

# Mental Health and Well-Being in International Education

## Reflections on Providing Support for Students and Administrators

### **About IIE**

As an independent, 501(c)(3) not-for-profit founded in 1919, the mission of the Institute of International Education (IIE) is to help people and organizations leverage the power of international education to thrive in today's interconnected world. IIE's work focuses on advancing scholarship, building economies, and promoting access to opportunity. IIE research publications can be found at: <https://www.iie.org/research/>

### **About AIFS Foundation**

The AIFS Foundation, an independent, not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt public charity, was established in 1967 with the assistance of the late Senator Robert Kennedy to help young people from many nations and diverse cultures to understand each other better. The AIFS Foundation, in partnership with corporations and foundations, provides grants and scholarships to students for participation in study abroad programs and provides grants to high schools and institutions of higher education to encourage international and educational travel. AIFS publications and research papers can be found at <https://www.aifsfoundation.org/publications.asp#recent>

***We would like to thank the individuals and organizations who contributed to this paper through interviews, research, and sharing their knowledge.***

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### **Suggested Citation**

Ingraham, S. & Mason, L. (2023). *Mental Health and Well-Being in International Education: Reflections on Providing Support for Students and Administrators*. Institute of International Education.



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## FOREWORD

As leaders in international education, we at IIE and the AIFS Foundation take the health and well-being of all students who participate in exchange programs seriously.

Education abroad experiences take individuals outside their comfort zone and drive and challenge their awareness of the world around them. We recognize that these experiences can also be disruptive, stressful, and complex compared to what is familiar and comfortable at home.

AIFS and IIE focus on ensuring participant success through ongoing review and monitoring of our participant support systems. As our programs grow and evolve, so do our participants, their needs, and their experiences. We have always taken the well-being of our participants very seriously and provided the necessary mental health resources through various means to ensure they are supported. Our organizations work closely with mental health professionals and coordinate with available campus resources to access needed support. The emphasis on well-being has only become more important with the well-documented mental health challenges students have faced since the COVID-19 pandemic.

At AIFS Global Education Centers, our teams emphasize teaching and supporting the "whole person," considering participants' individual lived experiences, strengths, and requirements. By engaging in open and honest dialogue from the first spark of interest in our programs, through the pre-departure process, and into the experience on-site, our staff play an essential role: active listeners. Connecting with participants in this way reinforces the position of staff and faculty as support and community.

Similarly, at IIE, our teams have put in place robust systems to support international students and Americans overseas who face mental health challenges. We have also learned to transfer the knowledge of caring for participants in crisis to caring for our team members. Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, we have established new norms of support that enable us to serve students in flexible and nimble ways and acknowledge our team members' needs. More frequent communication is an expectation at all levels, and increased flexibility and empathy at the programmatic and team member levels are central tenets in operating educational programs.

We chose to pursue a paper on mental health and well-being this year because of the growing awareness among international educators that it is a critical topic for our field. While this paper, limited by space alone, offers a short introduction to the support needed for students and administrators in international education, we hope that it is the opening of a more significant and much-needed dialogue on the topic of mental health and well-being – a topic essential to how we care for students and the numerous administrators who support them at our organizations and around the world.

**William L. Gertz**  
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## FOREWORD

Having dedicated my career to supporting teen and young adult mental health, I read with great interest the publication by The Institute for International Education (IIE) and The American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS) on Mental Health and Well-Being in International Education. As leaders in international education, both for U.S. students studying abroad and international students studying in the United States, IIE and AIFS bring their expertise to bear on the unique mental health challenges many of these students face.

The increasing rates of mental health struggles among our youth is well documented, yet the impact on mental health among students studying outside their home country has received less attention. *Mental Health and Well-Being in International Education* provides an overview of the challenges these students are navigating and concrete strategies for supporting them. The emphasis on a proactive versus reactive approach, offering support and guidance pre-departure, the integration of offices that support students to enable collaboration, training, and education for staff on how best to support student mental health, and education on cultural differences and attitudes toward mental health are just a few of the strategies discussed. Furthermore, IIE and AIFS note that administrators, faculty, and staff are struggling to maintain their own well-being while caring for students, and they make recommendations to leadership on how to support their staff's mental health best. They urge program administrators and institutions to take a systemic, campus-wide approach to support well-being and call on leaders to prioritize well-being for students, faculty, and staff.

*Mental Health and Well-Being in International Education* goes beyond simply identifying the unique mental health challenges of international and U.S. students studying abroad by broadening the focus to include the well-being of faculty, staff, and administrators, emphasizing the importance of leadership support and offering concrete, practical strategies for supporting mental health. *Mental Health and Well-Being* is a helpful guide for all who work in international education.

**Nance Roy, Ed.D.**  
Chief Clinical Officer  
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## INTRODUCTION

In the United States, the field of international educational exchange has increasingly focused on mental health and well-being throughout the program cycle—from international students coming to the United States and those studying abroad and their host institutions and families. This focus extends to the advisors and administrators supporting these students at U.S. colleges, universities, and organizations administering exchange programs. While mental health support services are not new, and many organizations focused on challenges well before the COVID-19 pandemic, the health emergency over the past three years exacerbated the importance of the topic throughout international education. At the highest echelons of U.S. higher education was the admittance that "burnout" was real across students and administrators. To move forward in international education, we must look harder at what support is needed to prioritize mental health and well-being at all levels.

This welcome shift advocates elevating mental health and well-being as paramount in any student's international education experience, ensuring their journey is supported and positive. It further acknowledges the importance of well-being support for students' academic success and international education professionals' critical role in supporting their mental health. At the same time, this situation has created a dialogue around how international exchange administrators can receive the necessary support to address mental health issues and feel supported in their professional roles.

AIFS Foundation and the Institute of International Education (IIE) are committed to supporting research on improving mental health and well-being for students participating in exchange programs and the professionals administering them. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, our priority has been to study how our staff, students, and scholars can have positive experiences. As part of this research, we provide case studies across our two organizations and U.S. colleges and universities about promising practices that support students' and administrators' mental health and well-being. The research synthesizes respondents' perspectives alongside a review of the literature on mental health and well-being to provide a context for the challenges students are facing and recommendations for how best to support them. Finally, it shares resources for how to enhance support systems in a **Resource Appendix**.

## KEY FINDINGS

The COVID-19 pandemic brought mental health concerns to the forefront on university campuses worldwide. Respondents in the international education field noted that international students and those studying abroad continue to suffer from increased anxiety and a greater concern about the general state of the world. This requires program administrators to proactively provide support services that speak to the needs of international and study abroad programs.

### Support for Students

**Respondents emphasized the need to develop proactive practices that address students' needs, moving beyond reactive responses.** They described ways to leverage touchpoints throughout their relationship with the student that demonstrated the importance of well-being.

- ❖ **Prioritize well-being as a guiding tenet of programming.** Emphasizing that well-being is a top priority of exchange programs and sharing the tools to facilitate health is paramount in the field. Respondents recommended that well-being resources have a strong presence on websites, within program applications, during orientation, and even as part of the required academic curriculum at the start of the program activity.
- ❖ **Start early.** Respondents emphasized that approaching mental health and well-being topics as early as possible, such as at pre-departure or when students select programs, is critical.
- ❖ **Provide high-touch accessibility.** Supporting student well-being requires consistent communication and contact with students, including regular community engagement activities, check-ins, and other opportunities for face-to-face encounters. Respondents noted that a multi-pronged approach from different angles could strengthen the quality of support that students receive.

**Overcoming stigma is the greatest barrier to supporting students in need.** Respondents working with international students and students studying abroad shared strategies for bringing down barriers to identify mental health challenges and better support their students.

- ❖ **Create a brave space for disclosure.** While it may be difficult for students to disclose their mental health and well-being needs during pre-departure, respondents recommended garnering trust and condemning stigma from the outset to foster open, honest dialogue before the student departs to their study abroad location, whether that is the United States or abroad.
- ❖ **Use a variety of approaches.** Since mental health and wellness can be understood differently by different students, it is helpful to be open, flexible, and creative when gathering information so that students can share their reality and needs.
- ❖ **Maintain an asset-based outlook.** There may be a cultural disconnect and high stigmatization surrounding mental health support, including therapy, in different international contexts. As such, being sensitive to cultural differences, creatively modifying support, and taking an asset-based approach that values what each student can achieve may inspire engagement for many students.

## Support for Administrators

**Recognizing that "You are not an island" is necessary for administrators to understand their role and set boundaries around how they support students' mental health and well-being.** This recognition begins with understanding their role and the support they may need in terms of training, tapping into the knowledge and expertise of professionals who could provide students with the needed support.

- ❖ **Bring in mental health experts and support as necessary.** Administrators need to realize that they are not expected to be experts in mental health. Administrators can and should access internal resources and third-party agencies specializing in these areas. There is also training and further support that organizations can provide to advisors and administrators to help them better cope with addressing the mental health needs of their students.
- ❖ **Integrate all offices serving international students and students studying abroad.** When all offices, departments, or units serving international students and students studying abroad can collaborate, this significantly streamlines efforts, creates more robust networks, and strengthens the support provided. It is particularly important to advocate for collaboration between counseling centers, offices of disability services, and international student and study abroad offices.
- ❖ **Leverage student mentors.** Building a peer mentorship system with experienced international exchange students is a great way to leverage relatable resources. Peer support guides can be nominated, selected, trained, and receive academic credit to provide mentorship during onboarding, pre-departure, orientation, throughout the first semester and beyond.

**Providing support for administrators of international education programs is important to recognize the role that administrators' well-being plays in program success.** Organizations such as IIE and AIFS Abroad have recognized the toll that the COVID-19 pandemic and related emergencies have had on their own staff and their ability to provide optimal support to international students and students studying abroad. Recognizing this is critical to ensuring that all feel supported in their work.

- ❖ **Recognize and reflect on the role of staff in supporting international students.** IIE conducted research allowing its team members to reflect on their roles throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This research raised an important conversation about the role that these professionals play in successful program outcomes.
- ❖ **Provide training on mental health support and well-being.** Respondents noted that their mental and well-being training has been critical to providing that support to others. Familiarizing themselves with the needed knowledge can also provide important perspectives on how to address their own challenges should they arise and know their boundaries.



## METHODOLOGY

In March and April 2023, IIE interviewed thirteen staff at AIFS and IIE, along with U.S. higher education institutions. The semi-structured interviews aimed to understand practices in place to support international educational exchange students during pre-departure and on-site phases. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for coding and analysis. Transcriptions were coded following an inductive approach to identify emergent themes. The themes were further compared with recent research on international exchange students, including U.S. students studying abroad and international students studying in the United States. This study used a collective case study approach, analyzing and comparing multiple cases to find an in-depth description and analysis of present-day, real-life cases that are in progress (Creswell & Poth, 2018). IIE selected the participants using purposeful sampling to understand the practices of selected organizations and institutions that serve international educational exchange students in varying roles.

The research team triangulated the data with a second method of data collection: document analysis of publicly available information from program and university websites. IIE, AIFS Abroad, and U.S. higher education institution websites contributed to the resources listed at the conclusion of this paper. While the website analysis was limited to public pages and did not include internal portals for accepted students, it does provide a sample of online resources that support the mental health and well-being of international exchange students. Finally, IIE has contributed two additional publications that complement this research, and the authors integrated some of the findings in this report. First, the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* project released a special report on international students with disabilities. While the findings focused solely on international students with disabilities in the United States, the findings related to resources provided by higher education institutions were relevant (Baer & Andrejko, 2023). Second, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, IIE conducted interviews with its own team members regarding their role and work in international education, and published this research in April 2023. The findings from this research regarding staff mental health and well-being also complemented this research (Ilchman et al., 2023).

### DEFINING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Mental health and well-being is discussed in this report using the updated definitions from the World Health Organization (WHO).

Mental Health is defined as, “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.” (2022)

Well-being is defined as, “a positive state experienced by individuals and societies... determined by social, economic, and environmental conditions. Well-being encompasses quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose.” (2023)

## MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Several considerations underpin the need to focus on mental health priorities in international education programming. First, the international education experience requires a student to travel from their home country to a foreign destination. Whether international students coming to the United States or U.S. students studying abroad, these experiences position students to step outside their comfort zone and experience new people, environments, and cultures. As a result, research suggests that students participating in study abroad programs are, at times, at greater risk than their domestic peers of experiencing mental health challenges (Mori, 2000; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; as cited in Lee, 2021). These students may face significant challenges in adjusting to a new environment, culture, and language while undergoing the added stress of living away from home and their regular social support network (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Lee, 2021). Faced with homesickness, culture shock, and cultural discrimination (Lee, 2021), these students have incredible obstacles to overcome along their journey.

Many students who participate in international educational exchange are also within the age commonly associated with the onset of mental illness. In the United States, for example, research shows that 50% of lifetime cases of mental illness start at 14 years and 75% by age 24 (American Psychiatric Association, 2023). Moreover, recent studies highlight statistics that show more than 70% of college students in the United States report moderate to severe psychological distress, including stress, anxiety, and depression (American College Health Association, 2022; TimelyMD, 2023). Additionally, a 2019 study found that psychological distress increased by 71% among Americans aged 18-25 between 2008 and 2017 (Gallup, 2023). Whether this can be attributed to the negative effects of smartphone and digital media use, increased gun violence, cyberbullying, microaggressions, or other factors, the problem of increased mental health concerns in U.S. higher education predates the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating that this crisis will not disappear as the pandemic winds down and that mental health and well-being support for this population must continue to be a top priority.

Even pre-pandemic, both domestic and international graduate students in the United States were facing increasing rates of stress, anxiety, and depression. In 2018, two-thirds of graduate deans at U.S. higher education institutions reported graduate students were experiencing more mental health challenges than five years prior (CGS & JED, 2021). And for international students, coming from systems outside the United States may also create further barriers to identifying or diagnosing mental health needs, struggling with the local medical system, or seeing psychological support (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Baer & Andrejko, 2023; Brunsting et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2020).

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these challenges intensified. A shift in support was needed for students and their host families as mental health for international students became a much larger issue to tackle (Rekenyi et al., 2023). In 2021, one-third of U.S. graduate students reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, or depression (CGS & JED, 2021). Moreover, host families and university staff were undergoing their own mental health crises while international students relied on them for support. Research on counseling centers at higher education institutions reported significant

increases in demand for mental health services rising past the capacity of many schools, followed by counselor turnover and burnout (Hotaling, 2023). In response, graduate school systems and their counterparts have been responding and adjusting to this increased need for emotional support by implementing structural changes to boost the well-being of this population.

## PROMISING PRACTICES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS

This section describes the promising practices shared by respondents to support the mental health and well-being of international students in the United States and U.S. students studying abroad. When possible, the authors paired specific examples from the literature and interviewed respondents alongside their reflections on the realities of their programs.

## PROACTIVITY OVER REACTIVITY

The majority of respondents described their response to the COVID-19 pandemic student mental health crisis as reactive – identifying tools and resources over the past two years – in comparison to a few who felt their proactive response was enabled by resources already in place. The key recommendations for being proactive include integrating well-being as a guiding tenet of the educational institution and exchange program, starting early with pre-departure, and cultivating accessibility with high-touch advising.

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## PRIORITIZE WELL-BEING AS A GUIDING TENET OF PROGRAMMING

Although the pandemic prompted administrators to reach out to students who may feel isolated or need support, respondents described that the emphatic focus on well-being created the space for deeper discussions on significant societal issues affecting students who participate in international educational exchange and their mental health (E.g., Black Lives Matter, Asian discrimination). The topic of mental health has reached a space where open dialogue is encouraged among students and the individuals who support them. Several respondents emphasized the broad scope of issues affecting international exchange students beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

"There's been a lot of things that have challenged our participants in regards to their mental wellness... multiple pandemics still persist, which include not just COVID-19, but racial and ethnic injustices, injustices in regards to the treatment of the LGBTQ plus community and those with other underserved or marginalized identities, continue to persist. The political climates are also not healthy... the work I do in diversity, equity, and inclusion and developing a culture of belonging and a culture of care - mental health and wellness is a part of that work. It's not separate. It's not an aside. It is a part of that work, and it is a part of recognizing the whole student and supporting them in holistic ways." (U.S. Study Abroad Administrator).

Mental health and well-being topics positioned at the forefront of a university or program website can set the tone to normalize and invite conversations for students. Students need to see that these well-being resources are "not hidden behind a wall," and if they see it on the website, it might open them up to be able to talk about vulnerable topics (U.S. Study Abroad Administrator). When students arrive on campus, respondents recommend emphasizing the key tenet of well-being, providing extensive information, and even bringing students to the physical spaces on campus, such as the counseling center, to see where services are located and meet the people involved.

The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), together with the JED Foundation, provides an evidence-based framework to develop systemic support and ameliorate the increasing stress and anxiety that graduate students face (CGS & JED, 2021). They emphasize having a set of values and principles, including student-centered education, environments that support the whole student, diversity, equity, inclusion, and transparency, well-being as a foundation of student success, thriving, not surviving, as the goal, and recognizing that challenges experienced by graduate students vary and that faculty, staff, and administrators may also experience stress (CGS & JED, 2021). Through this lens, CGS and JED propose a series of commitments to support mental health and well-being on U.S. campuses, which include involving students in the process of building programming, strengthening and leveraging the roles of diverse groups, integrating offices across campus, making sure that programs meet diverse needs, incorporating evidence-based strategies, investing in training for staff and mentors, strengthening the graduate dean network, and including social and emotional training in the student curricula, and professional development for faculty (CGS & JED, 2021).

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## START EARLY

Respondents emphasized that preparation is the absolute key to success. They echoed findings from one study that reported that pre-departure programs were the most effective in preventing serious mental health issues for international educational exchange students (Venn, 2023). Some ways to prepare include raising students' awareness during pre-departure about what to expect when living away from home and highlighting the mental health and well-being resources available. Pre-departure meetings should go beyond the practical aspect of the program and include how to transition to another culture and try "to reduce the gap between what students imagine their life will be and what reality will be" (U.S. Study Abroad Administrator). Administrators can reinforce pre-departure information during orientation, after students arrive at their host destination. When students are prepared, they are better equipped to successfully manage unexpected obstacles.

It is important to acknowledge here that what this looks like in the pre-departure context may vary for U.S. students going abroad and for international students coming to the United States. It also may not be possible to predict every student needing support and the service they need before they depart their home country. The subsequent sections within this larger section on support for students highlight several areas that can and should be expanded upon during pre-departure and orientation sessions, including demonstrating well-being as a shared goal, addressing the stigma around mental health, and

accessing support services. This is especially needed for international students whose home context and understanding of mental health may differ greatly from the conversations and resources available to students in the United States.

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### CULTIVATE ACCESSIBILITY THROUGH HIGH-TOUCH ADVISING

Respondents emphasized that the more opportunities provided for interactions and community building, the more likely students will feel comfortable and be open to talking to a staff member. Moreover, high-touch advising allows staff to notice nuanced changes in students and detect when they may need support. In the context of U.S. students studying abroad, advising can be built into a tailored program in many ways. However, one outcome is that,

"We have daily contact with students. Within the community, the faculty and staff build personal relationships with the students and see them every day. This regular contact really helps students to feel supported. They have familiar faces that they can go to. They can speak with the staff; they can speak with the faculty, and this is certainly one of the advantages of the program we have." (U.S. Study Abroad Administrator)

Cultivating accessibility spans beyond models of high-touch advising to building structures within the university that include a diverse body of international exchange students. For international students on a U.S. campus, whether that means making sure there is a celebration of the Lunar New Year for Asian students so that they are encouraged to celebrate their New Year or making it a priority to identify career and professional opportunities for international students and sending them to eligible students in a weekly newsletter, administrators have many opportunities to make students feel seen. One counselor describes how this challenge shows up for her international students,

"I think oftentimes institutions and systems are set up for a particular group. And so, when thinking about the well-being of international students, what are the systems that we have in place to truly help them succeed academically and occupationally? And that means understanding what some of the natural limits and consequences are by virtue of the fact that they are here on visas... and creating pathways for them to be able to achieve the dreams that they'd like to achieve... What I'll often hear from international students and scholars is they get all these well-intentioned opportunities sent to them, but they're not eligible for them. And that creates an experience of being unseen and not understood even though they were recruited to be at the institution." (International Student Administrator).

Building a culture of shared responsibility for well-being is vital since well-being is not just an individual responsibility but also an institutional, organizational responsibility (Posselt, 2021). For instance, career services must serve the specific needs of international students, given the strong link between mental health and career prospects (Lee, 2021). Many structures for supporting international exchange

students can be identified and transformed by leveraging international exchange students' participation in change-making while ensuring that all hands are on deck.

In the context of international students in the United States and some U.S. students studying abroad, administrators can address several additional areas to ensure students receive the right balance of community engagement to support their needs. For example, one factor correlated with better mental health for international exchange students was living on campus or in private accommodations with a family, indicating fundamental structures for students to feel well-connected, supported, and less isolated (Venn, 2023). Similarly, a lower incidence of emotional stress reported by undergraduate students with supportive, respectful relationships with faculty and peers underpins the significance of strong support networks (Gallup, 2023). Finally, international exchange students who work 10 hours or more but less than 40 hours per two weeks reported better mental health than their counterparts who work under 10 hours or more than 40 hours per two weeks (Venn, 2023). This finding suggests the importance of a good work-life balance and the availability of financial support services for international students. Thus, preparedness, work or financial pressures, and levels of community support significantly impact the mental health of international exchange students and are key factors that must be addressed to prevent poor mental health (Venn, 2023; Gallup, 2023).

## OVERCOMING STIGMA

Respondents reported that the stigma around mental health permeates much of their work with students, preventing students from disclosing their needs and receiving the available resources. Interviewees described the need to continuously infuse student engagements with conversations around mental health and well-being to demonstrate support and help students understand the available resources. Although stigma is evident when working with all students, the approach, conversations, and even services may vary, requiring administrators to adjust. Administrators must identify the necessary starting point to best inform, support and connect the individual student to the services most appropriate for their needs.

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## OPEN DIALOGUE CREATES A BRAVE SPACE FOR DISCLOSURE.

One promising practice for reducing the stigma that respondents and interviewees identified was using pre-departure orientations for addressing mental health issues with students. The more information students received during pre-departure, the better-equipped staff was to support students during the program.

Respondents described the importance of building a community and an environment accepting all students in the context of U.S. students traveling abroad. For organized study abroad programs, this was frequently achieved through more intimate settings where faculty and staff knew every student by name and were engaged with students during extra-curricular activities and experiential learning outside of the traditional classroom.

"If we can provide an environment where students feel comfortable talking to us, it makes everything easier for everybody." (U.S. Study Abroad Administrator)

Many students, U.S. and international, may not be familiar with the healthcare system of their host country. U.S. students in organized study abroad programs may have support built-in with program staff and university insurance to leverage. However, international students in the United States may be navigating insurance and other aspects of U.S. healthcare for the first time. For example, in the United States, the age of adulthood may differ from one's home country, regulations like HIPPA that protect students' privacy when in the United States might be unfamiliar to international students, and they may fear that if they ask for support, it will be reported to their parents. Sharing these nuances and guiding international students through accessing necessary healthcare requires a trusting relationship built on honest dialogue.

"It really just comes down to communication. If we build brave spaces and comfortable spaces for students to disclose early and work with our team, they would be much more successful on the ground." (U.S. Study Abroad Administrator)

The CGS & JED report also noted the value of finding new, creative ways to facilitate international students in seeking help. One example is offering counseling and psychological services within a multi-service center to mitigate the stigma of seeking help since some international students may feel embarrassed being seen going into a counseling center (Lee, 2021).

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#### USING A VARIETY OF APPROACHES.

Respondents emphasize the benefit of using a multi-pronged approach, as mental health does not have a "one size fits all" solution (U.S. Study Abroad Administrator). When "supporting a student of a marginalized background, there are often things that they have experienced in regard to mental wellness and mental health that often isn't thought of in dominant culture, so it is really important to draw that connection because that is another way of supporting the whole student" (U.S. Study Abroad Administrator).

Moreover, listening and responding to student feedback can help craft support to meet the needs and desires of distinct individuals. For example, one university that used a student-centered approach responded to student feedback and shifted an international student drop-in group by removing clinical screenings and shifting wording and structure from a "therapy" group to a "support" group, which increased engagement and made students feel more comfortable.

Being creative and open to solutions for supporting mental health can go a long way. One counselor described a metaphor she uses with international students to reduce the mystery and stigma around therapy. She tells them to pretend they are in a cave with a flashlight, and her job as a therapist is to

turn the flashlight to shed light on another part of the cave that they cannot see. Another respondent spoke about embracing a happy accident that turned into a regular practice of support.

"We have a dog come in every Monday. We have found that students, particularly a few weeks into the semester, are really missing their pets. And so, you know a lot of them, when they see the dog, are absolutely delighted." (U.S. Study Abroad Administrator).

The *Open Doors* Report on International Students with Disabilities (Baer & Andrejko, 2023) recorded numerous resources institutions use to share information with international students with disabilities. More than half (55 percent) of institutional respondents to their survey shared information in an orientation seminar, a critical first step given that mental health or psychological disabilities are the largest classifications of disclosed disabilities for international students. Other means of sharing information with students included websites for disability resources (65 percent), student services or academic support fairs (46), and print resources for students (37 percent).



Figure 1. Percent of institutions providing specific resources for international students with disabilities  
 Source: *Open Doors Special Report – Promoting Access to U.S. Higher Education: International Students with Disabilities, 2023*

#### MAINTAIN AN ASSET-BASED OUTLOOK.

Respondents stated that, at times, the achievement-oriented, individualist approach commonly found in elite U.S. academic institutions is part of the struggle attributed to students' mental health needs. Administrators can shed light on a health-supportive path that embraces the process. Celebrating international exchange students' diversity and strengths empowers them to live up to their best potential. By maintaining an asset-based approach, administrators can lift a community's spirits while making the international exchange students feel seen and heard.



"There's so much vibrancy and beauty that our international students and scholars really bring to our community. Many of our international students and scholars come from cultures where humility is highly valued, and so... opportunities to really celebrate the vibrancy of what they bring to the institution and how important that is... I wish that we as humans, when we think about diversity, and we think about, you know, even how America has grown, really think about how we celebrate the people who come to live and study and work here... celebrating the gifts that they bring to our community, I think that's an important aspect of feeling like one belongs and helps support mental health and well-being" (International Student Administrator).

"Try to keep an open perspective and not just come in as someone who says, you know, these are the rules it has to be this way, but just to keep an open heart, and be as compassionate as possible." (International Student Administrator)

## Spotlight

The English Language Programs (ELP) at the University of Pennsylvania, home of Positive Psychology, requires international students in their Foundation Year Program to take a course called "Wellness, Engagement, and Leadership." During the first semester of this program, the Health and Wellness curriculum delivers modules on positive psychology, mindfulness, resilience, and more. Another course offered by ELP called Skills for Success teaches about positive psychology, stress management, personal well-being, and self-management.

"These are very student-centered classes where students write reflections, and it really raises students' self-awareness about things that maybe they didn't think about or could be stigmatized in their countries or the culture of education in their countries. I think bringing up these topics in our culture of education where students are talking, thinking, and writing about it really helps them to be more self-aware about any mental health issues that they're having, think through ideas, and be more aware of resources" (International Student Administrator).

## PROMISING PRACTICES TO SUPPORT ADMINISTRATORS

While the authors emphasized the promising practices for supporting students, it was evident in our research that supports for administrators was essential to meeting this goal. This section describes the promising practices shared by respondents to support administrators who work with international exchange students and support their mental health and well-being. Similar to the previous section, the authors included specific examples from the literature and interviewed respondents alongside their reflections on the realities of their programs.

## "YOU ARE NOT AN ISLAND"

All respondents emphasized their undeniable reliance on outsourced training, networking, and large-scale teamwork to be better equipped to tackle the enormous and nuanced challenges of providing mental health and well-being support to international exchange students.

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## BRING IN MENTAL HEALTH EXPERTS AND SUPPORTS

Respondents noted that numerous training programs and resources are available to staff, including telehealth options for students for whom English is not the first language. Telehealth also creates geographic accessibility while supplementing the strained bandwidth of many counseling centers caused by extremely high demand. However, understanding which training and resources are among the most promising options and will yield the best results for the students with whom they work is an area that professionals continue to explore. Some valuable third-party resources to respondents included the JED Campus initiative, Mental Health First Aid, QPR Institute's suicide prevention training, Mobility International USA (MIUSA), International SOS, Mindhamok, and CISI Insurance (See the Resource Appendix).

"International SOS was really helpful in being able to talk with students 24/7, whereas even though we had staff sort of on the schedule, you know, it's hard for us to work 20 hours, so it was very useful to have International SOS to cover capacity when we weren't able to ensure the students felt like they had support during a very hectic and very confusing time" (U.S. Study Abroad Administrator)

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## INTEGRATE ALL OFFICES SERVING INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE STUDENTS

One of the respondents' most emphasized pieces of advice is the importance of strong communication between all offices serving international exchange students. When these offices are siloed, the support that students receive lacks consistency and strength while making everyone's job more challenging. Taking a holistic approach and building collaborative networks across campus acknowledges that everything is connected and streamlines student support. Student needs are holistic and require holistic support; if students are struggling academically, there might be a health issue, or if they're struggling physically or mentally, then there might be an academic issue.

"Collaboration is key. Partnership is key. You cannot do this by yourself. And so one of the most crucial pieces of what I do is building relationships with all the units across campus. What that means is attending meetings that have nothing to do with what I'm doing, right, but building those relationships, so that when you do introduce an idea or need support from a department, you have that good working relationship, and the trust is there." (International Student Administrator)

Integrating services may look different for administrators serving U.S. students on study abroad and international students in the United States. For U.S. students on study abroad, integration may be between a home university, host university, and third-party vendor to coordinate communication and evaluate the available services through various insurance options to support the students. For international students in the United States, integration may be within offices on their U.S. campus. According to the *Open Doors* Report on International Students with Disabilities, 66 percent of institutions coordinate individual students support between the international student and disability resource offices, with 12 percent conducting specific training for faculty or staff on serving international students with disabilities (Baer & Andrejko, 2023).

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### LEVERAGE STUDENT MENTORS

Several interviewees spoke about their successes in leveraging mentors who are in their second or third year and have a variety of experiences. These mentors can be selected by advisors, vetted, and trained. Creating a system of peer mentorship serves mutually beneficial purposes; student mentors can receive certification and academic credit, while peer-to-peer support fosters community, takes care of anything lost in translation, and can normalize conversations around mental health, which adds an extra layer of support in mitigating stigma and improving accessibility. Peer mentorship can begin as early as the onboarding process, be part of orientation, and last through the first semester or year. Newly arrived international exchange students benefit tremendously from the care of individuals they can relate to who have lived experiences at the university, which they may feel is overwhelmingly unfamiliar.

"We have a program with Italian students doing their training with us as interns, so they're also prepared to talk to the American students, and they act a little bit as cultural mediators... They are involved in social and cultural activities. They sit in with them, and they become their day-to-day local friends, local council. So, in many cases when students have minor problems with adjustments, this is already a good help, a good support." (U.S. Study Abroad Administrator).

### SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH FROM AN ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Respondents acknowledged the strain on staff that has resulted from supporting an increasing number of international and U.S. students to manage their mental health and well-being over the past three years. This strain has not gone unnoticed in organizations like IIE and AIFS Abroad, which rely on competent, knowledgeable individuals to support the life-changing experiences of students who study outside their home country. To this end, IIE conducted a study dedicated to the team members who worked so hard to support U.S. and international students throughout the pandemic to examine the lessons learned in program administration from the initial response through revised programming today (Ilchman, 2023). Among the findings of this research was how IIE supported team members through flexible work arrangements, increased contact and communication, and humanizing work relationships at a different level. In addition, IIE reminded staff about benefits such as the Employee Assistance

Program, implemented an emergency paid sick leave policy, and promoted new physical, emotional, and financial wellness resources for staff. Measures such as these taken by IIE and similar initiatives at AIFS Abroad served to support staff at a time when they were going above and beyond to support others.

## CONCLUSION

The mental health and well-being needs of international students in the United States and U.S. students abroad will likely continue to increase as more students engage in international educational exchange in the years to come. This report highlights some of the promising practices administrators can implement to better support students on their journey, acknowledging administrators themselves also need support – both in training to handle the mental health and well-being needs of the students they work with as well as organizational support for their own mental health and well-being.

As administrators look to develop future programming and supports, recognizing the value of proactive solutions for sharing mental health and wellness resources with students, other institutional offices, and partner organizations will be a critical step to put in place and regularly reevaluate at every organization. And although overcoming the stigma of mental health cannot be achieved by one individual alone, program administrators supporting students can serve as role models by creating brave spaces for students to seek and receive the help they need.

Together, the institutions and organizations that facilitate international education exchange can raise greater awareness around the issues of mental health and well-being and drive solutions that support students and administrators.

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## RESOURCE APPENDIX

- ❖ AIFS provides [Health and Safety](#) and [Access, Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity](#) information at the top of their website, in addition to an extremely robust set of [General Social Identity Resources](#) with questions to think about and tips to consider for first-generation abroad, race & ethnicity, LGBTQIA, Women, Mental Health & Wellness and more.
- ❖ [Healthy Minds Network](#) administers the Healthy Minds Study, a national web-based survey examining mental health services, utilization, and well-being-related issues amongst undergraduate and graduate students.
- ❖ IIE Gilman International Scholarship program provides videos on tips to cope with [Culture Adjustment and Culture Shock](#) along with an introduction to the features of [International SOS benefits](#)
- ❖ IIE KAUST Gifted Student Program offers [COVID-19 Health and Safety Tips](#)
- ❖ [International SOS](#) health and security risk services, including five free counseling sessions.
- ❖ The JED Foundation offers the [JED Campus](#) initiative that provides colleges and universities with programs and customized strategic plans to build strategies and techniques for improving student mental health.
- ❖ [Mental Health First Aid](#) is a skills-based training course about mental health and substance abuse issues.
- ❖ [Mindhamok](#) offers mental health and well-being support services, including a therapist network, helplines, and knowledge-based content for international and study-abroad students.
- ❖ [Mobility International USA \(MIUSA\)](#) promotes disability rights, study abroad, and leadership training.
- ❖ [National College Health Assessment \(NCHA\)](#): collects data about students' health, habits, behaviors, and perceptions.
- ❖ Ohio Wesleyan University offers an expansive collection of mental health resources along with links to informational TED Talks found at [Ohio Wesleyan Mental Health Resources](#)
- ❖ [QPR Institute](#) offers training for suicide prevention.