

Creating SkillZone: A Tutoring Program for International Students and Scholars

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Abstract

According to the Institute of International Education, international students represent a sizeable portion of the student body within the higher education system of the United States – a total of 886,052 international students were enrolled in either a public or private institution during the 2013-2014 academic year. However, literature related to tutoring centers built specifically for international students is lacking. As such, it is essential that this specific population be addressed within relevant research. The purpose of this article is to shed light on the current model of an academic support center for international students at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Keywords: peer tutoring centers; international students; academic support; social support

Introduction

Ten years I tried to come to the United States.
Ten years of endless paperwork.
On August 16, 2015, I finally made it.
When I got off the plane, everyone looked different.
Food, Family, and Friends
I was homesick for all.
But the warm hugs from my host family made me feel at home.
To be polite, I ate food they cooked,
Even when I didn't like it.
And I couldn't find good restaurants.
I missed home food so much, I got pissed off when I saw pizza
Or mashed potatoes.
But I had to eat them.
My excitement to have international roommates, died
When our English became a barrier to friendship.
We did our own things, without any words.
The first day of class was frustrating.
The professor spoke so fast.
I couldn't keep up.
And I had never read or written so much in my life
But I found support
In old friends
And my cohort.
36 hours I typed
And finished my two papers
After ten years, I was finally a Ph.D. candidate
In the US
I celebrated my victory
At the Statue of Liberty
Where I felt self-assertion.
I am where I belong.
All these paths we've taken

Brought us here to help others.
To bring the food,
To be the friends,
To be the family.
SkillZone is a diversity zone.
SkillZone is here for you.

Tutors and students at SkillZone, an academic support center for international students at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), coauthored the above poem. Together, the students and tutors thought of their experiences as international students, drafted those experiences into phrases, and combined them into a cohesive poem. The poem's nature as a communally written piece stands as a physical example of the SkillZone community while its themes demonstrate why a program like SkillZone is needed. Likewise, because it was written collaboratively by members of the SkillZone community, it gives credence to our stance that SkillZone is building a community.

SkillZone was established because international students' specific needs and desires, as described in the poem and in the literature below, were not being met via campus organizations or support centers already established. Therefore, we provide information on how our international student and scholar interdisciplinary tutoring center was built with the hopes of inspiring other universities to find ways to address their international students' needs.

Literature Review

Although academic stress is typical for all university students, international students are largely affected by even more stressors considering they are immersed in a different culture and must navigate a potentially unfamiliar educational system. For some international students, culture shock may occur, which can hinder or prolong their adjustment to the new environment (Coates and Dickinson, 2012; Lombard, 2014; Terrazas-Carrillo, Hong, and Pace, 2014). As stated by Lombard (2014), culture shock refers to the 'loss of the safety net of predictable social roles, cues, and practices' that are not present or perceived to be present within the given context (p. 175). Complications with adjusting are further exacerbated for those who encounter language barriers, or have minimal experience with discourses specific to the host country and limited familiarity with implicit cultural norms (Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Zhang and Goodson, 2011; Campbell, 2012). Therefore, international students may also experience sociocultural stressors, including feelings of loneliness or isolation, due to difficulties interacting and forming relationships with other international students, domestic students, or even locals (Smith and Khawaja, 2011).

In conjunction with campus living stress, negative feelings may result when students' academic expectations do not match their lived experiences, the educational services provided by the university are not perceived as being efficient or of good quality, and the teaching methods are unfamiliar to the students (Smith and Khawaja, 2011). Tucker and Ang (2012) further point to why there is a gap between students' academic expectations and their experiences. In their study, Asian students in Australia struggled to discuss class topics or work in groups without a clear hierarchy. Another common struggle that Amevuvor (2014) found was the amount of work expected of students. For instance, sometimes international students come from backgrounds in which they were never required to write or type lengthy papers. Bamba (2012) supported this within some African contexts in which students' classrooms were so large that it was typical for teachers to only lecture. All of these classroom discrepancies between the students' expectations and experiences can cause stress, which in turn affects the students' academic performance, particularly when there are insufficient opportunities for self-expression within the classroom (Terrazas-Carrillo, Hong, and Pace, 2014). Therefore, it is helpful for international students to have another place where someone understands that part of their struggles in class may stem from how they experienced education in the past, outside of the classroom.

Of course, this brief description of international students' educational experiences is neither exhaustive nor explicative, and does not intend to homogenize undergraduate and graduate students; but it does serve to elaborate on some of the major sources of stress found within current literature, as well as some of the experiences of students who have become a part of SkillZone.

Considering that there are a variety of factors to account for regarding the challenges international students face, it is essential to discuss how support services, and more specifically, tutoring centers, are beneficial to these students. According to Akanwa (2015), universities ‘...must be committed to providing an enabling environment that is capable of meeting international students’ needs, as well as equipping international students with relevant social and academic skills’ (p. 272). A study conducted by Fenton-Smith and Michael (2013) found that student participants largely reflected positively on their experience with on-campus support services, citing that both their study skills and academic language improved as a result. Moreover, those who make regular use of tutoring centers are ‘statistically more likely to be in good academic standing’ than students who do not visit a tutoring center or even visit less frequently (Cooper, 2010, p. 33).

Beyond academic improvements, international students may also benefit socially by attending tutoring sessions. For example, these sessions may help international students to further adjust to the new culture and academic climate, as well as potentially provide them with an opportunity to work on their communication skills in the target language (Yusoff and Othman, 2011). A study conducted by Cruickshank, Newell, and Cole (2003) shows that the most effective English-language support model for the ESL student participants of the study was one that incorporated individual mentoring/tutoring. Based on such findings, it is both relevant and important that university tutoring centers be aware of and sensitive to the unique needs of international students, who likely gain more than an immediate academic benefit by attending the session (Gillespie and Lerner, 2000).

Several studies have also indicated that peer-tutoring in particular can foster a conducive environment for not only the students who attend but the tutors as well (Dioso-Henson, 2012; Duran, 2010; Gillespie and Lerner, 2000; Ronesi, 2009; Sanford, 2012). As described by Duran (2010), peer tutoring is a cooperative and collaborative process between student and tutor (who is also a student). For international students, this allows them to interact with another student, who could be viewed as more relatable than a teacher. The inevitable negotiation that must take place between both parties also promotes interpersonal competency. As stated by Sanford (2012), ‘students navigate a process for bringing their own ideas to fruition that includes both individual exploration and participation in a dialogue that brings ideas into beneficial conversation’ (p. 1). Moreover, as was the case for Dioso-Henson’s (2012) study, reciprocal peer interaction can ‘[induce] reinforcement and motivation to increase the interest of the students’ (p. 48). Therefore, we chose peer tutoring as the core for our tutoring center model. In the next sections, we provide more details about SkillZone and its context.

Context

As of 2016, the Indiana University of Pennsylvania has more than 800 international students from 60 countries (iup.edu/international). It has the largest international student population of all the universities in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE). International students, like all IUP students, have access to tutoring through the Academic Success Center and Writing Center, as well as tutoring through different departments. (It is worth noting that the Academic Success Center was created after SkillZone). Students attending the American Language Institute (ALI) also have a tutoring class where they work with the same tutor for an entire semester. In spite of the resources available to international students, the Assistant Vice President for International Education and Global Engagement at IUP was well aware of many of the unique academic and social challenges that international students face. When she saw a gap between the needs of international students at IUP and the resources available to them, she decided to create a new program – SkillZone. Her goal for SkillZone was to create an interdisciplinary student academic support center for all international students and scholars, including ALI students, undergraduate and graduate students, visiting scholars, and generation 1.5 students.

Developing the Program

SkillZone was created based on an interdisciplinary peer tutoring model. As such, the next step in building the program was to hire tutors from different departments. However, after the first two semesters of the program, it became evident that it was important to not only hire tutors from a range of departments, but to hire tutors who had a range of skills and disciplinary experience as well. For these reasons, tutors are asked to provide all of the disciplinary areas they feel most confident working in. These include test preparation, academic culture, and technology along with specific disciplinary

areas like statistics, biology, or English. To accommodate students' interdisciplinary needs, SkillZone has had between 20-25 tutors during fall and spring semesters. Tutors are assigned to different areas in SkillZone depending on their strengths. By retaining at least twenty tutors, the program can ensure that one of the tutors will be able to meet the student's specific needs.

While the one-on-one tutoring room addressed the academic need of the students, it did not completely fulfill their social. Therefore, to address these potential social needs, a group room was developed. The intent of the SkillZone group room is to have an ongoing discussion, as this room provides a place for social connection and managing emotions as well as a place for students to practice their conversation skills. Moreover, it functions as a space for students to begin speaking in groups, considering that some international students struggle with speaking in group settings (Tucker and Ang, 2012). Thus, the room provides both academic and social support; and it is one of the unique aspects of SkillZone, as many other tutoring facilities do not employ this type of support.

Including the group room, SkillZone has three main areas. In addition to the front desk, where students swipe their student card and receive information, SkillZone also has a group room and tutoring lab. The separate spaces are important because each one can be designed to meet students' specific needs. For instance, if they choose to go to the group room for social support, they will find large chairs, a couch, and desks in a circle that promotes open discourse. Conversely, students needing academic support will find that they have access to three long study tables, a computer lab, a projector, and a printer in the tutoring lab. Just as the spaces are designed to meet the students' needs, training was also developed according to the program's goals.

Training Development

Training can be a challenge in a program with such a diverse staff. The training cannot center on specific content areas because there are so many disciplines represented. Therefore, trainings focus on common knowledge the tutors would need. The first objective is to map out a tutoring session so that it is productive and goal-driven. To that end, the first part of the training focuses on Macauley's (2005) *Setting the Agenda for the Next Thirty Minutes*. Within this book chapter, Macauley discussed the importance of creating a map for a session. While the chapter was written for writing center tutors, it applies to other tutoring centers because it gives tutors an idea of how to organize their sessions. By training tutors on how to structure or map out a tutoring session, the supervisor can ensure that, no matter the topic of the session, it will be focused. Strategies that the training includes are setting goals at the beginning of the session, communicating and negotiating those goals, working in collaboration with the student, reviewing what was accomplished, and creating a future goal related to that task.

Aside from tutoring, one thing all of the tutors had in common was that they would be tutoring students of diverse backgrounds. Because SkillZone utilizes a peer tutoring model, it is essential that the tutors approach each session with equality and privilege and marginalization in mind, particularly considering that the students would be coming from different cultural, racial, religious, and language backgrounds. Multicultural training is also essential because the tutors come from different disciplines, not all of which teach issues of multiculturalism. To design the training materials, Jocelyn used scenarios that actually happened either at the tutoring center or on campus. The tutors discussed if and why these scenarios were offensive. Ultimately, these trainings generated productive conversations and helped tutors reflect on their identities.

Similar to the multicultural training, tutors also need to be knowledgeable of the international student experience. As the literature shows, international students have unique experiences that can entangle issues of academic literacy with social and financial stress (Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Zhang and Goodson, 2011; Campbell, 2012, Coates and Dickinson, 2012). Because students are more comfortable with peer tutors, they may share their challenges. Tutors need to be prepared for these moments and know when to be a listening ear and when to direct students to helpful resources. For that reason, we purposely employ international students because they can share their experiences with other tutors. Since many of our tutors are international students themselves, they are a rich learning resource for other tutors. Therefore, sharing and incorporating tutor voices into the trainings is essential.

Advocacy

Once the program was built and the tutors trained, the next challenge was promoting the program so that students knew that support was available especially for them. While we made great strides in developing the branding, brochures, posters, and other materials, advocating for a new tutoring program cannot rely on these materials alone. There are many events, departments, and support centers trying to gain visibility among the IUP community. Therefore, sometimes promoting through posters and brochures is not effective because students, faculty, and staff are already inundated with these materials.

So, in addition to using promotional materials, the SkillZone staff has worked to contact core faculty and staff that will be able to inform students about SkillZone. The benefit of this is that, while students come and go, faculty and staff usually remain in the campus community for an extended period of time and can promote the program to new students. There is, however, one problem with this, and that is the issue of professors' time. As Amicucci, Chamcharatsri, and Reilly (2011) found, IUP professors' time is already devoted to an array of responsibilities, so it can be difficult to get in contact with a faculty member to tell them about SkillZone. Amicucci, Chamcharatsri, and Reilly's (2011), study also demonstrates how professors' time constraints are the very reason why programs like SkillZone should be built. They found that professors do not have adequate time to understand and address their multilingual students' needs. Therefore, SkillZone becomes the place where students can have their needs met when their professors are unable to provide extra time. And so, we try to demonstrate to them how SkillZone can collaborate with and benefit them, so they will be more likely to tell students about SkillZone. One way we demonstrate this is by sending faculty reports to professors, upon students' requests. These reports detail the student's activity and progress at SkillZone.

Other promotional methods that have worked is connecting one-on-one with students at events like orientations and student life fairs. This meant that, in addition to setting up a table and passing out materials, we also sat with students at breakfasts and personally invited them to visit SkillZone. We also connect with international student clubs and purposefully hire qualified tutors who are present in the international student communities. Once again, our tutors, particularly those in or connected to the international student community, stand as cornerstones of our program because they help promote and build it.

Confronting Criticism

Some also might argue that international students and scholars should attend the resources that are available to all students, such as the writing center or other interdisciplinary tutoring available on campus. That question -- Why a tutoring program just for international students and scholars? -- is at the core of all we do in advocacy. The research is clear that international students and scholars have a combination of needs, which are often layered and compounded, and which domestic students often do not have (Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Zhang and Goodson, 2011; Campbell, 2012; Coates and Dickinson, 2012). While a domestic student may be struggling financially, he or she is not often, at the same time, struggling with visa issues, language barriers, or academic and/or social culture shock, for example. SkillZone and its tutors are trained to understand those needs, and while tutors cannot address all of them, they can listen to students, empathize with them, and help them on an academic, linguistic, and social level. They can also provide them with a way to navigate the new academic and cultural system they have entered, ultimately assisting with their transition into new and perhaps unfamiliar contexts. SkillZone also serves as a gateway for international students to access the other resources available to them at IUP, which in turn encourages them to become members of the larger community.

Tutors' Feedback

After developing the program, training the tutors, and promoting the tutoring program, it was important to get tutors' feedback on the program. Since the tutors have played such a major role in developing the program and contributing to its culture, we asked them to share their insights regarding if and in what ways the program has fulfilled its mission. To do so, Miriam, who was a previous tutor, conducted a focus group with current tutors. Five tutors participated in the focus group. Four of them are international students, and one an American student. Their time working at SkillZone is described in the table below. All names are pseudonyms.

Name	Semesters working as a SkillZone tutor	Country of Origin
Mohammed	Fall 2014, Spring 2015, Fall 2015, Spring 2016	Jordan
Michelle	Spring 2015, Fall 2016	China
Maame	Fall 2015, Spring 2016, Fall 2016	Mali
Ibrahim	Fall 2016	Nigeria
Saoirse	Summer 2016, Fall 2016	U.S.A

Table 1:Tutor Information

Miriam opened the focus group by presenting tutors with a copy of the mission statement and asking how SkillZone has succeeded or failed in fulfilling it. The mission statement reads:

As a part of IUP’s Office of International Education, SkillZone has been designed as a space for international students and scholars to make their own. We provide academic, social, and cultural support through peer interaction and community engagement. Our efforts are focused on adapting to the ever changing needs of IUP’s international students and scholars.

Mohammed, Saoirse, and Maame all agreed that SkillZone has been very successful at creating its own community. When Miriam asked how tutors would describe that community, their answers indicated that SkillZone is a diverse community with different languages represented, which allows them to offer language support. Saoirse described the community as welcoming, and Mohammed said, ‘At some point, we were like a family.’ Ibrahim agreed, describing SkillZone as home away from home. With their feedback so positive, Miriam asked if the tutors felt there were any challenges at SkillZone. To this, Mohammed said ‘Most [students] want you to do the work for them.’ And Maame agreed and added ‘You have to have limits.’ Mohammed and Maame’s insights demonstrate that there are drawbacks to a peer tutoring model. Students and tutors who work frequently together often become friends, which can cause students to feel that their peers should be willing to provide more assistance than ethically acceptable. The tutors agreed that they combat such pressures by setting limits for themselves in the session and being self-aware that they are tutors. Ibrahim also described how he encourages students to complete the work on their own by giving the students confidence and showing them that it is not a competition. Despite the challenges that come with being a peer tutoring center, the tutors indicated that it is a good model because students feel comfortable to, as Ibrahim said, disclose a problem to peers, more than with faculty, who students fear may judge them.

Along with the academic side of SkillZone, the tutors had a lot to say about the other parts of SkillZone. Mohammed stated that, ‘Another way that SkillZone helps is it’s not just academic stuff. We basically can help [students] with anything that relates to personal stuff. I helped a student with like establishing an electricity account, I’ve helped student with bank account,’ and Ibrahim agreed describing how tutors will walk students somewhere if they are unfamiliar with buildings on campus. Having peer tutors allows SkillZone to be able to offer these extra services and provides students with a place to turn to on campus to receive help with their everyday needs.

While the tutors help international students, they also described how SkillZone helps them. Mohammed described SkillZone as ‘a condensed course in diversity.’ The other tutors agreed and explained that the students taught the tutors about their cultures. To the tutors, diversity sets SkillZone apart from other tutoring programs they have participated in. For example, Ibrahim described the multilingual community by saying that, in his other tutoring experiences, he tutored only in English, but at SkillZone there are many languages spoken. Michelle felt this was, at times, a challenge at SkillZone because many of the students came with lower proficiency levels. However, Maame described how the different languages of the tutors allow them to support students in their first language. The multilingual environment is a testament to how students and tutors are creating their own space at SkillZone.

Mohammed expounded on this by explaining that students choose to come to SkillZone because it is a place for them, and their ownership of it makes them feel that they are entitled to or *should* receive help there. He gave his own personal example, explaining that when he needs help with something, he always looks to SkillZone first, then he seeks out other tutoring services if necessary.

Mohammed's point about SkillZone tutors using the center as a resource led to another discussion about how SkillZone gives opportunities to international students to participate as tutors. He described how SkillZone often hires American Language Institute students who have finished their English language classes and are accepted into IUP classes. He said, 'Spring 2014, I was ALI student and then fall 2014 I was SkillZone tutor and same thing happened with [another tutor]. It's like seeing students develop—that's a success. Yeah, that's the most important. Because that's our goal, like, to help them improve their skills. And that's the best thing I'd say.' Hiring international students has been an important part of SkillZone for two reasons. The first is that it allows international students an opportunity to contribute to their community and engage in professional development activities; and the second is that it ensures that SkillZone will be a community built by and for international students. Ultimately, they build their community together, which helps fulfill SkillZone's mission.

Reflections

Given that SkillZone has been in existence for two years, we can reflect on its successes and look at possible revisions for the model moving forward. One thing we have learned from the students and other campus offices is that international students and domestic students want to connect. Considering this, perhaps having a closed community for international students only is not the way to go. Therefore, one way we hope to increase numbers and advocate for a global perspective on campus is to welcome domestic students into the group room. SkillZone has also begun looking for ways to partner with existing programs on campus that may be suffering from inconsistent attendance, such as conversation partners or students needing service hours. Saoirse, who directs Conversation Partners, described how the Conversation Partners event hosted by SkillZone was well attended. As she described, collaborating with other campus organizations has enabled SkillZone to fulfill its mission to engage students in the broader campus community. While these projects are new initiatives, they demonstrate how a tutoring program specifically built for a small percentage of the student population can thrive and contribute to the larger community.

As one graduate assistant described it, SkillZone is a gateway for international students to the larger community. From looking at how SkillZone currently connects students at IUP and further creates opportunities to increase those connections, we can say that SkillZone is not only a gateway to the larger community, but also has the potential to be a significant contributor to a richer, more globally knowledgeable campus community; and it is our goal to promote and maintain this ideal.

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