sessions, and accessible online resources can play a pivotal role in fostering awareness, trust, and understanding.

Strategic evaluation and meticulous assessment of the needs of international students represent pivotal components in the enhancement of support services (Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). These assessments, while encompassing various dimensions, should be tailored to the unique challenges and cultural contexts of international students. By capturing feedback from international students, these assessments can spotlight areas in need of refinement, while also offering counselors a clearer understanding of the intricate interplay between students' needs and the services provided. Moreover, these assessments can aid in the development of culturally sensitive and responsive strategies, fostering a more inclusive environment that resonates with the diverse backgrounds of international students (Ching et al., 2017).

Partnerships and collaborations between counseling services and external organizations can help improve service delivery to international students (Coll & Stewart, 2002; Llamas, 2011). For example, partnerships with other mental health, guidance or career units, and international student organizations can help to provide a broader range of services and promote the exchange of knowledge and resources (Prieto-Welch, 2016). Also, a supportive and confidential physical environment includes having a counseling center that is easily accessible, with flexible hours of operation, and a confidential and inclusive atmosphere (Baik et al., 2019).

Theoretical Framework: An Inclusive Approach to Counseling

The theoretical framework for this article is centered around an inclusive approach to counseling services in higher education, which acknowledges and embraces pluralism and diversity in counseling and education (Huynh & Grossmann, 2021). This approach recognizes that students' diverse backgrounds and experiences, including international students, must be considered to provide effective and culturally sensitive counseling services (Mori, 2000). As a result, counselors must assume new roles and responsibilities to make their services more inclusive and effective for all students, regardless of their cultural background or other unique characteristics (Sakiz et al., 2015).

One key element of an inclusive approach is the acknowledgment of the transactionality of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Sameroff, 2009). This recognizes that individual development is influenced by a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors and that these factors interact with each other in a transactional process that shapes the individual's experiences and outcomes (Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009; Sameroff, 2009). For international students, this means that their experiences in higher education are shaped not only by their academic and personal experiences but also by the social, political, historical, and environmental factors that have influenced their lives.

Another important component is a systemic approach toward screening for counseling needs (Farrell & Venables, 2009). This involves assessing the needs of all students, including international students, and providing support accordingly. Systemically assessing an individual's counseling needs is crucial in understanding their well-being. However, a purely medical understanding limits the scope of the assessment and ignores the impact of various factors on mental health. Inclusive counseling practices emphasize that mental health is influenced by systemic factors such as social determinants of health, cultural beliefs and practices, and personal life experiences (Urquhart, 2009). Such an assessment can contribute to a personalized treatment plan tailored to individuals' unique circumstances and needs, leading to better mental health outcomes (Farrell & Venables, 2009).

Finally, an inclusive approach supports integrating counseling services with other services on campus, such as career support, guidance, and sociocultural support (Zunker, 2016). This holistic understanding of counseling recognizes that students' success in higher education is not limited to academic achievement but also includes social, emotional, and personal well-being (Hernandez & Seem, 2004). To support international students, higher education counseling services should consider these broader aspects of success and offer a range of services that address students' unique needs and psychological, cultural, historical, and environmental circumstances (Kim et al., 2019; Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009).

Research Gap and Significance

Within higher education, international students face various challenges that can affect their academic success and overall well-being. These challenges may include language barriers, culture shock, homesickness, and discrimination (Jing et al., 2020). Moreover, due to these unique stressors, international students are often more vulnerable to mental health problems than their domestic counterparts (Rivas et al., 2019). Given the importance of mental health and academic success for international students, it is crucial to identify the structural components of counseling services that effectively support these students.

Researching the structural components of higher education counseling services for international students is significant as it can inform the development of more inclusive and effective counseling programs. Considering the diversity of international university students (Huynh & Grossmann, 2021), more research is needed to specifically address their unique counseling needs. This research gap makes it challenging for universities to ensure that their counseling services effectively meet all students' needs, including international students.

Despite the growing body of research on international students and counseling services, a significant gap exists in the literature that investigates these services through some theoretical lens. While some studies examined the effectiveness of specific counseling techniques and interventions (e.g., Delgado-Romero & Wu, 2010), few addressed the need for a comprehensive theoretical framework that can guide the development and implementation of inclusive counseling services for international students (e.g., Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021). This gap underscores the requirement for a study that can offer both a theoretical framework for counseling and a valuable resource for practitioners and policymakers engaged with international students in higher education settings.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the needs of international students and develop more inclusive and effective counseling services. To achieve this aim, the following research question is asked: "What are the structural components of inclusive counseling services in higher education for international students?"

Methodology

Research Design

The research design for this study adopts a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology, as emphasized by Merleau-Ponty (1962), is instrumental in shaping the design of this research. It highlights the importance of understanding human experiences within their lived context, considering the world as an integrated and inseparable part of these experiences. This aligns with the essence of the phenomenological approach, which aims to explore the meaning and essence

of human experiences within their natural contexts. In this study, the phenomenological lens allows for an in-depth exploration of how international students perceive and interact with the counseling services provided at the university. The focus here is on comprehending the shared experiences and perspectives of participants regarding the structural components of higher education counseling services for international students.

Researchers' Positionality

It is important to recognize the transparency and acknowledge the positions and backgrounds of the researchers. The researchers included an international visiting professor at a North American university during the time of the research, with a background in counseling and educational psychology, and a North American professor of counseling at the same university. Their expertise and knowledge in the field of counseling added depth and insight to the study.

The main author held no official role within the university's counseling services or its administrative units. During this period, they had the opportunity to interact with international students through their academic role. Their unique position allowed for insights into the challenges and issues faced by international students without assuming any official authority over the participants. The co-author, a North American professor, did not provide counseling services through the university's counseling center or any related service. Their connection to the university was purely academic, with no direct involvement in the counseling services offered. This position enabled them to contribute valuable insights into the local counseling landscape and the university's institutional dynamics from an academic perspective.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that while the main author had interactions with international students through their academic role, they did not hold a position of authority or influence over the participants. The main author's role primarily revolved around academic activities and did not involve providing counseling services or any official administrative capacity at the university. Their collaboration allowed for a comprehensive examination of the research topic, benefiting from both international and local perspectives. By combining diverse perspectives and experiences, they aimed to approach the study with cultural sensitivity and openness to different viewpoints. It is important to acknowledge that their positions as researchers did not entail any official roles within the university's counseling services, and this was clarified to avoid potential misconceptions. They strived to maintain reflexivity and objectivity throughout the research process, recognizing the potential impact of their own backgrounds on data collection, analysis, and conclusions.

Participants

The participants of this study included 32 individuals from different departments and units within a state university located in the USA. The participants were interviewed to gather their perceptions and experiences with the counseling services provided at the university. Three participant groups were involved

in this study. The first group consisted of 13 international students, comprising six undergraduates and seven graduate students, along with four local students, including two undergraduates and two graduate students. The second group comprised three unit managers responsible for counseling and psychological services, five counseling service experts, and three unit managers overseeing socio-cultural, career, academic, accessibility, and inclusive support services. Lastly, the third group included four faculty members from the departments of counseling, psychology, and sociology.

Including a diverse range of participants, such as students, staff, and faculty, was instrumental in capturing various perspectives and insights related to the phenomenon under investigation. Students' experiences are pivotal as recipients of counseling services, providing firsthand insights into their needs and challenges. Staff members, including counselors and administrative personnel, contribute their professional expertise and insights into service delivery and operational aspects. Faculty members, on the other hand, offer an academic perspective and may provide insights into how counseling services align with the broader educational mission. By engaging participants from different roles within the university community, the study aimed to provide a holistic view of the challenges, needs, and potential improvements in higher education counseling services for international students.

Among the 13 international university students who participated in the study, there were individuals from different parts of the world, reflecting a broad range of cultural perspectives. The international student cohort included two students from India, two from Europe, one from Japan, two from the Middle East, two from South America, one from Turkey, one from China, one from Indonesia, and one from Canada. Importantly, all international students were born and raised outside of the USA, contributing unique perspectives shaped by their respective cultural contexts.

The mean age of the participants was 36.7. The departments of the students included engineering (2), nursing (1), education (4), business (1), arts (1), communication (1), physics (1), literature (1), psychology (1), political science (1), media and journalism (1), theater (1), and chemistry (1). Of the 17 students, 13 received counseling services, while four did not. Eleven international students and two local students received counseling services.

The sampling strategy for this study involved purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Creswell, 2013). Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants with direct experiences and knowledge about the counseling services offered at the university (Patton, 2015). Potential participants were initially identified based on their roles within the university's counseling services, academic departments, and administrative units. Snowball sampling was employed to further identify participants who could provide additional insights into the experiences and perceptions of the counseling services (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This inclusive approach facilitated a comprehensive examination of the perceptions of the counseling services provided by the university.

For ease of reference and tracking, each participant was assigned a label indicative of their role and a numerical identifier. For instance, "Faculty 1" represents a faculty member, "Staff 1" denotes a staff professional, and "Student 1" signifies a student participant. This labeling system was implemented to

streamline the presentation of results, allowing for clear attribution of perspectives and comments to specific participant groups throughout the study.

Data Collection Instruments

The data collection instruments used in this research comprised semi-structured interviews tailored to each participant group. The focus of these interviews was to gather insights into the participants' experiences and perspectives on the structural components of higher education counseling services. The interviews were thoughtfully developed by integrating the theoretical foundations and methodological frameworks presented in relevant literature. For instance, insights from the literature guided the selection of key topics to explore, such as cultural sensitivity in counseling and the integration of support services (e.g., Ching et al., 2017; Keum et al., 2022). Additionally, methodological approaches highlighted in the literature influenced the formulation of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to share their experiences, thereby enhancing the authenticity and depth of the collected data (e.g., Lipson et al., 2019; Zunker, 2016).

To ensure the credibility of the data collected through the interviews, an evaluation of the interview questions was carried out. This process involved comprehensive cross-referencing of the questions with the pertinent literature. Moreover, the questions underwent rigorous testing through pilot interviews, during which participants' feedback played a pivotal role in refining the interview structure. These pilot participants provided valuable insights into the clarity of questions, the depth of topics covered, and the overall flow of the interviews. Their input prompted adjustments in question phrasing, consolidation, and inclusion of probing prompts. This iterative process enhanced the questions to effectively capture the nuances of participants' experiences, bolstering the credibility and robustness of the study's findings (Cresswell, 2013).

Furthermore, the interview questions were designed to reflect cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, recognizing participants' diverse backgrounds. The questions encompassed cultural expectations, preferences, and intersections of identities and experiences that international students may encounter. This approach aimed to foster an environment where participants could openly share their perspectives while facilitating a comprehensive exploration of the research question.

It is important to emphasize that the interviews were not just theoretical constructs, but tangible interactions that occurred between the researcher and the participants. Through these interactions, we were able to engage with the participants' unique perspectives, experiences, and voices. The interview schedules served as the guiding framework for these discussions. The fact that these interviews took place is crucial to understanding the firsthand accounts and reflections that were shared, allowing us to delve into the complexities of higher education counseling services for international students from multiple viewpoints.

Procedure

First, permission from an institutional review board and consent from the participants were obtained. The interviews were conducted in person ($n=27$) and remotely ($n=5$), depending on the participant's preference and availability. The interviews, which lasted approximately 1 h, were conducted by the primary researcher, who has a background in counseling and extensive training in qualitative research methodologies, while the second researcher conducted a subset of them to ensure that the data collection process captured diverse perspectives and reduced potential bias stemming from a single interviewer. The researcher took detailed notes during the interviews and audio-recorded all of them for later analysis. The interviews were conducted in a private setting to create a supportive environment for the participants to share their experiences freely.

After the interviews were conducted, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by trained transcribers to ensure accurate representation of participants' responses. The transcriptions were then imported into qualitative data analysis software for systematic coding and analysis. Strict confidentiality measures were implemented to protect participants' identities and ensure data security. Only the researchers had access to the raw data and personally identifiable information. All audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored on password-protected devices and cloud platforms.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic and inductive analysis approaches. Thematic analysis was used to identify and categorize meaningful themes and patterns within the data and allowed for the identification and categorization of recurring themes and patterns within the data, providing insight into the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The inductive analysis facilitated a bottom-up approach to data analysis, and helped to build themes and patterns from the data, making the research more grounded in the participants' experiences where themes and patterns were identified based on the data itself rather than pre-existing assumptions or theories (Saldaña, 2013).

In this study, two coders were involved in the data analysis process. They engaged in coding discussions and reached a consensus on the code design and selection (Saldaña, 2013). Throughout the coding process, any disagreements that arose between the coders were discussed and resolved through open dialogue and iterative refinement of the coding framework. This process involved regular meetings where the coders critically reviewed and compared their individual coding decisions to identify areas of agreement and address any discrepancies. Consensus was achieved through thorough deliberation and reaching mutual agreement on the final coding decisions (Cohen et al., 2018; Saldaña, 2013).

The first step in the data analysis was transcribing the entire audio-recorded interviews into written form. Then, the data was read multiple times to gain a general

understanding of the content. This was followed by identifying initial codes and themes through open coding. The themes were then refined based on their occurrence frequency and significance to the research question (Huberman & Miles, 2002). Next, axial coding was used to link the themes and subthemes to form a coherent and comprehensive data picture. The themes were then sorted and grouped into broader categories to identify overarching patterns in the data. Finally, selective coding was used to integrate and synthesize the themes and subthemes into a meaningful and coherent representation of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Trustworthiness

This section elaborates on the measures that were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings (Huberman & Miles, 2002). First, to ensure credibility of the findings, this study employed an extended period of data collection, which allowed for the collection of rich and diverse data. Furthermore, the data collected was analyzed in depth, and the findings were cross-checked against the existing literature to ensure the credibility of the results. Second, to ensure the transferability of the findings, the study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques to select the participants. This allowed for the collection of a diverse range of participants. Also, participants were selected from different departments and colleges, which added to the diversity of the data and the transferability of the results. Third, to ensure the dependability, the study employed a rigorous data analysis process, involving a detailed thematic and inductive analysis. The data was analyzed multiple times to ensure that the findings were consistent and robust. Furthermore, the results were cross-checked against the existing literature to ensure dependability. Finally, to ensure the findings' consistency, the study employed multiple researchers to analyze the data, and the results were compared to ensure that the findings were consistent.

Findings

This section presents the results of the qualitative data analysis. Seven overarching themes, accompanied by their respective 24 sub-themes (Table 1), have been identified through rigorous analysis. It is important to note that these themes and sub-themes represent illustrative examples drawn from the data. While some themes are discussed by multiple participants, others are relatively concise and serve as exemplars to convey the diversity of perspectives. This approach provides a comprehensive overview of the data while acknowledging that the richness of participant experiences is captured through these representative examples.

Alignment with the Mission of Education

The first theme focuses on the importance of aligning counseling services with the mission of education and the need for universal approaches to address the needs of international students. First, participants note that focusing on a developmental

Table 1 Themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Alignment with the mission of education	⇒ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developmental focus • Infusion in curriculum • Outreach • Prevention and life skills • Education for stakeholders • Promoting safety, confidentiality, and effectivity • Multicultural curriculum • Groupwork
Universal support and guidance	⇒ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campus inclusiveness • Commitment to internationalization • Integrating counseling with campus services • Academic and sociocultural support • Accessibility
Collaboration	⇒ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared policy and mission • Cooperation with services • Faculty involvement • Research
Designing for providers and students	⇒ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International students' unique needs • Internal resources • Autonomous planning and implementation
Economic constraints and staff shortage	⇒ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applications and waiting time • Involvement of insurance companies
Social, historical, and cultural influences on students	⇒ {• Tailoring students' unique needs
International counselors	⇒ {• Euro-American orientation in counseling

approach can help international students learn about mental health and develop life skills. A faculty member (Faculty 3) states,

We need to shift our focus from just treating problems to providing guidance and support that empowers students to learn and grow. It's about building resilience and life skills, not just fixing something broken. This approach, which prioritizes psycho-education and proactive support, can potentially foster meaningful and lasting changes in students' lives.

Participants note that infusing counseling content into the general curriculum can help integrate mental health into the education system and promote overall well-being. A counselor (Staff 7) states, "It is important to integrate mental health into the curriculum so that students can learn about it as part of their education. Infusing counseling content into the general curriculum can help normalize mental health and reduce stigma." Participants also note that counseling services need to reach out to international students and inform them about the services' availability and confidentiality. One manager (Staff 2) states, "It is important to make international students feel comfortable and safe seeking help, and outreach can help create this environment. It can help build trust and increase access to counseling services."

Participants highlight the importance of education for stakeholders. For example, a faculty member (Faculty 1) states, "It is important to educate everyone about mental health so that everyone can understand the importance of counseling services and help international students who may need support." An international student

(Student 2) states that “Awareness about mental health can help reduce stigma and create a supportive environment for international students.” As for students, a counselor (Staff 10) notes,

Teaching life skills and prevention strategies can help international students manage stress, develop resilience, cope better with challenges and challenges they may face. Teaching these skills can be empowering and help international students feel more in control of their lives.

Participants note that international students need to feel safe and confident in the counseling services. One international student (Student 11) states, “It is important for the counseling services to maintain confidentiality and provide effective support for international students.” A local student (Student 15) notes that “showing that the counseling services are safe, confidential, and effective can help increase access and trust in the services.” Ensuring this, however, requires that counseling students learn about different cultures and have a multicultural perspective. One manager (Staff 1) states that “Having a multicultural perspective can help counselors understand the unique needs of international students and provide better support.” A faculty member (Faculty 4) notes that “multicultural curriculum content can help counselors develop cultural competence and provide more inclusive counseling services.”

Finally, importance of group work is highlighted. A manager (Staff 6) notes that “it is difficult to organize group counseling because there are different schedules and needs among international students.” Similarly, a counselor (Staff 11) states that “group counseling services can benefit international students, but it requires coordination and proper implementation.”

Universal Support and Guidance

Universal support and guidance are crucial aspects of higher education. The sub-themes identified in this theme highlight various perspectives and experiences related to the support provided to international students on campus. Participants emphasize campus inclusiveness and the university’s role in creating an inclusive environment that helps international students feel welcome and cared for. As one international student (Student 4) notes, “Having a supportive and inclusive campus environment can greatly impact the well-being of international students. When the university works closely with counseling services, it can alleviate some pressure that international students may feel.” One aspect of an inclusive campus is committed to internationalization. Participants discuss the importance of leaders committed to internationalization and understanding the challenges international students face. One faculty member (Faculty 3) notes, “Our decision-makers understand the importance of international students and their unique challenges. When leaders are committed to internationalization, it sets a positive tone for the entire campus community.”

Participants discuss the importance of integrating counseling with campus services by having a comprehensive approach to supporting the well-being and mental health of international students. This requires that counseling services be integrated

with other campus services, such as health, academic, and student affairs. This also highlights the crucial role of universal support in promoting an inclusive environment for international students. For example, participants emphasize the importance of having resources and support systems, such as academic and socio-cultural support, that caters to the unique needs of international students, such as language classes, cultural activities, and support groups. One counselor says (Staff 9), “International students face a range of challenges, including adapting to a new culture and language, and the university must provide academic and socio-cultural support to help them succeed.” Moreover, accessibility is important to provide support and accommodations to international students who may struggle with certain aspects of university life. Participants report satisfaction with accessibility services but discuss the need for flexible policies that cater to the unique needs of international students, such as allowing for additional time for assignments or offering support services.

Collaboration

The third theme highlights the importance of collaboration between different stakeholders. During the interviews, one issue is the need for a shared policy and mission among different counseling provider units. As one faculty member (Faculty 2) notes, “There needs to be a clear and concise mission statement for all counseling services to effectively serve international students.” A manager (Staff 3) echoes this sentiment and emphasizes the importance of having a shared policy and mission to ensure the most effective services for international students. Participants also highlight the need for cooperation between counseling units and other service providers for international students, such as student affairs. As one counselor (Staff 8) emphasizes, “Cooperation between counseling and student affairs is vital in providing a comprehensive support system for international students.”

Faculty involvement in counseling is highlighted as a factor in creating a cohesive and integrated system of support for international students. One manager (Staff 6) stated, “It is imperative that faculty is involved in the organization of counseling services to help bridge the gap between the academic and support aspect of student life.” Participants believe that greater collaboration between academic and counseling departments can enhance the overall well-being of international students. Similarly, participants stress the need for utilizing more counseling research that is already occurring at the university. One faculty member (Faculty 1) notes, “There is a wealth of information and resources available, but it seems like counseling units are not utilizing them to their fullest potential.” This underscores the importance of evidence-based practice in counseling and the need for counseling units to stay up to date with the latest research and best practices.

Designing for Providers and Students

The fourth theme highlights the importance of considering counselors’ and international students’ perspectives and needs in counseling. Participants provide varying opinions leading to a rich understanding of the challenges and opportunities

in designing effective counseling services for international students. One faculty member (Faculty 4) notes, “I think it’s important to utilize internal resources such as trainee master and doctoral counseling students. Not only is it cost-effective, but it also provides these students with hands-on experience and the opportunity to learn from experienced counseling professionals.” A counselor (Staff 11) comments,

While it’s important to consider the unique needs of international students, we also need to empower the counseling units to make their own decisions and plans. They are the ones who are closest to the students and understand their needs best.

However, a different counselor (Staff 10) argues, “I’m concerned about the autonomy of the counseling units. Although they have the autonomous power of planning and delivery, the services they provide should align with the overall mission and values of the university.” These opinions illustrate the complexity and nuances of designing counseling services that are both economically feasible, responsive to the unique needs of international students, and aligned with inclusive values.

Economic Constraints and Staff Shortage

The fifth theme in this study reveals that the need for more resources and funding creates significant challenges for higher education counseling units, leading to long waiting lists for students needing support. One faculty member (Faculty 2) states, “Due to the high demand for counseling services and limited staffing, many students are left waiting for extended periods to receive the help they need.” Another local student (Student 14) notes, “I think the waiting time is just too long. I had to wait for a month to get an appointment, and by then, my issue had already escalated.”

In examining the economic structure of counseling units for international students, it becomes evident that while insurance coverage includes some counseling expenses, it also dictates the structure and delivery of counseling. One international student (Student 1) states, “The insurance company tells us how many sessions we can have. It feels like they are more concerned with controlling costs than with our well-being.” Another student (Student 16) shares a similar sentiment: “The insurance company limits the type of counseling services we can receive, which makes it difficult to get the help we need.” While insurance coverage for counseling can benefit international students, it is important to acknowledge the limitations imposed by insurance companies on delivering counseling services. This theme highlights the challenges that higher education counseling units face in effectively supporting students.

Social, Historical, and Cultural Influences on Students

The sixth theme highlights the impact of social, historical, and cultural elements on international students in adapting to their new environment and reflects the need for early screening and tailored support for international students’ unique needs. One international student (Student 6) states, “It is difficult to adjust to a new country,

culture, and academic system. I think having someone to talk to, who understands our challenges, would have made it easier for me.” A manager (Staff 2) emphasizes the importance of tailoring services to the unique needs of each international student: “Every student is unique, with their background, culture, and challenges. It is important to understand and cater to their individual needs to provide effective support.”

Participants emphasize the importance of having a support system that can identify and address the unique challenges faced by international students. The findings highlight the need for universities to develop inclusive support systems tailored to the needs of international students to help them navigate their academic and personal challenges.

International Counselors

This theme highlights the importance of providing culturally responsive counseling services to international students but also acknowledges the issue’s complexities. It also reflects the participants’ views about the limitations and advantages of having Euro-American counselors. Cultural background is a key aspect of counseling services for international students. Some participants strongly prefer counselors from their cultural background, citing a desire for greater understanding and comfort in discussing certain topics. For example, one international student (Student 8) state, “I think it would be great if there were more counselors from my country or similar cultural backgrounds. I don’t feel comfortable talking about certain things with someone who doesn’t understand my cultural context.” In contrast, others feel that a counselor from a different culture might be more effective in understanding their unique challenges. One international student (Student 5) explains, “I think having a counselor from a different culture is good because they can relate to me better and understand my problems without judgment and making me feel embarrassed.” Interestingly, some participants also emphasize the importance of the counselor-client relationship over cultural background. For instance, one international student (Student 9) shares, “I think it’s more important to have a counselor who understands me, regardless of their cultural background. I’ve had great experiences with culturally different counselors too.” These diverse perspectives highlight the complexity of providing culturally sensitive counseling services to international students.

Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the structural components of higher education counseling services for international students. The study identified key themes that impact the provision of counseling services for international students. The following discussion explores these themes in greater detail, highlights their implications, and suggests recommendations for improving counseling services for international students in higher education.

Alignment with the Mission of Education

The findings suggest a need for universal approaches and alignment with the mission of education, and several structural components must be considered to achieve this goal. Integrating counseling services with other inclusive services on campus, such as career support, guidance, and socio-cultural support, is also an important aspect of the inclusive counseling approach (Sakız, 2017; Zunker, 2016). By providing a holistic and integrated support system, universities can help international students successfully navigate their academic and personal challenges and provide them with the tools they need to succeed (Rivas et al., 2019).

The findings suggest that teaching prevention and life skills can be a useful approach to help international students manage stress and the challenges they may encounter. By providing international students with the necessary life skills, they can learn to cope better with challenges and develop resilience. This approach can empower students to feel more in control of their lives and enable them to adapt better to the demands of academic and social environments (Mori, 2000). A growing body of research indicates the effectiveness of a developmental focus in counseling on student wellbeing. Eisenberg and colleagues (2009) found that developmentally oriented mental health education programs for university students can effectively reduce stigma and increase help-seeking behaviors. Bemak and Chung (2017) also found that a developmental approach to mental health services can increase access to care and improve outcomes for diverse student populations. Outreach efforts can help to reach a broad range of international students and incorporate culturally sensitive messaging and outreach materials that resonate with students' cultural backgrounds (Poyrazli, 2015).

Findings also highlight the importance of a multicultural curriculum in counseling education to better understand different cultures and perspectives. This emphasizes the need for counseling education programs to incorporate multicultural perspectives to support their clients. This can ensure that international students receive the necessary mental health services that align with their cultural backgrounds (Amparibeng & Pillay, 2021).

Universal Support and Guidance

The findings align with research that emphasizes the importance of inclusive services for international students. International students may face unique challenges, including language barriers, cultural differences, and feelings of isolation and homesickness, which can impact their mental health and academic success (Ching et al., 2017; Prieto-Welch, 2016). Many universities provide counseling services specifically for international students to address these challenges. However, this study highlights the importance of integrating counseling services with other campus support services, such as career and health services, to create a comprehensive approach to supporting international students' well-being and success (Sakız & Sarıçalı, 2019). This approach is consistent with the systemic perspective toward counseling that

recognizes the interconnections between different aspects of an individual's life and recognizes the transactional nature of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The findings of this study also highlight the importance of leadership in promoting a supportive and inclusive environment for international students. Research showed that supportive and inclusive university policies can positively impact the well-being and success of international students (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021). This underscores the need for university leaders to be knowledgeable about the unique challenges international students face and to be committed to promoting inclusiveness and diversity in higher education.

Collaboration

This study highlights the importance of collaboration among counseling units and service providers within higher education. Collaboration between counseling units and other service providers, such as student affairs, was also essential in providing comprehensive support to international students. The study's findings align with research, which supports the idea that increased collaboration and cooperation among counseling units and service providers is essential in providing effective and inclusive support to international students (Prieto-Welch, 2016).

Some other studies support the findings of the study. For example, Llamas (2011) and Coll and Stewart (2002) investigated collaboration's role in promoting students' well-being in higher education. Similarly, Sandeen (2004) explored the importance of collaboration between counseling services and student affairs in supporting international students in higher education. These studies emphasized the need for a coordinated approach that integrates counseling services with other support services, such as career support, guidance, and sociocultural support, to provide students with a comprehensive support system that holistically addresses their needs.

Designing for Providers and Students

Findings highlight the importance of considering the perspectives and needs of both the counseling providers and the international students in designing counseling services in higher education. Using internal resources, such as trainee master's and doctoral counseling students, can be cost-effective and provide hands-on experience for the students (Baltrinic et al., 2016; Lipson et al., 2019). However, it is important to consider the unique needs of international students and empower the counseling units to make their decisions and plans.

A systemic approach toward screening for counseling needs effectively increases access to services for international students. For example, in a study by Han and Pong (2015), a systematic approach toward screening and assessment improved the effectiveness of counseling services for international students and increased access to these services for students in need. A systemic assessment incorporating various factors beyond a pathology-based medical understanding is essential in providing inclusive and effective counseling services (Farrell & Venables, 2009).

There is a balance between utilizing internal resources and ensuring that the services provided align with the university's overall mission and values that highlight inclusion and diversity. For example, Lonner and Ibrahim (2008) argued that the implementation of cross-cultural training programs for counseling providers improve the quality of services provided to international students. In another study, Whaley and Davis (2007) explored the importance of cultural competence in the design of counseling services for culturally diverse students and found that culturally competent counseling providers are better equipped to address the unique challenges international students face.

Economic Constraints and Staff Shortage

The findings of this study highlight the crucial role that economic constraints and staff shortages play in providing higher education counseling services. For example, studies showed that adequate resources, including staff and funding, are essential for effective counseling services (Thorncroft et al., 2016). Also, the long waiting times can be detrimental to students who need immediate support and can further escalate their issues (Gallucci et al., 2005). Addressing this issue is critical to ensuring that students receive the help they need to navigate their academic and personal challenges successfully and to help foster a more inclusive and supportive campus community.

The findings highlight the role of external factors such as insurance companies, which can provide or limit the resources available for counseling units. The involvement of insurance companies may pose a challenge to providing adequate support to students and highlights the importance of addressing these issues through advocacy and policy change (Pilecki et al., 2011). This highlights the need for a systemic approach toward offering counseling, which can help to ensure that students receive the support they need, regardless of external constraints. It also underscores the need for higher education institutions to prioritize allocating resources to support the provision of inclusive counseling services.

Social, Historical, and Cultural Influences on Students

The findings highlight international students' challenges when adapting to a new environment and the importance of providing comprehensive and tailored support to meet their needs. For example, international students may experience discrimination, racism, challenges related to their cultural backgrounds or cultural shock, leading to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression (Bemak & Chung, 2017). This means that higher education counseling services should consider international students' unique cultural, historical, and environmental experiences and how these experiences may impact their mental health and well-being (Han & Pong, 2015). This aligns with the transactionality of human development and the importance of acknowledging and embracing pluralism and diversity in counseling and education (Sameroff, 2009). As research has shown, incorporating cultural competence and awareness of cultural differences into counseling services can lead to

improved outcomes and increased satisfaction among culturally diverse international students (Rivas et al., 2019).

The need for a systemic approach toward screening for counseling needs, as expressed by the participants in the study, highlights the importance of having a comprehensive support system in place that can identify and address the unique challenges faced by international students. Such an approach could provide the advantage of screening the needs of the students and making appropriate referrals (Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). This can include using assessments, observations, and evaluations to identify areas where support is needed and tailoring services to meet the individual needs of each student.

International Counselors

In this study, some international students expressed discomfort in sharing their personal experiences with Euro-American counselors due to a lack of cultural understanding. This finding highlights the need for multiculturally aware counselors in education (Farrell & Venables, 2009; Kim et al., 2019). For example, previous studies found that international students often face challenges related to language barriers, cultural differences, and academic expectations and that multiculturally skilled counselors can provide effective support systems to help these students to overcome these challenges (Kim et al., 2019).

However, some participants highlighted that the rapport with a counselor was more important than their cultural background, which highlights the importance of having a counseling service that is inclusive, culturally responsive, and sensitive (Yoon & Portman, 2004). Also, their culture could consider counseling seeking embarrassing (Young, 2017), and they could feel ashamed of a counselor from their background. Overall, this finding highlights the need to explore the experiences of international students with culturally diverse counselors and the factors that influence their counseling experiences, diverse counseling services, and the need for further research in this area.

Limitations, Implications, and Conclusion

This study has some limitations. Rather than aiming to generalize findings to other settings, the purpose was to provide a comprehensive exploration of the structural components within a specific higher education context. The data were collected from a single university in the USA, offering insights into the experiences of international students and counseling services within this environment. While the findings may not be directly transferable to all universities or cultures, they offer valuable insights into the complexities and considerations inherent to this system. Future research could extend this approach by exploring experiences in diverse settings, thereby enhancing the understanding of the various factors in different contexts. Additionally, conducting comparative studies across various university types or regions could offer further depth to the insights generated by this research.

The findings of this study hold significant implications for various stakeholders within the university context. For university administrators, understanding the structural components that impact counseling services for international students can inform policies that enhance student support and promote their overall well-being. The counseling center can benefit by adopting a more inclusive approach, integrating counseling services with other support systems like career guidance and socio-cultural support. Counselors can gain insights into the unique challenges international students face and tailor their approaches accordingly, ensuring culturally sensitive and effective interventions. International students themselves can benefit from improved access to comprehensive and tailored counseling services that consider their diverse backgrounds and needs.

In conclusion, this study examined the structural components of higher education counseling services for international students through qualitative data analysis. The findings revealed key themes such as alignment with educational missions, universal support, collaboration, designing for providers and students, economic constraints, social and cultural influences, and the significance of international counselors. These themes underscore the complex interplay of factors shaping counseling services for international students, encompassing the need for holistic approaches, inclusive campus environments, cooperative strategies, tailored support, resource allocation, cultural sensitivity, and diversity in counseling personnel. By understanding and addressing these facets, higher education institutions can foster an inclusive and supportive environment that effectively enhances the mental health and overall well-being of international students, thereby enriching their academic experiences and contributing to a more diverse and vibrant campus community.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate Ethical approval for the research was attained from the University review board. All participants were asked whether they consent to participate to the study. Those who consented could proceed to data collection.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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