WE ARE

CREATING A CULTURE WHERE

RELEVANT

EVERY STUDENT FEELS VALUED.

ADITI WAGH MA SOCIAL DESIGN 2019 CENTER FOR SOCIAL DESIGN

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BREATHE

A MOMENT OF SELF-REFLECTION

Every night when I sleep, the faces of people I have met through my work in India appear. I see the faces of poverty-stricken farmers, widows who succumb to brutal patriarchy, victims of human trafficking, child sexual abuse survivors and several community members who have been my windows to reality. I remember their words which are seldom pleasant. I sleep realizing my privilege; acknowledging my ability to act; accepting that I can't solve every problem, and knowing that design can bring communities together and empower them to write their own stories of progress.

I thank every one of those faces for influencing the fulfilling choices I have made in my life. Recognizing that I cannot change the reality leading to their circumstances, I keep moving with the knowledge that apathy is not an option, that they are not helpless spectacles; they are the people with insights that can inform fundamental change.

I move forward into my thesis keeping my experiences and the consequent learning at the heart of my practice.

My thesis is a transformation story that materialized from the experiences and challenges of Indian International Students but evolved into an inclusive narrative elevating the voices of every student who feels unheard, underrepresented, unprepared or unvalued; irrespective of their identity and representation.

My work is rooted in the process. I am transformed by it, with it and from it.

My process does not seek a perfect end; it is flawed, matures gradually, and loses direction mid-way. These imperfections strengthen my belief in Human Centered Design, for I emerge out of the process conscious that it was collaborative, iterative and inclusive.

Who are we? We are artists; we are creators; we are international students who come to the United States to learn, grow, evolve and build long-lasting relationships.

WE ARE RELEVANT

I came to the United States 9 months ago as an Indian International Student. I remember my first memory as being frazzled at the airport, hunting for my lost luggage. After a 30-hour journey, I had to wake up early the next day for my on-campus job training. I had no time or knowledge of resources at my disposal to process this massive move to another continent.

Within the first few weeks at MICA, I began to see an underlying pattern beyond the surface challenges of daily living. I realized a student has 3 identities - Social, Political and Cultural. These identities shape how students view their problems as well as how universities and the government create services for the students.

Several international students around me were grappling with similar challenges that emerged from unique personal narratives. I was keen to discover if there was a way to weave these different narratives together within a robust support system. In listening and observation, I found direction.

International students contribute over \$30 billion to the US economy & Indian students are the 2nd largest pool of incoming international students, yet American universities are unable to provide holistic support to meet their

<mark>unique needs.</mark>

THE BEGINNING

I navigated through research papers that linked the impact of acculturation with mental health and wellbeing of international students. Through the initial research I discovered:

- US universities acknowledge the current 'Mental Health Crisis'.
- Majority of the research on the relationship between adjustment patterns and mental health of international students in the US is focused on Chinese students.
- In most studies, international students are clubbed under the same category.
- Indians are the second largest group of incoming international students, but there is negligible qualitative research to understand their specific needs.
- The number of Indian students in the US has increased by five times, from 33,818 in 1997-98 to 1,96,271 in 2017-18, in 20 years.

I was struck by the enormous research gap to understand the unique needs of Indian International students. As a result, my thesis goals developed:

- To fill the void in qualitative research space by producing research around the impact of acculturation on the Indian student population.
- To elevate the voices of the Indian student community in global dialogue around mental health and thus, encourage destigmatization around seeking help.
- To understand the barriers of American Institutes of higher learning in providing culturally appropriate care to Indian students and offer recommendations to bridge this gap.

WHY IS AN INDIAN STUDENT VULNERABLE IN THE UNITED STATES?

1. NEW CULTURE

Due to the pressure to adapt to a new culture with no preparation

2. MODEL MINORITY MYTH

Due to the stereotypical tag of a perfect immigrant

3. FINANCIAL PRESSURE

Due to the financial pressure and decreasing value of rupee

4. PARENTAL PRESSURE

Due to parental pressure to excel academically

5. COPING MECHANSISM

Due to limited exposure to cultural coping mechanisms in the US, such as therapy

6. LACK OF INFORMATION Due

to lack of information on navigating the American health, banking and other service-based systems

7. "I" CULTURE

Due to dependence on friends and family for primary support, the Indian students struggle to distinctively navigate the "I" culture from the "We" culture they grew up with In India, a student commits suicide every hour due to the high value placed on academic excellence.

NATIONAL CRIME RECORDS BUREAU (NCRB, 2015)

INDIAN STUDENT

MACRO

Allocentric (group-oriented); Patriarchal and Hierarchical

> Sex education is a taboo (Respect-based relationships)

Mental Health is a stigma (Calling the person crazy or considering it a physical ailment)

CULTURAL LEVELS

MESO

(Independent Self Identity not awarded)

Parents set high expectations (Authoritarian parenting practices)

MICRO

Faces self-criticism, difficulty in emotional expression, & the pressure of being perfect in all roles; regards family and friends as the primary support system during the crisis

MACRO

Idiocentric (Self-Oriented); Subtle Patriarchy

Sex Education is essential (Friendship-based relationships)

Acknowledgement of mental health (Awareness around counselling and therapy)

OF Analysis

MESO

Family bonds are secondary (Independent self-identity awarded)

Liberal Parenting Practices (Less involvement of parents)

MICRO

Faces the pressure to be independent since late teen years, guards personal boundaries and space, regards therapy and counselling as a preferred support system during the crisis

U.S. STUDENT

SO, WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

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Indian international students struggle with acculturation stressors upon arrival to the United States. However, the current mental health and wellbeing programs designed by the higher education institutions are culturally insensitive and lack specific instrumental, social and psychological support.

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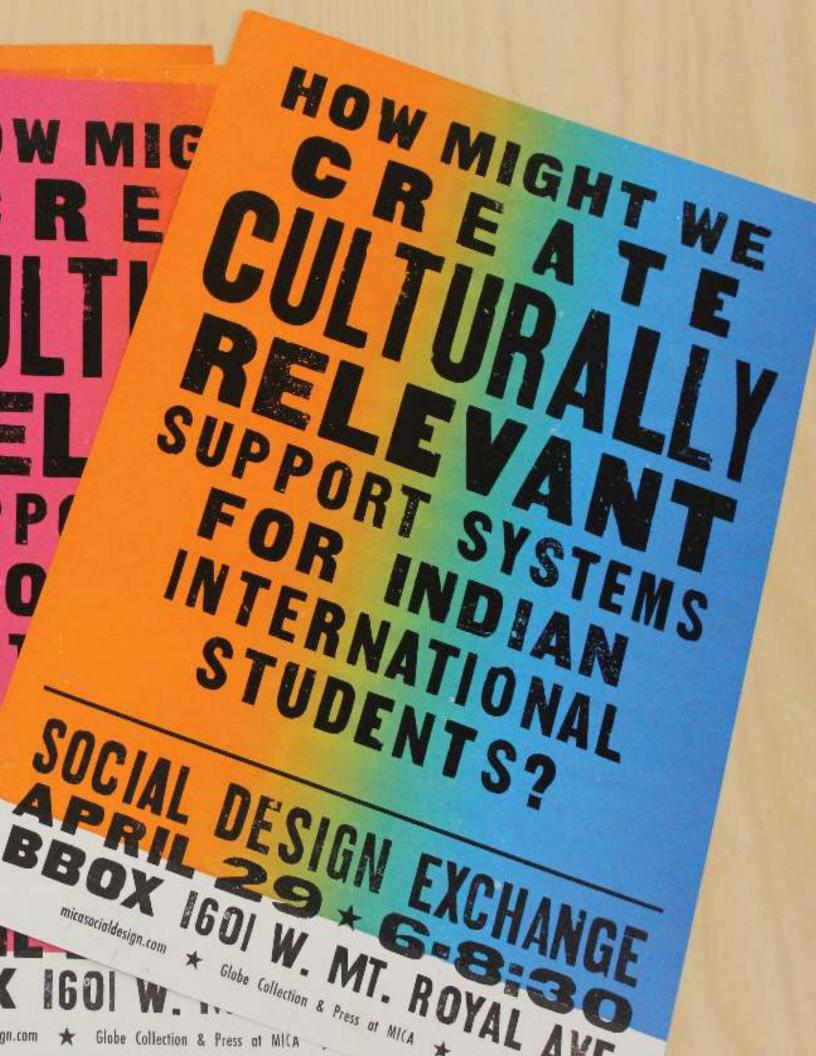
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DESIGN RESEARCH

My research was rooted in Inspiration, Immersion, Listening and Learning from the past.

INSPIRATION

Inspiration is seeking insight and creativity from different people, contexts, and situations.

OBJECTIVE

To find inspiration outside the context of research and understand the challenges of an immigrant.

APPROACH

I studied the work of Intercultural Counseling Connection, a network of mental health professionals committed to providing culturally responsive counselling and therapeutic services to asylum seekers, refugees and other forced immigrants in the greater Baltimore area.

Additionally, I attended the Maryland Immigrant Rights Coalition, where various organization working with immigrants shared stories, challenges and needs of immigrants who have succumbed to detention, deportation and waiting. Connect for Immigrants: Become a Volunteer, Help your Immigrant Neighbor!

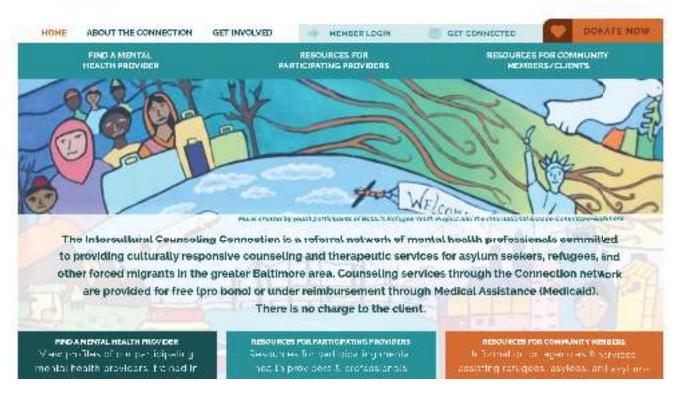


1 x Ticket Order total: Free



Intercultural Counseling Connection

A RESOURCE FOR REFUGEES IN THE GREATER BALTIMORE AREA



IMMERSION

Immersion is submitting oneself to the world you are exploring.

OBJECTIVE

To equip self with knowledge and expertise to understand and respond to the challenges, needs and concerns of all project collaborators (Students, University Staff, On-Campus Counselling and Cultural Competency experts).

APPROACH

Coming from a culture where mental health is heavily stigmatized, I needed to build my understanding of mental health before engaging with the students. I was responsible and accountable for the impact of my actions and interactions.

Therefore, I ventured into skill and perspective building in the following ways:

Mental Health First Aid Training By Mosaic Organisation

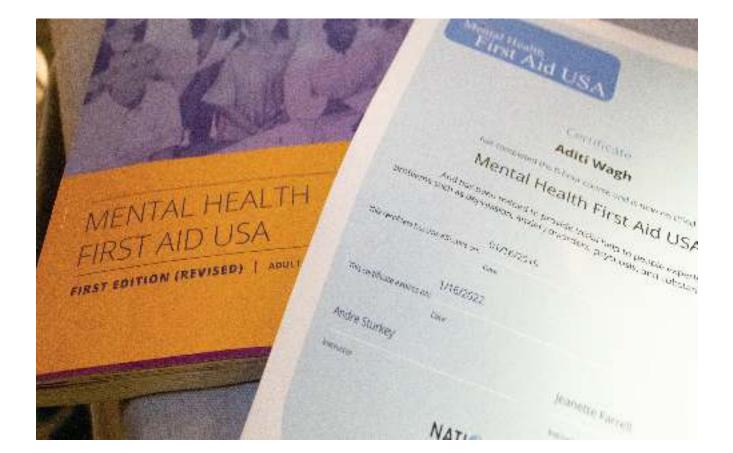
Participation in the webinars to understand the unique needs and challenges of international students and the recommendations By ACPA Commission for Global Dimensions of Student Development

Becoming a member of I AM SHAKTI

I-AM SHAKTI (translation: "INDIAN-AMERICAN POWER" or "I AM POWER") is a social justice movement to sensitize Indian-Americans to mental health challenges while providing hope and support to those affected. Our symbol is the Phoenix, symbolizing power and revival.

Though it started with an Indian focus, it's evolved to welcome all South Asians and marginalized communities and welcome all who wish to get involved.

Coming from a culture where mental health is heavily stigmatized, I needed to build my understanding of mental health before engaging with the students.



玊 Certífícate of Completion ¥ ACPA's Commission of Global Dimensions of Student Development X is honored to award this certificate of completion to Adítí Wagh X for participating in our Webinar Series on Mental Health & International Students ð, Apríl 2019 \mathbf{X} nission Chair COMMISSI X College Student **Global Dimensions of Student Developmen** Educators International

LISTENING

Listening signals respect. It is valuing voices, insights and contributions of all collaborators.

OBJECTIVE

To get an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, socio-cultural background, pain-points and motivations of Indian International Students as well as university staff members.

APPROACH

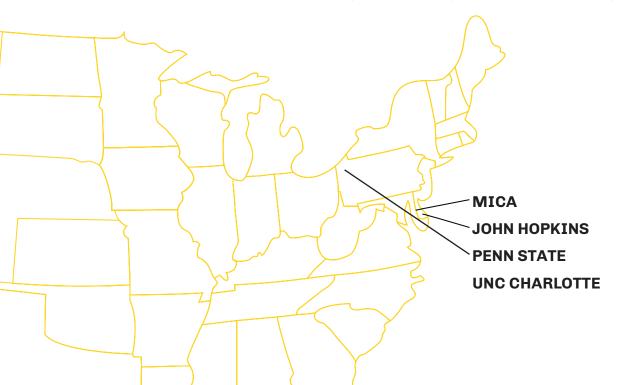
I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with Indian International Students from four American Universities.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION

Students were reached out via student organizations such as Student Associations and Unions and Social Media university groups and in collaboration with I AM SHAKTI.

Through my initial research, I was aware that universities acknowledge that international students have unique needs, but for specific reasons are unable to provide the relevant support. To get a comprehensive perspective, I interviewed 9 university staff members representing different departments that engage with international students in any capacity. I also interviewed on-campus counsellors and cultural competency experts.

I was also interested in studying the long term implications of acculturation, and the lack of necessary assistance during university and post the graduation phase. As a result, I also interviewed 2 participants who are university pass outs since a period of 2 and 22 years respectively.





LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Learning from the past is acknowledging the history of the community you are working with, understand the past and ongoing conversations, concepts and discourse within the area of interest.

OBJECTIVE

To navigate the existing research and recommendations as a way to facilitate the future direction.

APPROACH

Being a researcher and a sociologist I used secondary research to compliment my findings and contextualize my work in cognizance with the local, national and global dialogues around Support systems for the international student community.

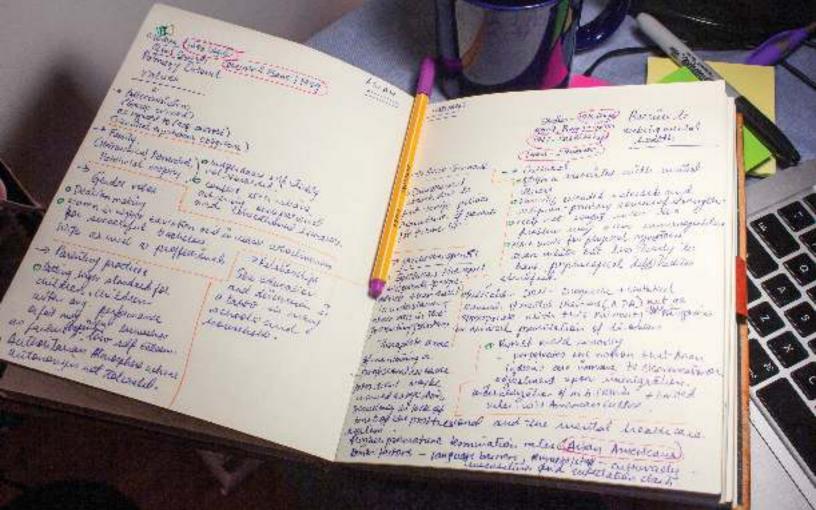
Due to the limited available research that provided insights on the unique needs and challenges of Indian International students in the United States, I referred to the following:

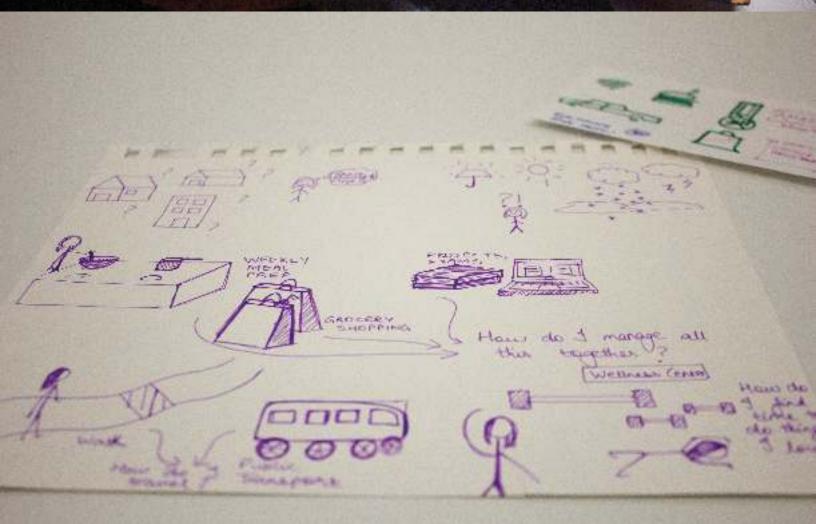
Research papers that studied:

- the mental health and wellbeing needs of international students
- the acculturation stressors of international students
- the acculturation challenges of Indian Immigrants
- the connection between acculturation and mental wellbeing
- the cultural context of student upbringing and challenges in India

Media references that informed:

- · the framing of problem in the current context
- the ongoing dialogue among universities
- the stories





SYNTHESIS

Synthesis is evaluating your research and identifying patterns from the stories of the community you are designing with.

OBJECTIVES

To gather insights and identify tensions pertaining to the problem.

APPROACH

I categorized my research into themes. The following insights and opportunities emerged.

INSIGHT 1

The US educational system is designed around white Americans. The rest of the students are considered 'others'.

TENSION

Indian students feel underrepresented in the curriculum and discussions around racism. However, universities view this group as a model minority without acknowledging the racist past.

INDIAN STUDENT

1. Need opportunities to understand students from other cultures and backgrounds, and more importantly, space where in they can proudly share their culture.

2. Need an inclusive space which does not ignore the past, and encourage discussions on history and social justice issues from India and other countries.

UNIVERSITY STAFF

1. Local students feel that the events organized are for international students, and vice versa. It is also difficult to learn about every festival that caters to the need of every international student, whether Indian or other.

2. The curriculum is evolving to be more inclusive. However, to consider the engagement of the students who form the majority, from the US as well as other countries, the curriculum is designed according to them.

AND STAFF 9

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lam not an Asian. lam an Indian. There is abig difference

OPPORTUNITY

How might we create opportunities for intercultural dialogue among students and staff?

toward international people of other cultures and countries. I think today you see a lot more stereotyping, a lot more bias, esp. against brown skin. life is west coast and east coast, it doesn't go beyond that. Inave had a couple of examples where my insights thom India shock people around.

AK

INSIGHT 2

Within this group of 'others', universities design support services that favour the needs of the majority. As a result, the lone student slips through the cracks.

TENSION 1

Indian students face self-criticism and difficulty in accepting emotional vulnerability due to their upbringing and cultural expectations. However, the university services are ill-equipped to provide relevant support.

INDIAN STUDENT

1. Need response-effective access to and robust support from on-campus counselling and programs for mental health and wellbeing awareness.

2. Need programs and services that specifically address the needs of every student according to their cultural background and inform staff about the different cultures.

UNIVERSITY STAFF

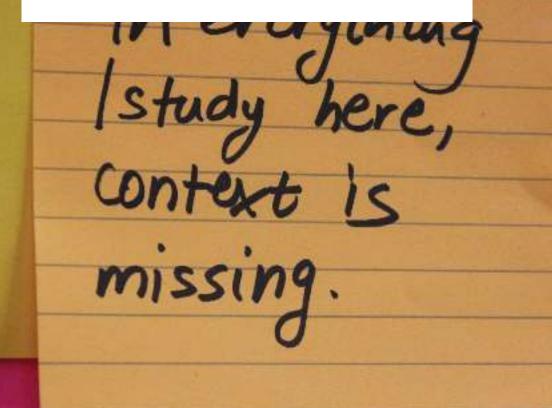
1. The biggest challenge for international students, especially Chinese and Indian, is that they approach counselling when their anxiety, stress and depression reaches a breaking point and negatively affects academics.

2. Students come from a number of different countries, providing relevant care to each student is not feasible.

In my case it wasn't tigha. It was the lack of audoreness. ama classic example of someone who Can go through their whole life not know? they have a mental

How might we improve communication within the educational ecosystem? How might we encourage participation of international students within classroom spaces and across campus?

OPPORTUNITIES



TENSION 2

Indian students feel unprepared for the shift to the US. But the universities struggle to find resources and ways to communicate related information to the students.

INDIAN STUDENT

1. Need an introduction to the American culture and effective preparedness programs with information about relevant local stores and guidance to operate American health, banking and other services.

UNIVERSITY STAFF

1. Wish to avoid information overdose for the students prior to the shift and during the initial orientation process. Difficulty in finding efficient and far reaching communication options besides emails.

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OPPORTUNITY

How might we better prepare international students to thrive in a new culture and educational ecosystem?

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INSIGHT 3

While the dialogue across educational forums recognise challenges of international students, no action-based recommendations exist.

TENSION

The universities provide counselling services, but the concept of counselling is inherently European and unaccommodating of Indian cultural beliefs.

INDIAN STUDENT

1. Need culturally competent counsellors who understand the socio-economic and cultural challenges of the students.

UNIVERSITY STAFF

1. Due to financial limitations it is difficult to find counselling representation from different identities, and time constraint do not permit for taking culturally sensitive counselling for students representative of every cultural background.

Not understanding that their confidentiality and Privary are respected to seeking counselling. The sear that everyone is going to know and struggling is huge.

OPPORTUNITY

How might we build culturally inclusive counselling for others?

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It's hard to say culturally relevant counselling asit! is a Suropean concept. Sharing emotions. with a stranger in an enclosed youm is many cultures. The medium itself is not inclusive. in the face of

The opportunities derived so far seemed to lack depth and character. I reviewed my research and found a collective need that stood out between all students - the need to be valued. As a result, a sixth opportunity emerged – How might we create a culture where every student feels valued.

Developing an environment where students feel valued means efficiently reaching out to every student, better preparing them to thrive in a new culture, having a safe and encouraging avenue for intercultural dialogue, and a space where students feel at home.

MU FEELS The personal touch is missing. what I dislike is the approaches in universities | Mita, are still centered around white people as the norm. So, it's like-It is not the groups that get impacted, let's do this outra it is the lone thing to work with these student who slips people from these other hrough the cracks. places.

IDEATION

Ideation nurtures creative solutions by placing community collaboration at its heart.

OBJECTIVE

To generate ideas on the proposed 'How Might We' opportunities with students, thus making them drivers of their journey and creating moments of self-reflection.

To reflect on the process in collaboration with the community, make students the drivers of their own experiences, and generate ideas through inclusive participation.

APPROACH

As the process transformed and broadened the scope of my work to include students representing all identities, not just Indian International students; diversity was significant for the ideation session I organized.



The session was divided into 3 parts:

RECOGNITION AND REFLECTION

The session began with student collaborators signing a consent form as a means to ensure their autonomy, and informing them about their participant rights.

As a way to facilitate introductions and recognize the diversity in the room, the students created personas which highlighted their personal information, likes/dislikes, goals, motivations and frustrations. To help participants ease into ideation, through sketches, they reflected on their experiences and journey before and after arrival to the US.

The session transpired to be a safe space for heartwarming dialogues that emerged from personal narratives.

RESONATION & POWER SHARING

While the Opportunities in the form of 'How might We' statements were born from the insights of Indian students who interviewed, the ideation session was an authentic way to reaffirm whether the rest of the students too resonated with the discovered tensions. The participants were asked to cast 3 votes for the opportunity that resonated the most with them. The voting also determined the sequence of the ideation session.

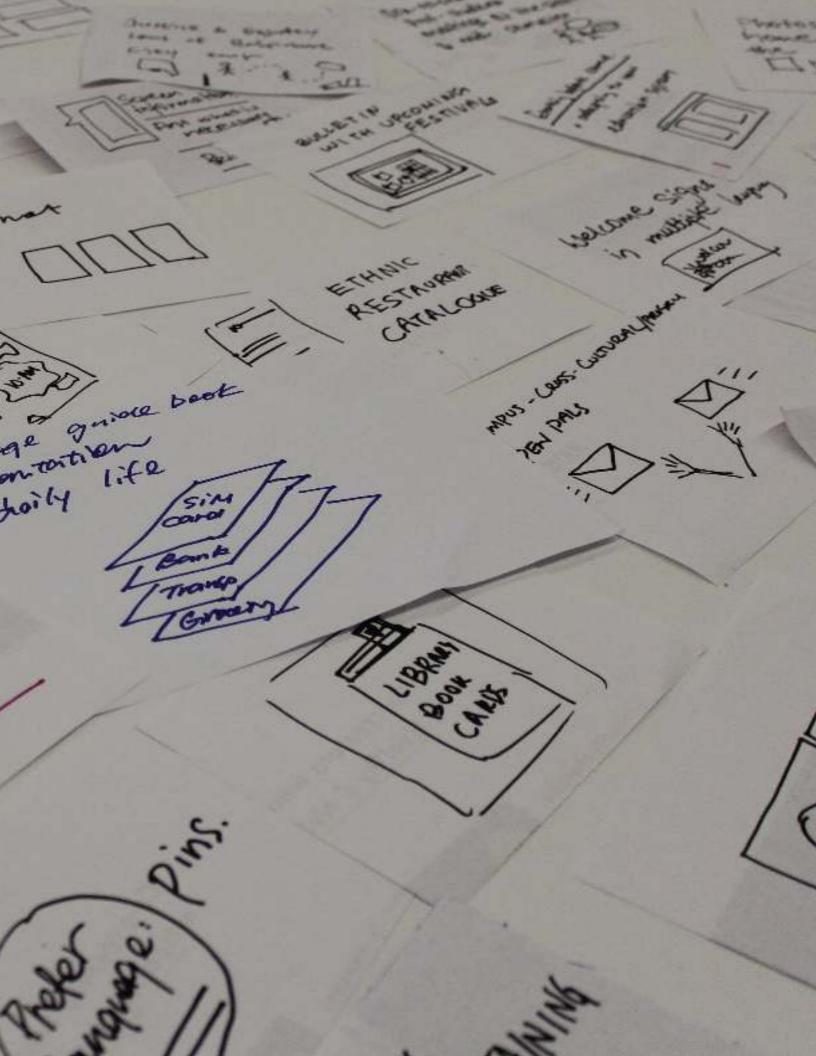
RESPONSE & FEEDBACK

The ideation session began with the opportunity that received the most votes. As a facilitator and a co-participant, I took the collaborators through each of the questions while offering 2 minutes to come up with an idea, and then 2 minutes for prompt- driven brainstorming. This process was followed for every 'How Might We' question.

Towards the end of the session, students were asked for feedback and to comment on the session and informed about future steps.

The session transpired to be a safe space for heart-warming dialogues that emerged from personal narratives that transcended political, social, economic, psychological and cultural touch points.





HOW MIGHT WE CREATE A CULTURE WHERE EVERY STUDENT FEELS VALUED?

THE NEW OPPORTUNITY

CONCEPTUAL PROTOTYPE

The ideation session left us with an opportunity that deeply resonated with every student. I realised that a support system specific to Indian International students was not an inclusive solution. The 'How might we' had to be broadened to embrace students representing all identities. The evolved 'How Might We' is the embodiment of the key insights from the other opportunity statements.

The prototype concept speaks to the new opportunity.

The prototype concepts represent student ideas and are a witness to the ability, passion and desire for students to own their experiences.

Taking into account the limitations that universities face to provide a robust support system for students, the prototype concepts are cost, time and space effective. They also are adaptable to any university context.

The prototypes concepts are:

Framing cultural competency as a pedagogical approach Leveraging the role of faculty as a primary support person was an important theme that emerged. However, the interviews with the university staff members highlighted the disinterested response from faculty regarding offering such support. Most faculty members viewed their responsibility as teaching and offering academic guidance.

Nothing more.

Equipping staff with effective outreach tools Strengthening the university outreach efforts and bridging the communication gaps between student-staff were themes that encouraged a lack of access to information and resources for students.

Cultivating a sense of belonging within students

Cultivating a sense of belonging and creating experiences of intercultural exchange were themes that echoed in the voices of several students. An environment where every student feels their identity, culture and opinions are valued, respected and heard.

THE NEXT STEPS

During the past three months, my work evolved into something more than a project. It manifested into a movement; a movement for every student to reclaim their autonomy, take charge of their circumstances, and demand an environment which cultivates mutual trust, respect and equitable outlook.

Moving forward, I plan to carry this vision forward by creating an online portal with free access to research findings and the prototype concepts as discussed above.

Equipped with the opportunity to closely study the structures and systems at MICA, the portal will also house recommendations specific to MICA's context as a process case study for other academic institutions.

Holistic wellbeing of a student is rooted in involvement. If students feel valued, they can develop healthy coping mechanisms despite structural limitations. The universities need to develop an educational ecosystem that fosters representation, reassurance, and recognition.

Bring the way Educating Professors No. of the second secon to understand differences and provide | Facilitate healthy environments. 2th 1. Martin Acknowledge & discuss * that race is Lay out expectation not the only factor. taking for what the History | accents/cultu REFLECTION cultural INCLUSIVE EXTRESSIONLY HUGE role. worths to a shock as the de AVTONOMY WIPMLETTE Ca learning --ON THEIP 45 WELCOME Voice Humanise INAL I REFERENCE HUMAN S/C. CONNECT WHAT IS 1-) TUDENT INDER ON DOREL ST TUDENT C. VALUE IMP TO isican You? NER WILD 1 onre Manorable . SHARE FI 4 SI. . RAINEN fecognize that its ude mant not just [WHITE] spect mey nould WHAT IS are with cach other. REALLY A PROBLEM ? TIME DEDICATED · TRANSPORTATION · SOCIAL LIFE (CHILLINA) SPECIFICALLY FOR · SUPPORT TO NURTURE MY PASSION + REMINNDER OF T STUDENTS TO

To everyone who has shared space, experience, knowledge, skills, wisdom, trust, belief, frustrations, joy, strengths, limitations, expertise, love, positivity, friendship, challenges, stories, moments of reflection and food with me,

I am forever grateful.

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