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Raquel Wright-Mair

*Rowan University*, [wrightmair@rowan.edu](mailto:wrightmair@rowan.edu)

Candice Peters

*Rowan University*

Gabrielle A. McAllaster

*Rowan University*

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# COVID-19 Strikes U.S. Higher Education: An Opportunity to Center International Students and Their Diverse Needs

Raquel Wright-Mair\*, Candice Peters, & Gabrielle A. McAllaster

Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
Rowan University

## Abstract

International students have contributed to the internationalization and diversification of U.S. higher education; yet, when COVID-19 struck, it became evident that this subset of the U.S. higher education student population was left unaccounted for and unprotected. This manuscript underscores the unimaginable damage and disruption that can occur when a global crisis of the highest magnitude meets under preparedness, pre-existing discrimination, and impulsive policy-making. It also highlights, for context, past crises and their impacts on international students, thus establishing a trend which places international students at the epicenter of the concomitant blows of crises of different nature. This manuscript provides the following implications for higher education stakeholders to consider in order to better guide, serve, and support international students during and after crises: (a) establish support systems specifically for international students, (b) create a sustainable emergency/crisis relief fund, (c) seek and maintain non-local partnerships, (d) problematize issues of inequity and actively disrupt injustice, and (e) develop intervention programs geared towards equity, inclusion, advocacy, and activism.

**Keywords:** international students; COVID-19; crisis management; U.S. higher education

\* Contact: [wrightmair@rowan.edu](mailto:wrightmair@rowan.edu)



## **COVID-19 Strikes U.S. Higher Education: An Opportunity to Center International Students and Their Diverse Needs**

The 2020 COVID-19 (i.e., coronavirus) pandemic has disrupted higher education institutions in the U.S. in more ways than one, and has had ripple effects on students. More specifically, vulnerable student populations, like international students, have been severely and disproportionately impacted by institutional responses to the pandemic, as well as the multiple, harmful social, political, and economic constructs which have accompanied the worst public health crisis (Cheung et al., 2020; Redden, 2020a, 2020b; Schnell, 2020; Tavernise & Oppel Jr., 2020; The Harvard Gazette, 2020) in decades. In this manuscript, we uncover various ways in which the current COVID-19 pandemic has impacted international students, and assess the effectiveness of institutional crisis plans, response, and management in meeting the needs of international students during times of difficulty and uncertainty.

To do this effectively, first, we review how international students have been affected by different types of crises in the past, then seek to understand how institutions may have been complicit in creating some of those challenges. In doing so, we are able to contextualize the role of higher education institutions in intensifying the effects of the ongoing pandemic on international students. We also outline implications for institutional change that honor international students and center them and their heterogeneous needs, providing a clear path forward that can lead to the development of inclusive, equitable, and effective crisis mitigation measures. Thus, institutions of higher education are enabled to fulfil their responsibility to international students and become true custodians of justice.

### **Review of Literature**

In reviewing the extant literature on international students and past crises that have impacted U.S. higher education, the primary goal is to highlight the extent to which international students have influenced U.S. higher education and underscore their susceptibility to acute disturbance by catastrophic events. Central to this, we discuss the number of international students attending institutions of higher education, their contributions, the challenges they face, and the ways in which they have been impacted by both past and current crises (i.e., 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the COVID-19 pandemic). In our discussion of the current COVID-19 pandemic, we also point out the national racial crisis and its paralyzing impact on the experiences of international students who are marginalized on multiple levels in a U.S. context.

## International Students: A Subset of U.S. Higher Education Demographics

International students are an expanding subset of the U.S. student population. During the 2018–19 academic year, more than one million (1,095,299) international students studied in the U.S., accounting for 5.5 percent of the total U.S. higher education student population—an all-time high (Institute of International Education, 2019a). There are a few characteristics that distinguish international students from any other student in the U.S. First, international students' permanent address must be located outside of the U.S., meaning international students must officially reside in a country or territory that is not considered part of the U.S. Second, international students must complete a cumbersome and exhausting visa process (Hegarty, 2014), so they may become holders of either a F-1 Student Visa (for study at an accredited U.S. institution or enroll in more traditional academic programs), a J-1 Exchange Visa (for participation in an exchange program, including high school and university study), or a M-1 Student Visa (for non-academic or vocational study or training in the U.S.), and be authorized to study or train in the U.S. (Durrani, 2019; Homeland Security, n.d.). Third, international students are responsible for adhering to immigration statutes associated with their student visa, ensuring they maintain status (i.e., remain authorized to study in the U.S.) at all times while studying in the U.S. to avoid jeopardizing their stay (Durrani, 2019; Homeland Security, n.d.).

International students heavily contribute to the internationalization of U.S. higher education. Internationalization is defined in the literature as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2). A comprehensive study of U.S. higher education internationalization reveals, through mapping, an increasingly sharp emphasis on student mobility as a way to fuel internationalization among institutions (American Council on Education, 2017). Specifically, nearly 48 percent of institutions have developed and implemented an international student recruiting plan to bring students from their home countries to study in the U.S. This practice is ranked the number-two priority activity among higher education institutions for internationalization across sectors—second only to increasing study abroad programs for U.S. students (American Council on Education, 2017).

Furthermore, institutions are incentivizing international students at both the undergraduate and graduate level to study in the U.S. by offering them scholarships or other financial aid (American Council on Education, 2017). Specifically, at the undergraduate level, the percentage of institutions engaging in this practice increased by 11 percent, while, at the graduate level, the proportion of institutions offering funding increased from 24 percent to 30 percent. In addition to providing students with scholarships or other financial aid, campus-based internationalization initiatives, such as study abroad experiences, curriculum enrichment and commitment to teaching disciplines within a global context, and strengthened foreign-language instruction (Siaya & Hayward, 2003) help to boost the competitiveness, prestige, and strategic alliances of institutions

(Altbach & Knight, 2007). These institutional actions also increase interaction and connection with international students which, in turn, aid in accustoming international students to U.S. life and promoting retention and an overall positive learning experience among students (Hegarty, 2014).

International students choose to leave their home countries and study in the U.S. for myriad reasons. For example: to broaden their horizons by immersing themselves in a new culture and/or language (Lin, 2012), access education, training, resources, and other higher education infrastructure that is unavailable in their home countries (Trice, 2001; Woolston, 1995). Additionally, some international students study abroad to fulfil their personal, academic, and professional needs and goals (Hull, 1978; Lin, 2012), escape undesirable economic and political climates (Woolston, 1995), and/or satisfy their desire for the perceived prestige synonymous with earning a degree in the U.S. (Huntley, 1993). Thus, the international student population in the U.S. is continuously increasing (Institute of International Education, 2019a).

### **Institutional Benefits of Hosting International Students in the U.S.**

Many countries, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, recruit international students to benefit financially from charging them high fees (Altbach & Knight, 2007). In other words, international students are required to pay out-of-state tuition which is sometimes two or three times the cost of regular tuition, and many have no choice but to invest in room and board and student health insurance—each of which is relatively expensive. From this premise, one can infer that international students are purposely recruited to help expand the U.S. economy. Unsurprisingly, according to data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, international students accounted for a whopping \$44.7 billion of the U.S. economy in 2018, a 5.5 percent increase from the previous year (Institute of International Education, 2019a). This not only boosted the overall U.S. economy, but also contributed to the prosperity of higher education institutions that sought out and chose to invest heavily in international students.

In addition to their positive economic impact, international students help shape the “personality” of an institution (Hegarty, 2014) by diversifying the student population, increasing cultural exchange, and enriching educational input and output through the sharing of unique perspectives (Wu et al., 2015). In turn, these effects challenge higher education stakeholders to improve their cultural awareness, develop multicultural competence (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013), and revise programs, policies, and praxes that do not take into account the vast differences and nuances that exist among the international student population. Additionally, international students enhance the academic excellence, prestige, and reputation of institutions as many tend to be academically well-prepared to deal with the rigors of higher education (Wu et al., 2015). International students are often highly ranked in their home countries, meaning some of the best and brightest students are leaving their countries to study in the U.S, catalyzing academic competition and jumpstarting new, divergent ways of thinking (Wu et al., 2015).

## Common Challenges Facing International Students

International students in the U.S. have unique perspectives, challenges, needs, and concerns due to their preconceived notions and expectations of student life in the U.S.; their experiences are also simultaneously shaped by their language abilities and social, cultural, and educational backgrounds (Mori, 2000; Özturgut & Murphy, 2009; Sherry et al., 2010). International students' multiple intersecting identities (i.e., nationality, race, ethnicity, class/socioeconomic status, [dis]ability, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, language ability, age, etc.) also contribute to the unique ways in which they interact with and make meaning of their place in higher education. Although some international students may be individuals with highly perceived self-efficacy, be exceedingly intrinsically motivated, have great educational aspirations, and/or have sound academic skills, they are still more prone to undergoing psychological distress and experiencing greater difficulties than their U.S. counterparts (Popadiuk & Authur, 2004; Zhai, 2002). Since this is usually the case, international students experience not only the typical stressors endured by most college students, but also the added pressures of adjusting to a new environment (Akens et al., 2019) and successfully navigating personal, social/interpersonal, academic, cultural, and psychological challenges within an unfamiliar U.S. context (Carr et al., 2003; Curry & Copeman, 2005; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

A few examples of the challenges faced by international students, which accumulate to overwhelm them, include: battling homesickness; becoming accustomed to new norms, traditions, cuisine, music, and weather; functioning within new financial constraints; experiencing a loss of social status; feeling a sense of insignificance; feeling fearful; remaining compliant with immigration regulations; and experiencing racial or ethnic discrimination for the first time (Hegarty, 2014). In many cases, these unwelcoming experiences produce culture shock (Coppi, 2007). Culture shock produces feelings of anxiety and uneasiness. Sometimes these compounded feelings manifest in the form of loneliness, alienation, isolation, forgetfulness, nostalgia, depression, sleeping problems, fatigue, mental exhaustion, irritability, stress-induced health issues, and/or feelings of not fitting in or being left out (Burdett & Crossman, 2012; Lacina, 2002; Pedersen, 2004; Sherry et al., 2010). In light of this, it is important that higher education administrators and faculty work diligently to cultivate affirming and inclusive campus and classroom environments that not only help international students to integrate more seamlessly into their new normal (Hegarty, 2014), but also equip them with the resources necessary to navigate crises.

## Past Crises: The Impacts of 9/11 & Hurricane Katrina on International Students

This section focuses on two crises—9/11 and Hurricane Katrina—that seriously impacted international students in U.S. higher education, thus highlighting international students as a segment of the student population that tends to be more adversely affected

by crises than any other student group. Before dissecting these crises, a definition of crisis is briefly examined:

Crises, catastrophes, and calamities are an unfortunate but inevitable fact of life. They have been with us since the beginning of time. It can be argued that they will be with us until the end of human history itself. In short, they are an integral part of the human condition. They are the human condition. (Mitroff, 2004, p. 33)

Based on this definition, it is prudent for higher education institutional leaders to anticipate various types of crises and develop strategies, structures, and systems that enable them to mitigate the effects of disastrous events which are part and parcel of life. In keeping with the inescapable nature of crises, it is worth noting that U.S. higher education institutions have faced numerous critical turning points in the form of natural disasters, school shootings, serial killers, mass murders, and suicides just in the last two decades (McCullar, 2011). The following two sections, however, will focus specifically on the impacts of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina.

### **9/11: The Demonization of International Students**

On September 11, 2001, the world watched in horror as a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks, spearheaded by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda, unfolded. With the U.S. at the epicenter of this calamitous event, the world learned that four planes were hijacked, resulting in two crashing into the World Trade Center complex, one crashing into the Pentagon, and another crashing into a field in Stonycreek Township, Pennsylvania. These attacks, often referred to as 9/11, not only rocked the U.S. and stunned the world, but also gave way to the imposition of new and restrictive immigration policies on international students. This unexpected attack on the U.S. also emboldened many to stigmatize, demonize, and vilify Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians (Arnone, 2003; Basu, 2016; Farber, 2007)—many of whom were international students—among other (im)migrants and foreigners.

Prior to 9/11, the U.S. viewed international students as instrumental in the push for world peace and cross-cultural understanding and competence (Sinsheimer, 2011). Although their stay in the U.S. was being regulated by a visa process, international students were looked at as unofficial diplomats and potential citizens (Sinsheimer, 2011). These sentiments were consistent with the general belief that international students and international education are crucial to the intellectual, social, and economic growth and development of the U.S. Following 9/11, however, international students were quickly targeted, and the goodwill initially extended to them was revoked (Sinsheimer, 2011). Many Americans' views of (im)migrants had changed for the worse and were further aggravated when generalized claims that the hijackers entered the U.S. on student visas surfaced, prompting stricter governance over international student migration.

America's change of heart manifested in the development and implementation of restrictive systems and policies meant to target migrants (Johnson, 2018). These include

the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism laws, the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2001, and the National Security Entry–Exit Registration System, etc. Essentially, these enactments made it more difficult for international students to enter the U.S. and bestowed upon higher education institutions the license to carefully monitor international students.

Although the systems and policies mentioned above were introduced with good intentions, the effects of their enactment have had negative and serious consequences for international students. More specifically, some immigration officers exploit the system, detaining students for innocuous reasons simply because they have the power to do so (Johnson, 2003). These incidents then increase the stress levels of international students and, sometimes, force them to incur legal fees in an effort to maintain their status in the U.S. (Johnson, 2003). Constantly being under this kind of scrutiny creates a socially and politically inhospitable environment for international students, making their journeys to, and stay in the U.S. unpleasant, causing them to feel less inclined to study in their adopted land (Lee & Rice, 2007; Urias & Yeakey, 2009). In response to this new reality for international students, the rest of the world began painting the U.S. as a world hegemon with a vengeful spirit (Farber, 2007; Nye, 2004). In other words, the rest of the world, which initially sympathized with Americans, became discontent with the blatant, hostile, and irrationally xenophobic attitudes and behaviors of U.S. nationals, sparking anti-Americanism (Farber, 2007; Johnson, 2018).

### **Hurricane Katrina: International Students Dislocated and Left to Fend for Themselves**

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall off the coast of Louisiana as a Category Three storm. After the storm hit and the dust cleared, it was apparent that the destruction and loss of life—an estimated 1,200 deaths (Gibbens, 2019)—suffered as a direct result of the natural disaster was extensive, unexpected, and inconceivable. The people and institutions of New Orleans were not prepared for the seismic devastation that Hurricane Katrina brought. Consequently, although higher education institutions across the U.S. were no strangers to infrastructural damage and academic programs being halted due to crisis (e.g., the tornadoes that torpedoed through Central State University [Ohio] and Gustavus Adolphus College [Minnesota]; the earthquake that rattled California State University, Northridge; the effect of 9/11 on lower Manhattan, New York, campuses, such as Pace University and Borough of Manhattan Community College), the sheer magnitude of damage inflicted on them by Hurricane Katrina was shocking and incomparable (O’Neil et al., 2007).

Pre-Hurricane Katrina, the higher education community in New Orleans was theoretically prepared for a Category Five hurricane. Post-Hurricane Katrina, however, it became painstakingly clear that the community’s preparations were no match for the force and effects packaged in the Category Three hurricane. Consequently, institutions



of higher education were forced to close their doors for the longest time in their history after the storm ravaged the Gulf Coast (Lipka, 2005). Specifically, Tulane University and Loyola University New Orleans, the two campuses with the least damage, announced that they would not be able to reopen for any part of the fall semester that year (O'Neil et al., 2007). Moreover, Louisiana's Commissioner of Higher Education, Dr. E. Joseph Savoie, reported that the state's public institutions of higher learning incurred expenses between \$500 and \$600 million, lost more than \$150 million in revenue and tuition, and were subject to an immediate \$75 million-state budget cut due to Hurricane Katrina (O'Neil et al., 2007). These facts help put into perspective the extent to which the higher education community in New Orleans was virtually unraveled.

It is important to highlight and assess the aftermath of the natural disaster; it is also equally crucial that we acknowledge the human-made disaster that occurred just before Hurricane Katrina's landfall. Based on Savoie's report, 84,000 students and 15,000 faculty members were initially displaced by the hurricane (O'Neil et al., 2007), 3,000 of them being international students (Advani, 2005). Of course, evacuation orders were a justifiable precautionary measure for a disaster of this nature. However, relocating, albeit temporarily, has different consequences for different groups of people. Therefore, over 50,000 students were forced to leave their New Orleans college campuses, despite shortage of their financial resources during the evacuation process (Ladd et al., 2006, 2007), creating another disastrous situation. According to a post-Hurricane Katrina study on displaced students from various campuses in New Orleans (see Ladd et al., 2006, 2007), over 60 percent of students stated that their institutions did not offer any type of evacuation assistance. Another 75 percent of students also avowed that they had to rely solely on family members for basic needs and guidance. Overall, the students expressed dissatisfaction with their institutions' response to the crisis. Taking a critical approach, the entire evacuation process would have been stressful (to some degree) for everyone involved. However, some students, based on the identities they hold (e.g., international students, students from a low socioeconomic background, or both), would have been more severely impacted than others. As a result, students were forced to endure various horrors due to the lack of preparedness, assistance, and guidance from their institutions, and local and federal government.

To add insult to injury, international students were not eligible for federal aid after Hurricane Katrina, despite this group's susceptibility to financial and/or food insecurity, prompting some of them to seek out other means of accessing assistance. To this point, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2007) found that improper and potentially fraudulent relief payments were issued to non-qualified aliens (i.e., individuals in temporary nonimmigrant statuses or people who are not authorized to be in the U.S.), including international students and temporary workers. Specifically, an official government report states that "[the Federal Emergency Management Agency] FEMA improperly paid at least \$3 million in [Individuals and Households Program] IHP assistance to more than 500 ineligible foreign students at four universities" (United States Government Accountability Office, 2007, p. 3). These were the troubling realities of some international students who were desperate for financial relief but were not

qualified to be helped.

## Current Crisis: The Impacts of COVID-19 on International Students

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, over 18 million confirmed cases in 188 countries have been reported as of August 6, 2020. Even more tragic, more than 700,000 people across the world have lost their lives as a direct result of the virus (Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, 2020; The Visual and Data Journalism Team, 2020). As it relates to the U.S., 4,823,797 confirmed cases and 158,249 deaths have been reported as of August 6, 2020 (Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, 2020). The strikingly high death toll from COVID-19, along with respiratory (and other) illness have forced higher education institutions and other businesses and organizations across the world to close their doors and transition to online/contactless models (where possible) in an effort to contain the spread of the highly contagious virus.

### Stay in the U.S. or Go Home?

Although institutions' closing their doors seems rational and effective at surface level, it has had serious implications for vulnerable student populations (e.g., international students, racially minoritized students, homeless students, students who were formerly in the foster care system, students who are estranged from their families for various reasons, and students who are subject to abuse and various types of violence at home) who were now being put at risk in an entirely different way. To be more specific, although some international students had the option to stay on campus during the COVID-19 crisis, others were told to pack their belongings and depart, leaving some students without shelter, safety, and food (Jack, 2019).

For international students, the closure of institutions of higher learning was especially problematic as they were being forced to choose between staying in the U.S. or going back to their home countries. For some, this was an impossible decision because staying in the U.S. meant that they would be away from their families who were simultaneously facing the same crisis back home, whereas returning home meant that they would have to risk contracting the deadly virus at some point during their travel (Schnell, 2020). In the same breath, some international students felt trapped in the U.S. as they wanted to go home but were not able to do so, due to travel restrictions, or not having the resources for a flight back to their country of origin. Thus, these students had no choice but to quarantine either on campus, where they would have limited access to support services, or off-campus. There were also those international students who found a way to return home but were then unsure about when or whether they would be able to return to the U.S. to continue their education due to the unprecedented spread of the deadly virus. In essence, the implications of higher education institutions' closing their doors are grave for international students, especially considering that there was still an expectation that they attend virtual classes, complete assignments, and carry on as if

their lives were not uprooted; as if they were not in the middle of making life-or-death decisions; as if all was well.

## Spreading the Virus of Hate

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Asians/Asian-Americans had to worry not only about their health, but also about their safety. In other words, being Asian in America meant being targeted (Cheung et al., 2020), as many Americans used the fact that the virus originated in China to fuel and rationalize vile racist, anti-Asian rhetoric, attitudes, and behaviors. It is important to point out that Asians make up the majority of the international student body in the U.S. (Altbach, 2004). Specifically, the 2019 Open Door Fast Facts Sheet states that most international students in the U.S. come from China (33.7 percent), while the second and third largest number of international students come from India and South Korea (18.4 percent and 4.8 percent), respectively (Institute of International Education, 2019b). In practice, more than half (i.e., 56.9 percent) of the international student population in the U.S. was subjected to the growing racism, in the form of microaggressions and/or verbal or physical attacks in the country since the start of the outbreak. Thus, the international student population, once again, took a major hit during yet another U.S. crisis.

Asians/Asian-Americans are often homogenized and mislabeled (i.e., perceived as being part of an ethnic group to which they do not belong) because many within the U.S. do not know or care to learn about the nuances that differentiate the various ethnic groups that fall under the category of Asian. Therefore, although the virus started in China, Asians and Asian-Americans as a whole—not just those who identify as Chinese—were being stigmatized, alienated and accosted. It is important to note that this point was not made to justify discrimination directed solely at people who identify as Chinese. Instead, the point was meant to underscore the sad reality that an *entire* region of people were being threatened and scorned (whether or not they had the virus) because many Americans felt the need to place blame on somebody, anybody—regardless of cost. To make matters worse, President Donald Trump insisted on calling the coronavirus the “Chinese” or “China” virus, irresponsibly amplifying anti-Asian sentiments among the American people, despite the uptick in violence and harassment against Asians/Asian-Americans (Cheung et al., 2020; Tavernise & Oppel Jr., 2020). This distasteful and hateful response to the pandemic, coming from multiple angles, compounded an already difficult situation for Asians/Asian-Americans, thus disproportionately burdening them and forcing them to grapple with not just one, but two concurrent crises.

## Pandemic One & Pandemic Two

In response to the raging coronavirus crisis (pandemic one), the government suspended enforcement of academic policies, allowing international students to remain lawfully in the U.S. while taking full online course loads (Redden, 2020b). Typically, federal restrictions prevent international students from taking more than one online course at

a time. This temporary accommodation should have remained in effect for the duration of the emergency, but, on July 6, 2020, the government suddenly reversed course (Redden, 2020b), issuing a policy directive requiring international students to take at least one class in person or face deportation or denial of entry to the U.S. (BBC News, 2020; Filipovic, 2020; Jamaica Observer, 2020; Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020; The Harvard Gazette, 2020; The Times of India, 2020). Following the announcement of this antagonistic policy, “at least 20 states and the District of Columbia and about two dozen universities filed various lawsuits to block the policy change from going into effect” (Redden, 2020b, para. 3), resulting in the policy being rescinded (Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020; The Harvard Gazette, 2020). Although this was a win for international students and their institutions, the damage had already been done as the directive placed yet another target on the backs of international students, thrusting them into a state of distress, panic, and confusion, and causing them to experience an additional, short-lived personal crisis in the midst of an enduring public health crisis.

The COVID-19 outbreak led to a worldwide lockdown which, in turn, provided a captive audience that became privy to the violent, ubiquitous, persistent, and systemic natures of racism (especially toward the Black community) in the U.S.—what many refer to as pandemic two. Although racism—a disease baked into the very fabric of U.S. culture and society (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002)—has been wreaking havoc on racially minoritized populations for centuries, the recording of the brutal murder of George Floyd, along with the killings of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Rayshard Brooks, sparked anti-racist mobilizations across the world (despite the COVID-19 pandemic threat), and social and political unrest in America (Nakhaie & Nakhaie, 2020). In turn, pre-existing social crises, and injustices were magnified, heightening the stress and trauma levels of Black populations. This reality is important to highlight because many international students are Black (or of African descent), or hold multiple identities, and had to contend with the simultaneous existence of the lethal COVID-19 pandemic and intensified racial injustices against their community.

## Discussion

### Multiple Marginalized Identities Lead to a ‘Double Whammy’ for International Students

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, international students, (im)migrants and even Americans, especially those perceived to be Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians (Arnone, 2003; Basu, 2016; Farber, 2007), were labeled as threats to U.S. national security, guerrillas, and terrorists in the making (Johnson, 2018; Urias & Yeakey, 2005). Likewise,

amid COVID-19, Asians—a particular subset of both the general U.S. population and, even narrower, international students—were targeted and stigmatized as their ethnic identities became synonymous with the newly discovered virus (Cheung et al., 2020; Tavernise & Oppel Jr., 2020). These similar responses to two different types of crises bring to light the endemic, permanent, and pervasive nature of the xenophobic and racist cultures that permeate, influence, and underpin U.S. society (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

To explain further, in both situations, the first instinct of many in the U.S. was to capitalize on an opportunity to pigeonhole and demonize entire groups of people as opposed to fairly assessing the situations and assigning culpability where it actually belonged. Such an inclination (i.e., a natural response) stems from internalized prejudices awaiting confirmation and resembles a learned fear coming into perceptible existence. Similarly, U.S. Presidential Administration's decision to use international students as pawns or tools to further its political agenda, forcing institutions, at the expense of their international students, to offer in-person classes amid the pandemic (BBC News, 2020; Filipovic, 2020; Jamaica Observer, 2020; Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020; Redden, 2020b; The Harvard Gazette, 2020; The Times of India, 2020), also reiterates the blatant disregard for the lives and well-being of international students and non-Americans in general.

In an effort to combat discrimination and its harmful effects which accompany and compound catastrophes, creating a 'double whammy' or two-fold (or more) crisis for certain groups of people, higher education stakeholders must acknowledge that they and their beneficiaries are functioning within a historically racist, xenophobic, and nationalistic society that privileges white Americans and frequently tyrannizes all others (Ray, 2019). International students are often at the center of such tyranny as some institutions recruit these students, using them as budgetary supplements to institutional revenue (Cantwell, 2019). Both inside and outside of U.S. higher education institutions lie agents of oppression whose mission is to further subordinate and persecute minoritized populations (Byrd & Ray, 2015). Ultimately, higher education authorities must strive to be critical doers, implementing equitable and inclusive policies and encouraging emancipatory practices and praxes that celebrate international students and prioritize their success and overall well-being. In doing so, international students would, at the very least, feel safe and secure within the confines of their own institutions.

International students are not *just* international students, this is only one layer of their complex identities. Consistent with this fact, higher education institutions must stop homogenizing, overgeneralizing, and oversimplifying international students (Hanassab, 2006; Lee, 2014), and start viewing them as individuals with different nationalities, cultures, financial backgrounds, racial/ethnic identities, religious/spiritual beliefs, (dis)abilities, gender identities, sexual orientations—identities that exist simultaneously, intersect (Crenshaw, 1989, 1993), and dictate how intensely they experience crises. This way, when institutional leaders develop crisis management plans or address other

issues related to international students, their discourse, strategies, and solutions will account for the diverse needs of this overlooked student population. Furthermore, by examining international students through a heterogeneous lens, institutions position themselves not only to recognize when international students have been caught in the crossfire of contemporaneous crises (e.g., Black international students experiencing distress on dual levels due to the COVID-19 outbreak [pandemic one] and the growing number of violent attacks on Black populations [pandemic two]), but can then respond quickly and intentionally to their needs, effectively reducing the negative effects of the turbulent situations on them.

### No 'CARE' for You

The word *forgotten* and international students seem to go hand-in-hand as institutions fail, repeatedly, to factor international students into their crisis management plans, despite past experiences which have revealed a pressing need for such plans to be revisited, reviewed, and revised. When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, students were forced to evacuate their residence halls, and for good reason. Campuses impacted by the storm were also forced to close for the remainder of the semester (Lipka, 2005; O'Neil et al., 2007). Similarly, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, most institutions cancelled in-person classes, transitioned to online instruction, and told residents on campus to pack up, move out, and go home (Redden, 2020a). In both situations, evacuation as an institutional response is reasonable. However, institutions either mandated or strongly encouraged students, including international students, to evacuate campus, but failed to provide them with the adequate assistance or proper guidance needed to ensure a 'smooth-enough' relocation process both in 2005 and 2020, leaving them stranded in a country not their own. In other words, students were faced with similar challenges 15 years later, and, yet, the same mediocre level of institutional assistance and guidance offered back then, especially toward international students who were disproportionately impacted by dislocation directives in 2005, remained in effect a decade and a half later.

Unanticipated transportation expenses (e.g., unexpected flights or long road trips), storage costs, rental agreements, and other financial burdens are serious strains that some students were forced to undergo (Redden, 2020a) and most were unprepared to deal with. U.S. institutions of higher education must evaluate their (or other institutions') response to previous crises, examine their level of preparedness (Henderson, 2005), identify areas of strengths and challenges, develop preventive measures, revise their crisis management plans where necessary, and, ultimately, be prepared to handle any crisis situation effectively (Coombs, 2007; Kupperman et al., 1975; Silva & McGann, 1995). Although the aforementioned steps are necessary for effective crisis prevention, response, and management, and seem like a natural order to follow, it is clear, now, that institutions did not learn from the past.

Unlike Hurricane Katrina, the COVID-19 pandemic brought no threat to campus infrastructure. In this case, institutions accommodating vulnerable students on campus with extenuating circumstances that would have prevented them from being safe and

secure upon leaving campus (Redden, 2020a) was an appropriate and necessary move. However, institutions should develop effective crisis management plans that ensure adequate campus support services are still available to students who have no choice but to remain on campus. This is essential, and should be part of a standard operating procedure, as telling students already in distress that they must live in campus facilities but prepare for severely limited campus services only serves to reinforce and exacerbate pre-existing inequities and inequalities (Redden, 2020a). Similar to providing students with holiday housing or holiday meals, institutions should continue to make provisions for vulnerable student populations during crises.

Lastly, after Hurricane Katrina, international students, unlike their American counterparts, were ineligible for relief funds (i.e., state and federal aid), and forced to grapple with financial burdens on their own, causing some of them to turn to illegal means of obtaining money for survival (United States Government Accountability Office, 2007). Similarly, during the pandemic, the CARES Act which establishes and funds the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) provided emergency financial aid grants only to U.S. students who had been severely disadvantaged due to the disruption of campus operations (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). These relief efforts, although essential to the survival and recovery of American students, are biased and exclusionary as they ignore the legitimate needs of international students, intensifying the crisis among them, and reifying the economic disparities among those of them who were financially insecure prior to the crisis.

## **Implications for Institutional Change**

International students grapple with a host of crisis-worthy challenges related to adjustment, discrimination, homogenization, and othering (Burdett & Crossman, 2012; Carr et al., 2003; Coppi, 2007; Curry & Copeman, 2005; Hanassab, 2006; Hegarty, 2014; Lacina, 2002; Lee, 2014; Pedersen, 2004; Popadiuk & Authur, 2004; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Sherry et al., 2010; Zhai, 2002). Given this fact, it is crucial that higher education stakeholders do everything in their power to minimize the impacts of other crises on this already vulnerable student population. The following implications for institutions of higher education, informed by the experiences of international students explored above, challenge institutions to center international students and their diverse epistemologies, challenges, and needs.

First, to ensure that international students are not facing harmful situations on their own, higher education institutions should take a comprehensive student approach to crisis, taking into account the current and potential needs of all student populations. As it relates to international students, effective support systems (Perry, 2016) aimed at providing students with an affirming and compassionate space where they feel safe enough to share their experiences (both good and bad), process their emotions, and offer tangible solutions that are taken seriously and acted upon should be designed. Although these sanctuary spaces must be functional throughout the school year, institutions must acknowledge the criticality of support efforts extended to students during

and after crises, given the likelihood of students experiencing some degree of psychological disturbance throughout those time periods. Additionally, support systems should seek to offer intentional student programming that elevate the voices of international students, name and confront the issues affecting these students, address related mental health concerns, direct students to appropriate resources, and provide students with pertinent information. Although such programs are necessary year-round, solidarity, excellent communication, professional counseling, and proper guidance are even more crucial when maneuvering through crises. Lastly, support systems must be purposefully structured to operate effectively both virtually and in-person as discrimination, trauma, and trials of other kinds do not cease because the world is in quarantine.

Second, given the fact that international students are ineligible for federal aid, despite being disproportionately burdened when institutional response to crises results in dislocation or extended periods of unemployment, higher education stakeholders need to consider creating a sustainable emergency/crisis relief fund specifically for international students. Institutions could consider providing an insurance policy option for international students that would cover them in any emergency situation. At this juncture, it is important to note that crises can occur on different levels (e.g., individual, organizational, national, regional, worldwide, etc.). Therefore, institutions should be proactive in their efforts to mitigate the impacts (i.e., financial, physical, emotional, psychological, and otherwise) of crises of varying levels. Institutions need to determine: (a) The overall budget and source of funds, (b) an appropriate value to be distributed to each student, (c) potential factors that would trigger relief activation, (d) float (or slack) time—earliest start time, earliest finish time, latest finish time, and latest start time of fund distribution, (e) the flexibility for the allowable usage of relief funds, (f) the means by which students would receive funds, and (g) procedures and parameters for approved reimbursements. Additionally, institutions should strive to develop strategic partnerships with the various home countries from which international students hail, allowing these countries to participate in providing comprehensive support for students in the case of crisis and emergency.

Third, bearing in mind that climacterics can cause higher education institutions to face major setbacks, institutions should consider joining forces with other (non-)local universities, colleges, corporate businesses, private foundations, and/or community leaders to: (a) strengthen their succor efforts in the face of crises, (b) reduce the negative effects of the situation at hand on international students and other stakeholders, (c) catalyze their recovery process, and, ultimately, (d) ensure their own survival through increased access to well-needed resources (e.g., volunteers, food, clothing, shelter, health care – mental and physical, grants or other financial aid, personal protective equipment, and other forms of direct support). These partnerships should be developed in advance of crisis situations as they can be beneficial even in times of non-crisis.

Fourth, institutions of higher education should not be afraid to get in “good trouble” for protecting their vulnerable and minoritized populations. The beloved American civil rights leader, John Lewis, left us with a clear message: “Never, ever be afraid to



make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble” (Bote, 2020, para. 4). Although Lewis’ efforts were focused mainly on racial injustice and inequality, his wise words can be applied to other types of injustices and inequalities as well, including laws, governmental or institutional policies, and other directives and programs, that target international students (and other minoritized populations) and create hostile environments and crisis-level situations for them. It is on this premise that higher education institutions should feel compelled not only to issue statements of support, but also stand on the front lines with their marginalized students, purposely injecting themselves into legal, political, and social battles with antidotes of morality, liberation, and love. Institutions, along with member organizations, like the American Council on Education (ACE), should be willing to join forces and be accomplices in the fight for access, inclusion, equity, and justice, ensuring international students and all other subsets of the student population get a fair chance at being successful.

Finally, in creating a staunch support structure for international students, higher education institutions can stipulate that all higher education authorities participate in intervention programs or training sessions focused on multicultural awareness, as well as anti-discriminatory pedagogies, practices, and praxes (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Such sessions would ensure that international students are interacting with critical administrators, faculty, and staff with cross-cultural competence and social and emotional intelligence. This layer of support is vital because it aids in cultivating inclusive campus and classroom environments that naturally evoke responses of compassion, empathy, and love during difficult times, and forestalls persistent issues of prejudice and harassment which only make matters worse during crises (Wright-Mair et al., 2020).

## **Conclusion**

Upon examination of the effects of institutional decisions (in response to crises) on international students, it is clear that international students are prone to the status of collateral damage as overgeneralized and ineffective mitigation measures are put in place to tend to unique challenges that international students face, leaving these students to experience and navigate, usually on their own, not one but two crises (sometimes more) simultaneously when catastrophic events occur. Given this realization, we suggest that institutions prioritize the needs of international students before and during major calamitous events as giving anything less than their institution’s best (especially under turbulent circumstances) could permanently and negatively alter the life course of this vulnerable student population. Furthermore, if appropriate and effective crisis management plans are developed, higher education institutions will be better prepared to provide international students with the succor they need during

both times of ‘normalcy’ and crisis and fulfil their moral obligations to international students, ensuring these students continue investing and thriving in U.S. higher education (Hegarty, 2014; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013).

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