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## INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION EQUITY FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS: DUOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS FROM CHINA AND CAMEROON

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### ABSTRACT

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Aim/Purpose	In our reflexivity in this duoethnographic study, we aimed to identify and elicit the authentic voices, thoughts, and experiences of international students from China and Cameroon to explore international education equity's complexities through the internationalization of curriculum in doctoral programs at U.S. institutions.
Background	Many studies have addressed the need for education equity in terms of gender, age, and socioeconomic status. However, few studies have explored the complex tensions of international education equity for international graduate students as they relate to the internationalization of the curriculum in doctoral programs in the context of neonationalist political rhetoric.
Methodology	A duoethnographic method was utilized to create dialogic narratives and provide multiple perspectives on a variety of topics across disciplines and forms of practices of one's life history to act and give meaning to actions. As two researchers and international doctoral students from China and Cameroon, we conducted interviews and discussions to maintain an ongoing dialogue debriefing our experiences.
Contribution	By focusing on the experiences as international doctoral students, this duoethnographic study encourages readers to recognize how different cultures, experiences, and needs reinforce and influence one another and the importance of ensuring education equity for international doctoral students' success.

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Findings	Three elements of international education equity were defined as authentic inclusion, differentiated teaching strategies and assessments, and individualized resources including but not limited to financial and cultural resources. Four prominent themes emerged related to international education equity for international doctoral students: (1) academic support related to teaching and learning strategies, assessments, language support, and mentorship; (2) financial support related to university funding and employment opportunities; (3) administrative support related to staff/faculty/community training on intercultural competence and training related complexities of visa status for international doctoral students; and (4) community support in the context of geopolitical tensions.
Recommendations for Practitioners	The findings highlight the need for research universities to address international doctoral students' concerns, develop and innovate practices to ensure international education equity, and help international doctoral students to study in a safe and welcoming environment.
Recommendation for Researchers	The findings suggest further critical research into the rationale of the difficulty in international education equity and the impact of equity in the curriculum and learning spaces of higher education through exploring the similarities and nuances between international doctoral students from China and Cameroon.
Impact on Society	These findings aim to ensure international educational equity and to build a welcoming environment for international doctoral students through collaboration among education providers, policymakers, and the community.
Future Research	Future research may use international educational equity to explore diverse international doctoral students' experiences, needs, and challenges in studying at U.S. research universities, and how those experiences, needs, and challenges shift their mobility.
Keywords	international education equity, curriculum internationalization, Chinese, Cameroon, current administration, academic, financial, community

## INTRODUCTION

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Worldwide, there has been a staggering growth of participation in higher education, which has been encouraged by the personal development, social status, career possibilities, and overall lifetime earnings the attainment of higher education has to offer (Chevalier, 2011; Colclough et al., 2010; Walker & Zhu, 2011). Internationally, alongside quality and efficiency, equity is usually considered to be one of the three fundamental measures of the effectiveness of a higher education system (Hanushek et al., 2015; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2012) and beyond the idea of equity are the vague notions of merit, fairness, and equality of opportunity (James, 2007). It must be said that none of these concepts are straightforward, for each involves complex and problematic notions of justice and choice (Rawls, 2009). Because of this, equity policies and programs are closely related to choices about the curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning (James, 2007). This has led institutions to adopt student selection and recruitment initiatives that influence first-year curriculum decisions and require teaching students who are more diverse and perhaps less-well prepared in conventional terms for higher education (Larkin et al., 2016). However, in many nations, the ongoing policy issue of equity of access is interwoven with speculation about a desirable overall participation rate in higher education (James, 2007). From a public policy perspective, equity is a fine example of policy limits in creating social change (García & Weiss, 2017).

Over the past ten years, research on international student experiences has increased (Ammigan, 2019; Gautam et al., 2016; Kaya, 2020; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Rivas et al., 2019; L. Yan & Pei, 2018). Many studies have addressed the need for education equity in terms of gender, age, and socioeconomic status (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013; David, 2012); however, few studies have related to international education equity (Tannock, 2018). While an overwhelming majority of these studies have focused on doctoral students, few have explored internationalization of the curriculum for international doctoral students in the geopolitical context in the United States (Leask, 2015). In highlighting the current geopolitical context, such barriers include visa limitations, international students' alienation and loneliness, discrimination and stereotypes (Pottie-Sherman, 2018), limitations in administrative, faculty, community cultural competence and financial concern (Zhu & Reeves, 2019). In review of the gaps presented, there is a critical need to explore the complex tensions of international education equity for students as it relates to the internationalization of the curriculum in doctoral programs in the United States.

Where equity has previously involved measures of fair access to higher education institutions within national systems, new conditions of knowledge production and dissemination demand more expansive and sophisticated analytical frameworks. According to Sellar and Gale (2011), globalization in higher education will require an effective and in-depth review towards internationalization of the curriculum and student equity in higher education that can help identify and readdress problems. Some of this can be done by incorporating an expanded conception of equity with resources for interrogating the production of policy or knowledge across multiple scales and bringing attention to the lived experience of inequality in particular localizations of global HE (Sellar & Gale, 2011). In addressing some of these facets, we do not only limit this to the current Trump administration, but also to the inequitable environment as a whole. In this article, equity is related to fairness and justice, which requires special consideration and support for the disadvantaged and the marginalized. It is the first step to achieve equitable access (Samoff, 1996). For this study, equity differs from equality in significant ways. *Equality* refers to the same or equal treatment and consideration for all. *Equity* refers to equality with fairness and justice according to individuals' various cultures, situations, needs, etc. (McDermott et al., 2013). *Curriculum internationalization* is defined as "the process of incorporating international, intercultural and global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods and support services of a program of study" (Leask, 2015, p. 9).

The interacting narratives in this duoethnographic study assess international doctoral students' various experiences within the context of equity in an attempt to explore the complex tensions of international education equity for international students as it relates to the internationalization of the curriculum in doctoral programs in the United States. In the utilization of a duoethnography research method (Sawyer & Norris, 2013), we seek to interrogate the cultural contexts of two autobiographical experiences in an attempt to gain insight into their perspectives, experience, and issues related to the personal and professional identities as international doctoral students from China and Cameroon in the United States. We aim to explore these perspectives as a knowledge base to inform international education equity in consideration of curriculum internationalization.

Furthermore, we explore the complexities and barriers of support in providing international education equity through the internationalization of curriculum in doctoral programs. We explore themes in dialogue within the context of equity, identity, and culture of international doctoral students in higher education, particularly in higher education under the current Trump administration but not only limited to the current administration. In doing so, we seek a deeper understanding of how higher education institutions, the community, and international doctoral students ensure international education equity through internationalization of the curriculum by specifically focusing on the experiences, needs, and barriers of international doctoral students. By focusing on international doctoral students' experiences, we encourage readers to recognize how different cultures, experiences, and

needs reinforce and influence one another and the importance of ensuring education equity for international doctoral students' success.

Finally, we address the following research questions: How do international students define and describe international education equity in their experiences as international doctoral students in the United States? How do international students articulate the factors to be considered for curriculum internationalization equitably?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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According to Espinoza (2007), some debates on *equity* and *equality* among scholars reveal some confusion about what those concepts mean in terms of their scope and results. In this study, we delve into the issue of equity and explore it from the perspectives of students from China and Cameroon to assess the formal and informal curriculum. We use *equity* in the context of the internationalization of the curriculum. Previous studies that have explored similar aspects of equity have found that although international status often impacts identity and participation, not all students encounter its impact similarly by revealing the different ways of “being international” (Ballakrishnen & Silver, 2019). Other studies have investigated international students' cultural adjustment, academic satisfaction, turnover intentions (Gopalan et al., 2019), differences in learning contexts as they may affect the educational and social adjustment of international students (Chung et al., 2018), international students' study anxiety (Khoshlessan & Das, 2017), and the challenges international students face during their higher education in the US (Rao, 2017). However, concerning international doctoral students, there has been little discussion of equity of access (Li, 2018; Madge et al., 2015) and what this might mean in the international context. Much of internationalization and student mobility analysis has focused on standards and the quality of provision, competition between countries, and university rankings (Allen, 2005; Astin & Oseguera, 2004). There has been extensive research on the student experience and discussion on the effects on the curriculum (Chao, 2016; Ilieva & Waterstone, 2013; Sawir, 2013). There has also been an increasing body of research related to the issue of exploring the academic experiences of international students for the purpose of improving equitable access and resources (Ashong, & Commander, 2017; Ballakrishnen & Silver, 2019; Chung et al., 2018; Gopalan et al., 2019; Kim & Roh, 2017; McKinley, 2019; Rabia & Karkouti, 2017; Rao, 2017; Yakaboski et al., 2017). However, there is little detailed research examining the composition of the student body participating in international higher education in a *formal* and *informal* setting (Leask, 2015) with a duoethnography methodology to inform equitable opportunities and access in US institutions.

Public policy discourses about equitable access to and participation in higher education have been growing in research (David, 2004; Espinoza, 2007). In regards to public policymaking, *equity* must be considered as the primary basis of distributive justice, which Deutsch (1975) notes, “is concerned with the distribution of the conditions and goods which affect individual well-being” (p. 137). Secada (1989) makes numerous strong arguments that *equality* is not synonymous with *equity*. To clarify, *equality* implies sameness in treatment by asserting the fundamental or natural equality of all persons, while *equity* is the fairness or justice in the provision of education or other benefits, which considers the individual circumstances of the person or group (Corson, 2001). Therefore, rather than striving for equality among groups of people, policymakers should work towards identifying inequalities among a particular group, examine the source of the inequality, and determine the reasons for the inequality in order to effectively address equitable inequalities that reflect the needs and strengths of various groups (Espinoza, 2007).

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ENROLLMENT

International doctoral students in the United States have brought economic benefits, creation of jobs, and cultural diversity (Campbell, 2015; Cantwell, 2019; NAFSA, 2019). Yet, institutions continue to report the declining international student enrollment due to an unstable visa application process, social and political environment, and personal safety (NAFSA, 2020). Such political and

economic decisions from the current administration's immigration policies were symbolized by travel bans (Maltz, 2018; Pierce & Meissner, 2017), the change of unlawful presence (Galati, 2018), hire Americans (Natarajan, 2017), the announcement of a multiagency National Vetting Center (Burke, 2018; Department of Homeland Security, 2018), United States Citizenship and Immigration Services' (USCIS) adoption of a stricter interpretation of rules regarding the employee-employer relationships and conditions for third-party placements for international students participating in the optional practical training STEM extension program, and ending DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and temporary status (Dussault, 2018; Pierce et al., 2018). These immigration policies were a unique challenge for international graduate students (Gao, 2019). As a result, international students have been living in a troubling, uncertain, and unwelcoming time in history (Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017) and are starting to worry about their future immigration status, causing "distractions for graduate students" (Gao, 2019, p. 262) as they struggle to pursue their academic and professional work. It is essential for scholars in the field of international studies to reassess the research agenda under the current political context (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). In doing so, it may help instructors to "soothe the blend of anxiety, fear, and bewilderment" (Hamann & Morgenson, 2017) among international students. Existing literature suggested that international students have to reconcile their ability to take advantage of higher education institutions' effort to support themselves (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). However, both higher education institutions and international students' responsibility is to create an equal and supportive environment while studying in the United States, particularly through formal and informal curriculum internationalization (Leask, 2015).

### ***INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES***

International doctoral students studying in the United States have experienced English language barriers, cultural differences, and intellectual challenges (Lin & Scherz, 2014; Liu et al., 2010; Xu & Grant, 2017; Xu & Hu, 2019). Linguistic differences place a burden on international doctoral students, particularly, when professors use slangs and idioms (Lin & Scherz, 2014). Notably, international doctoral students experience difficulties as graduate researching and teaching assistants (Le & Gardner, 2010). They have to rely on their positions for the monthly stipend sources, tuition waivers, and opportunities for research or teaching due to the restricted work authorization as international students, which cause these students to feel overwhelmed to maintain positive relationships with their supervisors (Campbell, 2015).

Campbell (2015) revealed that international doctoral students have difficulty establishing mutual interactions/relationships with supervisors, which may lead to cultural and psychological problems to impact their academic performance. In addition, international doctoral students have limitations to involvement in activities in an informal setting. Some participants articulated that they had "little social life" because they had to work in the labs, which caused them a slow integration into American culture (p. 294).

In addition, international doctoral students have experienced confusion, exclusion, insecurity, and stress under the current U.S. political climate (Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Todoran & Peterson, 2020). Todoran and Peterson (2020) found that international doctoral student feel extremely uncertain about the situation related to immigration policies, which might affect their mobility and employment upon graduation. More specifically, international doctoral students have experienced a more hostile environment under the political discourse (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017; Todoran & Peterson, 2020).

### **Chinese international students' experiences**

In the United States, China has remained the largest source of international students for a decade with 369,548 students in undergraduate, non-degree, and optional practical training (OPT) programs (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019). The large number of benefits international

students have brought cannot ensure positive educational experiences in host countries. In the current climate of commercialization of higher education, international students are considered objects or cash cows or university commodities for financial and reputational gains (Cantwell, 2019; Hayes, 2019; Lee et al., 2017). Once international students have paid their tuition, many higher education institutions are less likely to pay attention to supporting them after arrival (Lee, 2010). Chinese international students have been suffering from stress, racial discrimination, lack of support, academic and social integration challenges in U.S. institutions (Zhang, 2015).

Asians worldwide, mostly the Chinese, have been experiencing heightened tensions in their institutions and communities and instances of xenophobic or racist behavior (Chiu, 2020). Chinese international students are “fleeing back to China” due to the increase in racist attacks triggered by the so-called “Chinese virus” (Chiu, 2020) and maskphobia (Weale, 2020) as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Maskphobia refers to an individual’s dislike or prejudice against people wearing masks. For instance, Chinese students suffer from hostility from their landlords. One Chinese postgraduate student at the University of Manchester described that the drivers rolled down windows and sneezed at them while shopping in the city center with a friend because they wore masks (Weale, 2020).

Linguistic factors, including but not limited to English proficiency, accent, and dialogue competence, affect Chinese international student academic confidence and achievement (Heng, 2018). English language ability affects student academic achievement and experience despite students with high TOEFL or IELTS or GRE scores (Will, 2016). Language issues are the most cited challenges in Heng’s (2017) study. Although they have started to learn English from middle school, Chinese students feel the inadequacy in the U.S. speaking and writing. In Will’s (2016) study, Chinese participants stated that they had difficulty articulating and expressing some deeper thoughts during class discussions. Faculty in host institutions tend to complain that Chinese international students are incapable of reading articles or orally summarizing due to their deficient English language skills and lack of motivation (Heng, 2018). One Chinese student recalled that the professor ignored her questions and only listened to American students, and she was also given the cold shoulder in a group project (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011). According to Kaur (2019), a Duke University professor warned Chinese students against Chinese communication and urged them to speak English. Other professors complained about Chinese international students speaking their native language in the student lounge and study areas.

Chinese international students are more likely to encounter more stress and challenge to adjust to the host culture than international students from predominantly English-speaking countries due to social and cultural adjustment (Guo & Guo, 2017; Heng, 2018; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Chinese international students socialize less with U.S. peers than they do with other international students (Cheung, 2010) and have few or no American friends (Gareis, 2012). Will (2016) found that Chinese students were not seriously treated during class discussions by their American peers. There was a “rift or divide” between Chinese and American students (p. 1072). Students from Asia have less social contact and more difficulties bridging cultural differences (Glass et al., 2014). Although Chinese international students desire to interact with American peers, it is challenging to do so due to “a lack of knowledge regarding American cultural references and how to start a conversation with American students” (Will, 2016, p. 1072). Thus, Chinese students have faced discrimination from American peers (Guo & Guo, 2017). Pritchard and Skinner (2002) found that their participants adapted to the host culture and developed an intercultural competence to negotiate different worldviews. It was hard to adjust to different food tastes, views regarding sexual openness, and perceptions of time, and gender roles.

### **Cameroon international students’ experiences**

Cameroon is a coastal country situated in the central-western part of Africa. It shares its borders with Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Nigeria. Of the millions of international students who study abroad, less than 1,200 of them in the United States come from

Cameroon (IIE, 2019). Given this small number, it is understandable that the literature on their experiences is comparatively less. When mentioned, they are often included in studies on international students in general (Evvivie, 2009).

The challenges of studying in the United States for international students from Cameroon and other parts of Africa include differences in the societal value system, unusual food, gender role adjustments, loss of social status and power, differences in climate and living conditions, alienation and loneliness, discrimination and stereotypes, language proficiency, cultural and academic expectations, and financial concerns (Constantine et al., 2005; Evvivie, 2009; Okusolubo, 2018). Some of the challenges experienced by African international students were revealed by various studies such as Evvivie's (2009) phenomenological case study conducted at a U.S. metropolitan research university where in-depth interviews explored the challenges faced by six students from Western Sub-Saharan Africa and the factors they attribute to their success. Constantine et al.'s (2005) consensus qualitative study also examined 12 Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students' cultural adjustment experiences in America through semi-structured interviews. Okusolubo (2018) did a sequential autoethnographic study aimed at identifying and categorizing the different types of academic and social challenges faced by African international students in collegiate institutions in America to find possible solutions to those challenges faced by African students.

Specific to African international graduate students, feeling marginalized due to their race, ethnicity/nationality, foreign-status, and age were some of the barriers reported while studying in the United States. Also, they experienced cognitive dissonance or a disorienting dilemma about their racial positioning in America. Similar to other international students, African international graduate students also felt like faculty and peers perceived them differently due to factors such as accent/language differences as well as cultural differences, which often led to negative treatment or stereotypes (Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2014; Lee & Opio, 2011; Mwangi et al., 2018). In considering Cameroonian international students specifically, the civil unrest currently taking place in the country's breakaway region of Ambazonia (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2018) heightens adjustment and security issues for families with students studying in the United States. Considering these events, students studying in the United States from these regions faced the potential of emotional distress concerning the fear and safety of their families facing civil unrest and displacement back home.

### **Supporting postgraduate learning experiences**

Supporting international doctoral students also includes aspects of equity that could improve postgraduate learning experiences. As doctoral students, these areas of support are not limited to instruction/learning support, faculty and staff cultural competence awareness and training (Isomine, 2015; Mantai, 2019; National Education Association [NEA], 2017; O'Meara et al., 2017; K. Yan & Berliner, 2013) but also include funding for research and development and access to practical internship or employment opportunities (Alkathiri & Olson, 2019) to support their postdoctoral transition into the workforce. Educational equity is relevant to "distributed justice," which means that international postgraduate students need not only the equal access to educational resources, experiences, and outcomes, but also need relational justice that leads individuals to "practices and habits relating to one another as equals" (Tannock, 2018, p. 18). Confucian values have influenced Chinese students in the Chinese educational system, which might cause cultural tension or cultural shock in a westernized classroom setting in their first year. Particularly, Chinese students may experience a lack of culture and knowledge in the social science field compared to the STEM field. Thus, the emphasis should be placed on first-year international students to accustom to western culture and learning environments (Wu, 2018).

### ***THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK***

One way to achieve international educational equity is through Leask's (2015) framework of the internationalization of the curriculum. Internationalization of the curriculum pays attention to intended

learning and teaching objectives, content, and innovation in teaching. It is a shared cooperation of an institution and the various communities to meet the needs of students by recognizing the various learning pathways needed to get there. Leask's (2015) framework understands the internationalization of the curriculum from the collaboration among higher education institutions, the community, and international students.

Leask (2015) uses the framework to situate the disciplines "and therefore, the disciplinary teams who construct the curriculum, at the center of the internationalization process" (p. 27). The different layers in the framework interact with one another individually and collaboratively to "conceptualize and enact internationalization of the curriculum" (p. 27). The first part of the framework demonstrates the following pivotal resources for internationalization of the curriculum: "the international and intercultural requirements of professional practice and citizenship and the systematic development and assessment of intercultural and international knowledge, skills, and attitudes across the program" (pp. 28-29). In order to do so, the sole use of Western models need to be moved away, which requires examination of the underlying dominant paradigms and finding alternative ways of viewing the world beyond the dominant (Maringe, 2010).

A critical understanding of the internationalization of the curriculum needs to think beyond the Western paradigms to imagine and practice new ways of thinking and doing (Leask, 2015). The internationalization of the curriculum aims to prepare ethical and responsible citizens in this globalized world. In order to create professional practice and citizenship, decisions on developing students' understanding of and capacity to meet moral responsibilities need to be made from local (institution and community), national, and global entities. Furthermore, providing a relevant assessment of student learning from a formal and informal environment is essential in the internationalization of the curriculum. Leask (2015) also notes that systematic development across the program, such as language capability and intercultural competence, needs to be embedded in various courses for a positive learning outcome.

For the study, formal and informal curriculum is included in a variety of contexts, particularly in institutional and local contexts. Formal curriculum refers to the "sequenced programme of teaching and learning activities and experiences organised around defined content areas, topics, and resources, the objectives of which are assessed in various ways including examinations and various types of assignments, laboratory sessions, and other practical activities" (Leask, 2009, p. 207). Informal curriculum refers to the:

various extracurricular activities that take place on campus: those optional activities that are not part of the formal requirements of the degree or programme of study, which nevertheless contribute to and in many ways define the culture of the campus and thus are an important part of the landscape in which the formal curriculum is enacted. (Leask, 2009, p. 207)

In this study, Leask's framework is combined with the literature on international education equity to fill the current literature gap. We postulated that involving interplay between the formal and informal curriculum in the internationalization of the curriculum is essential to achieve international education equity. In addition to the formal and informal curriculum, "resources; respect and recognition; love, care, and solidarity; power; and working and learning" (Lynch & Baker, 2005, p. 132) need to be provided to international students. Domestic and international students should have the same opportunities and resources. However, at the same time, extra resources should be provided to individuals who are "educationally disadvantaged by their social background" (Tannock, 2018, p. 17). International students have more difficulties in academic and social adjustment than domestic students (Andrade, 2006). They have suffered more severe emotional stress, fear, uncertainty, and racial discrimination in this unstable world (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017).

## METHODOLOGY

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### *DUOETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY*

Framed as a lived-curriculum, duoethnography is a new research methodology grounded in Pinar's (1975) concept of *currere* – a critical form of autobiography and curriculum studies in which inquirers examine the various dialectical relationships within the intertwined curriculums of lived experience. It is collaborative in that it engages the researcher in a multi-dialogic process (Sawyer & Liggett, 2012) in which two or more researchers juxtapose their life histories in order to provide multiple understandings of a social phenomenon (Norris & Sawyer, 2004; Norris et al., 2012; Sawyer & Norris 2015). As a method, it is more conceptual than prescriptive and rejects the notion of a single, fixed, and absolute reality existing independently of human consciousness and imagination (Sawyer & Liggett, 2012). Using the researchers' biographies as sites of data inquiry, we utilized a duoethnographic method to create dialogic narratives and provide multiple perspectives of a phenomenon for the reader. Furthermore, it invites the viewer to enter the conversation.

Being born in curriculum theory, a duoethnography method is an appropriate fit for this study because it provides various topics across disciplines and forms of practices—curriculum of practice. The dialogue research of this method creates an informal curriculum or *currere*, which considers one's life history to act and give meaning to actions and explore how the life history of individuals impacts “the meanings they give to those experiences by employing multiple voices in dialogue” (Sawyer & Norris, 2015, p. 2). International students tend to be considered as cash cows, objects, and intellectually unequal (Cantwell, 2019; Hayes, 2019). As a result, international doctoral students have been experiencing challenges based on cultural differences, limitations on sociocultural connections, language barriers, etc. (Xu & Grant, 2017; Xu & Hu, 2019). The utilization of a duoethnographic method allows us, as international doctoral students, to explore four tenets— “its polyvocal/dialogic nature, the examination of life history as curriculum, the intent not to profess but rather to learn and change as the result of the conversation, and the importance of learning from difference” (Sawyer & Norris, 2015, p. 2). Overall, this process also allows us to examine our lived experiences and histories for the discourses that have shaped our views, perspectives, thoughts, and interactions (Sawyer & Norris, 2015). In addition, the dialectic process of creating duoethnography recognizes that openness to others' stories and opinions offers the potential for the reconceptualization of one's existing beliefs (Sawyer & Norris, 2013) and is also designed to be transformative to the writers (Norris et al., 2012).

Although duoethnography is a relatively new research methodology, it supports the foundation of this study because it evolves into a conceptual method for critical and reflective conversation between two researchers who have different perspectives and backgrounds (Norris & Sawyer 2004; Sawyer & Norris, 2015) and provides a variety of topics across disciplines and forms of practices—curriculum of practice. Here, researchers can examine their lived experiences and histories for the discourses that have shaped their views, perspectives, thoughts, and interactions (Sawyer & Norris, 2015). Furthermore, this research method's dialogue nature is a *currere* that considers one's life history to act and to give meaning to actions (Pinar, 1975, 1994).

We sought to answer the following questions: How do international students define and describe international education equity in their experiences as international doctoral students in the U.S.? How do international students articulate the factors to be considered for curriculum internationalization equity? The interview protocol included questions about the reasons we choose to study in the United States, our initial perceptions of the United States and the U.S. higher education, how these perceptions have changed since enrolling in the institution, our experiences and needs in our learning process, and how we have negotiated these experiences and needs.

### Context and participants

In this study, we delved into an anthropological hermeneutics (Wood, 2002), within a mode of narrative inquiries, developed over a period of three to four months. In utilizing some practices of hermeneutics in this duoethnographic study, we explored the dialogue between each other as international doctoral students who have different perspectives, experiences, backgrounds, and dimensions infused into the narrative as part of the *curreere*, considering “one’s life history, both in and outside of school, as a curriculum” (Norris & Sawyer, 2016, p. 2). By focusing on our individual experiences as international doctoral students, duoethnography encourages one to recognize how different cultures, experiences, and needs reinforce and influence one another. Both of us are international doctoral students. Zhen (pseudonym) and Victoria (pseudonym) are doctoral students at a medium-sized public research university of 13,000 students in the U.S. Northwest. Zhen, who comes from China, received her master degree in the United States, then received acceptance into an Ed.D in higher education administration program with Victoria. She later transferred to a PhD in higher education program in another university. Victoria comes from Cameroon and has been studying at the institution in which the study was conducted for five years. She also received bachelors and master degree in the United States and now pursues her Ed.D in higher education administration.

**Table 1. Researchers’ Demographic Information**

RESEARCHERS	AGE	MARITAL STATUS	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	STATE OF GRADUATE PROGRAM	PARENTAL STATUS
Zhen	29	Married	China	2 <sup>nd</sup> year in PhD Higher Education	No
Victoria	29	Single	Cameroon	3 <sup>rd</sup> year in EdD Higher Education	No

### Data collection and analysis

Qualitative methods expand the boundaries of curriculum studies in dialog conversation and life writing, bringing forward critical structures of teaching and learning through research methods. The duoethnographic methodology promotes organic, theory-practice connections, deepening conversations within and between particular traditions of curriculum theory, including arts integrated studies, and pace conscious curriculum (Sameshima, 2013). Such a method also recognizes the potential of dialogue to expand the meaning researchers make of academic culture and their investment in that culture (Jones Jr & Calafell, 2012). As such, we used this particular mode of inquiry to allow us to explore the multiple meanings made individually and together as critical pedagogues committed to promoting education as a practice of freedom (hooks, 1994).

This duoethnographic inquiry study was conducted during the spring of 2019 and the spring of 2020 in the United States. In order to engage effectively in a duoethnographic dialogue, we conducted audio recordings during each interview and discussion session, where we maintained an ongoing dialogue debriefing our experiences as international doctoral students, noting any important ‘critical moments’ in our (separate, but concurrent) interviews and/or discussions. In this way, the data (reflections) became an ethnographic basis, which informed the process of engaging with them as a duoethnography. We also employed several reliability procedures (Creswell, 2007), which included transcribing all interviews and reviewing transcripts multiple times to reduce mistakes in our narratives of experiences. This dialogue was based on our experiences as international doctoral students in U.S. higher education institutions. This method “follows the model of representation in duoethnography; that is, a text written as a dialogue between two people, without merging or subsuming two voices or

perspectives (co-authors) into one coherent text, and without relying or drawing extensively on exterior voices or texts for substantiation” (Seidel & Hill, 2015).

The first-round interview, lasting about two hours, was conducted toward the middle of the 2019 spring semester. The second-round of interview lasting about three hours was conducted via a zoom meeting towards the middle of the 2020 spring semester. Interviews reviewed an exploration of what brought us to the United States from a critical perspective and explored our experiences throughout our time in higher education. Examples of questions included “How would you describe the treatment you received from your professors, classmates, and the community?” and “Have you experienced or found any challenges in your curriculum?” “Describe any challenges or barriers you experienced as an international student in the classroom, on campus and in the community?” and “What kind of support, if any, did you receive from individuals, institutions or your community?” Unique to the conversation in 2019, the conversation in 2020 started with our specific experiences due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We held a number of formal and informal conversations, some of which were recorded, journaled, transcribed, and analyzed. The data was then generated through the written and spoken dialogues of all formal and informal conversations.

For data analysis, we began with deductive coding – coming from theory or prior research (Ravitch & Carl, 2019), which included a start list based on the theoretical framework. Deductive coding could help us as insiders build protections against biases and control for alternative explanations (Creswell, 2014). We searched for broad categories and then developed themes that emerged from our experiences. During the review sessions of our data inquiry process, we reflected on conversations to explore all the various themes embedded in each conversation for specification and expansion on various dialogs that required deeper understanding, clarification, or further reflection on experiences and meanings. Several themes emerged, with central theme of academic support, financial support, administrative support, and community support due to factors like discrimination, isolation, xenophobia, and lack of cultural competence and resource connections. Saturation is commonly taken to indicate that further data collection and analysis are unnecessary based on the data that has already been collected or analyzed (Breault, 2016). We utilized Urquhart’s (2012) definition on saturation to code our data until “no new codes occur” (p. 194).

### **Trustworthiness and credibility**

Central to duoethnography is the concept of phenomenology and social constructionism. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method that describes how human beings experience a particular phenomenon (Wertz, 2005). More specifically, it is a form of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual’s lived experiences within the world (Neubauer et al., 2019). Grounded in interpretivist philosophy, it maintains that “meaning is negotiated mutually in the act of interpretation; it is not simply discovered” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195), therefore making the goal of phenomenological inquiry one to describe a lived experience fully. In the utilization of this conceptual framework, duoethnographers engage in conversation to unveil interpretations and create intersubjective meaning by promoting conscious awareness of new constructions of meaning within a social context (Sawyer & Liggett, 2012). Unlike an autoethnography process that contributes to a critical process of individual perspective (Chang, 2008), duoethnography provides multiple collective perspectives on phenomena. This dialogue transaction (between others and within themselves) allows for the pursuit of critical tensions, insights, and perspectives to surface, critique, and reconceptualize our perceptions of the borders and in-between spaces (Asher, 2007) of phenomena.

As an interpretive method, we address two critical issues found within qualitative research: representation and trustworthiness. Validity in qualitative research means “appropriateness” of the tools, processes, and data. This establishes whether the research question is valid for the desired outcome, if the choice of methodology is appropriate for answering the research question, if the design is valid for the methodology, if the sampling and data analysis is appropriate, and finally if the results and conclusions are valid for the sample and context (Leung, 2015). Qualitative research depends on

factors that both distance and alienate the inquirer from the inquiry, such as credibility, triangulation, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In establishing the validity of this study, we utilized data triangulation and member checks, which involve the use of different sources of data/information (Guion, 2002) from various representatives and stakeholders: In-depth interviews on involving international students and administrative staff (i.e., faculty, advisers, program coordinators, and directors) from the International Programs Office, Study Abroad Program and Graduate School of a Midwestern research institution were conducted to triangulate and evaluate perceived outcomes of curriculum internationalization and international student equity in higher education. The themes and outcomes that were agreed upon by all stakeholder groups generated from these interviews established the validity of this study.

### Researchers' reflexivity

Reflexivity is a critical lens into the research process through delving into researchers' thoughts, feelings, reactions, and interpretations of the data (Stake, 1995). We considered reflexivity not only as a concept of qualitative validity but also as a tool for achieving the emancipatory goals intrinsic to our experiences as international students. As an insider, our reflexivity was essential because we were *the other* and we experienced everything by ourselves. Considering the relationship as international doctoral students from China and Cameroon in U.S. institutions, our experiences were quite similar. This might be explained by the fact that though we were from different countries or cultural backgrounds, we both received relatively similar treatment within the geographical context as 'international students' in a U.S. university. In other words, the university did not offer differential treatment to students based on their country of origin. We were all received and treated as international students regardless of where we came from. Considering this, we were able to sympathize with the experiences and positions of other international students. On the other hand, our cultural backgrounds impacted the role of English in our academic and social identities.

## FINDINGS

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In-depth interviews with researchers from China and Cameroon provided a deeper understanding of the experiences and needs of international doctoral students studying in the United States. Our dialogue began to take on a life of its own as we dug deeper into conversations of culture shock, assimilation, and adaptation and the changing identities and experiences of becoming international students in our host university and community. We recorded and journaled relevant ideas from the interview and documented our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and ideas that emerged during the interview using analytical memos. Transcript, coding, and preliminary analysis were necessary to structure and guide other interviews. The data collection included recorded semi-structured in-depth interviews, critical journaling, conversational power-sharing interviews to clarify understanding, and transcripts. The data were analyzed and broken into codes, then clustered into groups considering preliminary connections among them. Some categories or themes were then assigned to identify main aspects of lived experiences that were repeatedly mentioned by each of us as participants throughout our narratives (Norris et. al., 2012; Sawyer & Norris, 2012, 2013, 2015).

We defined international education equity through our dialogues and emerging themes. The major themes, each of which was concluded from the coding process, addressed the essential aspects of internationalization of the curriculum to reach international education equity. Four prominent themes were identified related to international education equity for international doctoral students: (1) academic support (formal curriculum) related to teaching and learning strategies, language support, and mentorship; (2) financial support (informal curriculum) related to university funding and employment opportunities; (3) administrative support (formal curriculum) related to staff/faculty/community training on intercultural competence and training related to complexities of visa status for international doctoral students; and (4) community support (informal curriculum) in the context of geopolitical tensions due to unequal and stereotyped treatment, discrimination, exploitation, xenophobia, and maskphobia. Despite such encounters, the findings revealed that some faculty and staff are willing to

support international students without knowing how to support. As international students, we both shared the same needs to support our formal and informal experiences. For instance, we both needed financial support and mentorship. However, we also shared some nuances concerning academic support. Zhen, as a non-native English speaker, needed support on articulating and writing skills, whereas Victoria needed support on public speaking skills because English was already her primary language in Cameroon.

### ***DEFINITION OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION EQUITY***

We defined *international education equity* in response to our exploration of the experiences and needs of being international students. The term *international education equity* was neglected by higher education institutions. Zhen expressed strong systemic hegemony that constructs Chinese international students as powerless students. At the same time, we articulated the features of what international equity means.

Zhen: Chinese international students' voices are not being heard. The majority of international students were Chinese students in my master's program. Most subjects were online, we had to post on the forum, so we had no face-to-face interaction with professors and American students. ...We as newcomers had a hard time clearly expressing and understanding local people. We had a conversation with our advisor and professors to ask if we could have a face-to-face class. However, it didn't work out. After our graduation, the program didn't recruit international students anymore.

### **Dimension and emphasis**

The outline of the meaning of international education equity was described with three dimensions and emphasis: authentic inclusion, differentiated teaching strategies and assessments, and individualized resources including but not limited to financial resources and intercultural resources. Zhen articulated, "Chinese international students' voices are not being heard." We characterize listening to international students' voices in policymaking as the authentic inclusion that indicates international students not only being included in the classroom but also that universities are obliged to provide guidance and consider international students' needs as policymaking. Victoria recalled that asking for help could be difficult for her in that in her culture "students aren't encouraged to directly approach instructors for help as it may indicate a lack of ability to grasp knowledge or learn on their own." Zhen described her fear to ask questions on some common terminology that her American classmates understand, "All my classmates in that class are from the US and have been working in higher education for several years. If the professor knew my academic background, maybe he would spend a bit more time to explain it or provide some resources for me to understand."

### **Academic support**

Our interviews revealed a range of opinions about our experiences, needs in our academic field, and how we are treated by faculty. We both articulated that faculty are willing to help and support international students under the condition of being asked. However, as a formal curriculum, effective academic support requires instructional strategies and teaching styles to better connect with the learning barriers or limitations international doctoral students face.

Zhen: The good thing is that whenever I ask my professors for help, they are willing to help me. Once I had some misunderstandings on concepts, my professor realized it and spent extra time after class explaining and making some examples for me to understand. I really appreciate that all my professors in my department are willing to spend more time to help me.

Victoria: Most of the professors I've had in the past have always been willing to help me ... but then again, the help only comes if you ask or seek for it.

Although faculty members are willing to help and support us, we felt it was challenging for us to ask questions in class. Zhen from China explained different ways of teaching in China and how that impacted her learning despite her taking initiatives to make friends with American students. Notably, she recalled that she needed more help with social science subjects due to a lack of social science background.

Zhen: I was in China for undergraduate study. My professors would ask students which part they need help with, and they would spend 30 minutes or a whole lesson time for students to ask them questions, in particular when exams were around the corner. However, when I came to the United States for graduate study, professors usually won't ask students which part they need help unless students ask or seek it. Sometimes I am hesitating to ask questions because I am scared that professors may think my questions are stupid. All my classmates in that class are from the United States and have been working in higher education for several years. If the professor knew my academic background, maybe he would spend a bit more time explaining it. It is the same with other classes, especially for social science subjects.

Victoria: [Asking for help] can be challenging for some international students. It was for me particularly because I come from a culture where students aren't encouraged to directly approach instructors for help as it may indicate a lack of ability to grasp the knowledge or learn on their own. ...For me personally, I relied on the Internet (e.g., YouTube, Google) for academic support as well as journals and articles to better understand concepts. Being in school for a long time helps in knowing who or where to go to for help because you become familiar with the process and begin to learn how to navigate yourself to get the help/support you need. Delaying to ask professors for help assuming that they already have a lot on their plate; don't want to be an annoyance or waste their time on something I can probably teach myself about.

We both identified we need academic support in our language, presentation, and publication, but in various ways due to our different backgrounds. Zhen, as a non-native English speaker, from China, needed help in speaking and expressing in English and understanding scholars' presentations and questions because it took time for her to translate and reflect on the contents. In contrast, Victoria from Cameroon spoke English in her country but with a different accent. Due to Victoria's quietness, although she had no difficulty in talking or expressing herself, she had challenges in communication and presentations.

Our interviews further elaborated that faculty need support to reach beyond the White curriculum and to design an internationalized curriculum. Zhen shared her concern that the curriculum was White, and there was "not any international background covering it. Maybe it is because our region doesn't pay attention to the internationalization of higher education." Victoria described that:

It can be challenging here for professors at times because they are operating under a one-size fits all model within the curriculum...we have to acknowledge that the ones [professors] that are willing to help, usually have to go out of their way to provide extra time, effort and resources to meet the needs of a student who can benefit from a different teaching style.

### **Financial support**

From different backgrounds and with different visa status, we both reported that we struggled with financial situations. Zhen used metaphors and images that conveyed how they were regarded as international students, then contrasted that with the realities of her life. We described that we had to pay a large number of tuition fees but with limited employment opportunities. The emphasis on networks with international students was illustrated by Zhen, who described she had no financial support from her graduate institution. International students are considered as an ATM, which means universities can withdraw money from them unlimitedly. "There was no scholarship or assistantship for any international graduate students. I feel I'm like an ATM machine. In China, if we say one is our ATM

machine, which means we can withdraw money from them anytime. My university is withdrawing money whenever it wants.” Victoria described, “Tuition is challenging. Sometimes when I think about it, I’m shocked that I’ve made it this far.” However, Victoria mentioned that there are some opportunities in place that can support international students financially if they are aware of them. These did not come easily and you needed to speak to the right people to learn about them.

Victoria: I joined clubs and organizations on campus that provided some sort of financial assistance through scholarship or subsidies to cover tuition. For example, being a part of the student body senate helped me a great deal. This opportunity waived or subsidized my tuition for every semester I was elected as a student senator. When I got into graduate school, I also learned very quickly to apply for teaching or research assistantships. These were very helpful, too, because they literally covered all my tuition while providing monthly stipends for every year you were awarded one.

We both articulated that we had limited opportunities to support ourselves; we were exploited, rejected, and discriminated against in searching for jobs. We could only apply for lower-paid and lower-status jobs. Zhen described, “At my previous university in the US, I applied for several on-campus jobs, but I only get the custodian job up to 20 hours each week. Once I applied for a daycare job on campus, I was rejected due to my nationality even though I had a rich experience taking care of kids. ... Even though off-campus jobs could pay higher salaries, I cannot work off-campus because it is illegal; otherwise, I would be sent back to my country.”

### **Administrative support**

Despite the presence of international students in U.S. institutions, our interviews revealed a gap of cultural training for administrative staff, particularly for faculty, in understanding the various cultures international students come from and the lack of knowledge in internationalization or the internationalization of the curriculum. Such gaps directly affect how quickly international students assimilate into American postsecondary learning culture and how they perform academically. Zhen’s experiences with the language reveal that academically, language barriers can impact how international students perform in class, including assignment writing, understanding lectures, oral and written examinations, and the ability to ask questions in class. Victoria described that she had to learn to adapt to the new discussion-based learning environment in graduate school.

Zhen: I want to participate in the classroom by answering and asking questions, but I was worried that my answer was wrong, or my questions were so easy so that my professors and classmates would think I am stupid. ... For this situation, if my professors could encourage me, I think I would be more active in class.

Victoria: When I started going to college, I did not speak in any of my classes. It hurt my grade in some of the courses that required active and verbal participation. It wasn’t until I was pulled out of class and told by an instructor that not participating could hurt my grade and I had to explain to her that the reason I didn’t speak in class is because in my culture, unless signaled approval or being called upon, speaking or talking without request by the teacher was considered disrespectful.

Both Zhen and Victoria agree that, while faculty may lack the training to recognize such needs for students, lack of funding from administration may also impact the accessibility of these resources for instructors to provide to their students. Deep state cuts in funding for higher education over the last decade have contributed to financial challenges that have also limited systems of support and resources international students could benefit from, such as interpretative services in the classroom.

Interviews in this study also revealed the changing policies on international student statuses and how it affected their academic experiences. Zhen disclosed feelings of fear, discomfort, and isolation given the visa status restrictions for international students and how constant changes to these policies sometimes caused confusion, misinformation, and discrimination against international students. A

lack of organizational knowledge among administrative staff to better inform or advise international students about the changes to visa statuses as mandated by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) may cause severe implications to the statuses of international students studying in American institutions.

Zhen: I feel unsafe. It doesn't only mean physical safety, more about status safety. Since President Trump took office, there has been a big shift in immigration policies. I feel so unstable and I have to be very careful about my visa status. The USCIS (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services) policy went into effect August 9, 2018, which determined international students' unlawful presence time spent out of lawful immigration status would be recorded immediately from the first day of violation. But you know, the immigration policies are very complicated and keep changing, how I can know that. If I stayed in the U.S. after 180 days of unlawful presence, I would trigger a three-year bar, which means I couldn't enter the U.S. in three years. When I read the news a 17-year-old Palestinian student Ajjawi was detained for eight hours at Boston Logan International Airport and was sent back home to Lebanon. The reason was that an immigration office claimed she found people posting political points of view that oppose the US, even though she discovered nothing Ajjawi posted himself. I feel horrible about it. Now I don't want to post anything on social media because I don't want to be in trouble. One thing really pisses me off is that my husband wanted to transfer to my current university because I am here. However, my current university rejected him, and the reason was that he wanted to immigrate to the US. What a ridiculous reason! If I were not here, how could my husband want to come here to study? Plus he is at a better university. What we can do? Nothing. Now we have to be separate from each other. It is such a pain. We just got married in May, and now we can't live together

### Community support

The interviews revealed feelings of alienation for international students in the community. These feelings were manifested in how community members would react or respond to actions or practices that may seem "strange" or "foreign" to typical American norms and practices.

Zhen: Once I had dinner with my friends, I asked the waiter if he could microwave my salad for me because I will be sick if I have cold dish. Then my friend said that, "You are such a weirdo. Who would microwave the salad"? Another example is that in the first beginning, my American friends would feel confused when I drank hot water in a restaurant.

As Zhen described, such perceptions and responses made "it difficult to be involved in their life as good friends and to understand their culture." However, both Zhen and Victoria agree that when it comes to community support, faith-based organizations helped provide opportunities to learn about the culture and resources to help international students assimilate into the community. Zhen: One good way for me is to be active in the church. Everyone is very friendly and kind. They invited me to have dinner at their houses, which gave me better opportunities to experience the local culture. I like the peaceful environment, and friendly people.

Victoria: Faith-based groups can provide great support for international students. International students are very appreciative of their support especially when the support is genuine and not with intentions to obtain conversion to their religion.

The interviews also revealed how political views and practices shaped the experiences of international students in the community. It was clear that international students were often mistaken as targets of prejudice or discrimination, especially if their physical appearances were similar to that of targeted groups. Notably, Chinese students were targeted in this pandemic.

Zhen: When I was walking on campus wearing a mask, a male American student looked at me and suddenly ran away from me. Once, I wore a mask on my way home from my evening class, one American male student said something to me, which I didn't understand. He

was walking in front me, but he suddenly stopped and turned in another direction because he didn't want to walk with me. I guess he thought I might have the virus.

Victoria: I remember a friend of mine (who was an international student) tell me that sometimes she felt discriminated against because people often assumed she was "Mexican" even though she was Nepalese.

Zhen also described that her friends in the community "got burgled, and their car got smashed. Now the universities in the Middle East have blocked her friends' universities." Such treatments leave international student populations in fear and isolation and force them to maneuver cautiously off-campus.

## DISCUSSION

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The duoethnographic study helps us, as both researchers and international doctoral students, explore and examine our dialectical relationships within our lived stories and experiences (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). We interpret international students' experiences and needs and how to negotiate them equitably in studying in U.S. universities through internationalization of the curriculum. The three dimensions and emphasis of international education equity address international students' needs in academia, administration, finance, and community areas. The support from academia and administration as a formal curriculum in an institutional context provides teaching, learning, training activities, and experiences among students, staff, and faculty (Leask, 2015). The support from financial institutions and community as an informal curriculum in local and institutional contexts contributes to students' access, cultural, and emotional needs. Our findings support the collaboration among international students, higher education institutions, and the community to achieve curriculum internationalization to build an equitable and welcoming environment for international doctoral students.

As supported by O'Meara et al. (2017), this duoethnography indicates that effective academic support for international students requires instructional strategies and teaching styles to better cope with the learning barriers or limitations international doctoral students face when compared to their domestic counterparts. Even if international doctoral students are required to have the same textbooks and receive the same instruction from their professors, their academic success and learning satisfaction can be better facilitated if a range of teaching and learning strategies, assessments, and professional practices are implemented (Liu et al., 2010). Our findings also indicate that international doctoral students might feel that, when grading, faculty tend to pay more attention to their assignments, particularly for writing, compared to other students. Another significant barrier international doctoral students face upon arrival to the United States is the language, which may significantly affect their ability to communicate. Research supports the fact that international doctoral students have a strong need for language support and practice opportunities throughout their academic study (Isomine, 2015; K. Yan & Berliner, 2013).

Also, it is noteworthy to mention that the variations between Ph.D. and Ed.D. may vary. Ed.D. programs require more administrative and practical focus within coursework with the capability to work while attending classes. Ph.D. programs are more research-intensive, requiring more tuition and research funding to publish and present in conferences. Considering these factors, international doctoral students in Ed.D programs would benefit from internship opportunities that provide practical training in administrative roles while international doctoral students in Ph.D. programs would benefit from assistantships with more access to funding to help support their focus on research.

International students' financial needs are often not considered because host institutions tend to regard international students as 'cash cows' and rich (Cantwell, 2019; Ma, 2020). International students often feel that being non-citizens disqualifies them for job opportunities or internships within the community. This result ties well with previous studies (Arkoudis et al., 2009), wherein international students feel discriminated against for employment opportunities in their institutions. A lack of funding in higher education is challenging and concerning for students (Alkathiri & Olson, 2019). Such

findings indicate the importance of providing financial support as informal curriculum for institutions to take responsibility and the necessary steps to provide staff training and competence to eliminate such biases in employment.

Administrative support to the formal curriculum is an institutional-wide recognition and effort for faculty, staff, and community training. Our diverse classrooms have awakened the urgent need for culturally competent educators and practitioners in education (NEA, 2017). When applied to education, cultural competence centers on the awareness of one's own cultural identity and views about differences (NEA, 2008). Our findings indicate that orientations need to consider the specific needs of international graduate students compared to their undergraduate counterparts. Also, workshops and seminars should be provided during post-arrival orientations that address American value systems and culture to help international students with information about life in the United States (K. Yan & Berliner, 2013). Due to the unwelcoming and unstable environment, international students have to be more careful and more aware of their interactions (Pottie-Sherman, 2018). Notably, under the current administration, it is essential for the international office to emphasize immigration policies changes and provide training for international students so that they can better protect themselves from xenophobia, racism, and rejection.

While negotiating the experiences and needs, our findings address the importance of community support in internationalizing the curriculum in an informal setting. The community remains a rich source to which international students can and should build such networks of support and connection. Our findings suggest that some of the most significant stressors, specifically for Chinese students, are social isolation and inability to integrate with domestic students, making cultural adjustment and social integration more difficult than academic adjustment (K. Yan & Berliner, 2013). Our findings also supported Okusolubo's (2018) study on challenges like cultural shock, isolation, and tuition cost that Cameroon and other African international students face in the United States. Some of these challenges can be reduced or limited if academic institutions who accept the admission of African international students created supportive systems to assist them before they are in need. These systems could facilitate detailed orientation programs to help orient, educate, and integrate them into the new environment and community. Okusolubo (2018) also suggested that orientations should cover broad social issues like drunk driving, public indecency, anger control, sexual harassment, and many socially tense issues to help them have an awareness of the culture and reduce social challenges faced in America. Also, institutions are encouraged to be more student-oriented rather than policy-oriented in aspects concerning students' academic courses, tuition, and financial aid to support students' academic success (Okusolubo, 2018). Social support also plays a significant role in doctoral students because it helps them to feel welcomed, reassured, valued, and included (Mantai, 2019).

It is also noteworthy to mention that financial support, administrative support, increased cultural competence, and social isolation are common complaints from the general graduate student body. However, for international graduate students, these challenges can be different in comparison to their domestic counterparts. First, a difference in academic culture may add to the existing stresses of language or cultural barriers. Depending on a student's background, one may have a difficult time understanding the grading of assignments. According to Sovic (2008), for example, international students sometimes find it confusing when more importance is given to the process of working on the assignment (e.g., creating drafts/outlines for an article) than on the completion of the composition itself. Such cultural differences in the academic context of teaching and learning present additional challenges for international students. Secondly, international doctoral students' financial support may differ in that though they may have been granted assistantships, they may also be supporting multiple family members in their home countries financially. The cultural expectations and responsibility as a *breadwinner* for some of these students present additional challenges in their finances. Lastly, social isolation may be different for international students because they cannot just travel back home in the upcoming school break due to the distance and cost. Such a burden can be lonely and stressful at times.

The findings highlight the need for research universities to address international doctoral students' concerns, develop and innovate practices to ensure international education equity, and help international doctoral students to study in a safe and welcoming environment. The above dialogue calls for urgent and socially just transformations of existing perceptions deeply embedded in international student narratives while promoting in exchange the understanding of lived-experiences from students and its potential to inform and shape curriculum and administrative practice in higher education. The reader of this duoethnographic study is encouraged to engage in a conversational currere with the texts and is challenged to investigate and identify the various contradictions embedded in diverse student experiences, which in turn encourage deeper questioning (Sameshima, 2013).

## LIMITATIONS

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The first limitation regards ethical questions surrounding collaboration in duoethnography. As Breault (2016) notes, because of the “potentially intimate relationship between co-researchers, the ethical stance between participants [must be] deliberately negotiated and requires constant vigilance” (p. 779). We want to echo Breault’s (2016) thoughts here. We found that checking in with each other repeatedly about our choices to reveal or remove information has been vitally important given the dialogue we had with one another. Another limitation that surfaced in this project was the question of what other international students might feel about the questions we explored and how our responses in the duoethnography may relate to their own experiences. We acknowledge generating a degree of the ambivalence of the experiences of other international students, given the differences in country of origin, culture, age, gender, economic status, program of study, and institution.

In addition, we acknowledge that our positionality as both researchers and participants of this study is distinguished in the roles we take during this study’s analytical process. On the one hand, the voices we have represented are real and recognizable as our own while at the same time understood as textual selves, or discursive constructs (Kelly, 2015). This challenge positioned us in starting points and pathways continually traveling between the hyphen that connects post- and -critical in our interpretation and understanding of the selves we were constituting. When it came time to represent and interpret the selves in the text, we both attempted to cultivate a level of detachment. Rather than authentic versions of *us*, we imagined Victoria and Zhen as social actors who articulated broader cultural scripts and meanings and invited each other to comment on, and edit, both speaking positions in the duoethnography, and to act as interpreters of the discourses that circulate within them (Burford & Mitchell, 2019).

Despite these limitations, our findings provide valuable insights into establishing international education equity in internationalization of the curriculum in academia, finance, administration, and community areas for building an authentic, inclusive, equitable, supportive, and welcoming formal and informal learning environment for international students. We offer valuable insights to investigate the sociocultural context of international students in doctoral programs in U.S. institutions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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The findings suggest further critical research into the rationale of the difficulty in international education equity and the impact of equity in higher education curriculum and learning spaces. Thus, returning to our conversation of understanding the emerging themes to achieve international educational equity through curriculum internationalization, we offer the following suggestions for faculty and administrators working with international doctoral students.

First, faculty and administrators need to reconsider the quality of teaching and how to ensure the quality of teaching for an effective, inclusive, and responsive curriculum and environment for international doctoral students. Faculty need to understand the educational culture “where students aren’t encouraged to directly approach instructors for help as it may indicate a lack of ability to grasp knowledge or learn on their own” (Victoria’s quote) and to encourage students to ask questions.

Faculty should expect and encourage international doctoral students to participate in scholarly research or activities so that students could be included in the learning community. Gaining the support of mentors could be helpful to student academic success and professional development.

Second, faculty and administrators need to have cultural training and awareness of the influence of the current geopolitical context to international doctoral students. According to Zhen and Victoria, the changes of immigration policies on international student status cause “confusion,” “anxiety,” “isolation,” and “uncertainty” about their future. Cultural and visa training workshops would equip faculty and administrators with cultural understanding, international doctoral students’ concerns and situations. During the pandemic, more attention needs to be paid to international doctoral students through weekly check in from their advisors or mentors, particularly to Chinese/Asian students for being targeted. Last but not least, faculty and administrators need to understand international doctoral students’ financial situation and to provide financial support to particular students in need. For some universities with limited or no graduate assistantships, more on-campus working opportunities should be provided to international doctoral students.

In terms of curriculum internationalization, students and faculty both experience difficulties in transitions because they are moving to a new learning/teaching environment. While institutions are providing support for international students, it is indispensable to provide support, such as cultural training, relationship building, financial and language support, for faculty and administrators through workshops or seminars to build a safe, inclusive, and welcoming environment. Furthermore, continuous assessment of teaching and learning drives program effectiveness and improvement. However, it may not be practical or sustainable by providing only a checklist. Instead, this requires ongoing planning and practice to identify obstacles and impacts of achieving equity through curriculum internationalization.

## CONCLUSION

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In pursuit of graduate studies in the United States, we explore the experiences of international education equity from the perspectives of two international students from China and Cameroon as it relates to the internationalization of the curriculum in doctoral programs in the United States. This project has been one through which we have engaged in critical conversations about international doctoral students’ experiences in addressing the gaps and needs of equity in higher education, particularly the gap in the current Trump administration. After writing, reading, and re-writing multiple drafts of this duoethnography, it became clear that we needed to engage in a final reflective conversation again. We needed to talk candidly and explicitly about the ethnic differences between us: Zhen, a doctoral student from China and Victoria, a doctoral student from Cameroon. The revelations in this conversation were quite poignant. Although our working relationship sparked a transformative learning experience for both of us, the lingering gaps uncovered the associated challenges in aiming to disrupt normative equity gaps of international students in American higher education institutions.

Particularly, we recognized a variance in our experiences in American higher education, given the differing durations of times we have resided in the states. The social support differences also play a big role in how we compartmentalize and seek support in our experiences. Victoria has her immediate family in the states. Rather than leaving some of these complexities unsaid, we acknowledge and shed light on the unique dynamics that international students face. This study was situated in a conceptual framework focused on exploring the various gaps in curriculum equity of higher education internationalization initiatives. Our examination of academic support, financial support, administrative support, and community support dove into more profound reflections of our questions to further mutual understanding and meaning. In examining these questions directly, we unearthed the subconscious ways in which gaps of equity pervaded this study.

The dialogue of this duoethnography contributed to the awareness of international students’ struggles in the cultural and academic adaptation process, and language barriers, as well as the need for

greater interaction with domestic students. This study also addressed the inequitable gaps affecting international students in higher education today. This awareness can serve as a foundational base for higher education administration, counselors, and community support groups to create meaningful understanding and relationships with international students upon their arrival. The recommendations for international student support can also be implemented in higher education administration practice and curriculum to better support host institutions serve international doctoral students effectively. Future research may use international educational equity to explore diverse international doctoral student experiences, needs, and challenges in studying at U.S. research universities, and how those experiences, needs, and challenges affect their academic success.

In conclusion, this duoethnography highlights the importance of equity in the transformative learning experience from the vantage point of international doctoral students. We experienced transformation in that our personal views or horizons for becoming scholars were expanded through this learning partnership. Further, this study opens up the possibilities for both educators and administrators to recognize the impact of equity in the curriculum and learning spaces of higher education, and how higher education institutions can better support international students to study in a safe and welcoming environment in the United States.

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## BIOGRAPHIES

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