

Supporting International Students During University Breaks



By Paula Gil and Zach Jaap



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Submitted to:

International Student Council at Penn
State University

Housing Services at Penn State
University

Housing and Food Services at Penn
State University

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Letter of Transmittal

TO: International Student Council, Housing Services, and Housing and Food Services at Penn State University

FROM: Paula Gil and Zach Jaap, Public Relations and CIENT Majors, Pennsylvania State University

DATE: November 9, 2025

SUBJECT: Supporting International Students During University Breaks, Letter of Transmittal

Supporting international students during university breaks is our goal in this analytical report, prepared as part of our ENGL 202D class at Pennsylvania State University.

The purpose of this report is to examine the challenges that international students face during university breaks regarding housing accessibility, financial barriers, and isolation. Through interviews, surveys, and traditional research, we analyzed Penn State's Break Access/HFS Housing and Food Service contract and compared it to other universities' support systems, therefore exploring opportunities for a community-based solution such as alumni help and hosting programs with local families.

Although Penn State does offer housing options during breaks, our findings point out that many students remain unaware of these resources or find them financially inaccessible. The report includes recommendations to implement programs and improve affordability and emotional support for international students through ISC initiatives and collaboration with the university housing department.

We appreciate your time and consideration of our findings and recommendations. We believe that if these strategies are implemented, they can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for international students who stay on campus during breaks. We would like to thank all survey participants, interviewees and faculty members who contributed their time and insights to this report.

Sincerely,
Paula Gil and Zach Jaap

Executive Summary

Purpose

This report explores the challenges international students go through at Penn State and in many other universities regarding breaks. For many international students, seeing all your peers go back home while you can't be tough for their mental health and alienating. These students cannot travel home because of cost, distance, or even visa issues, leaving them with limited and expensive options. This issue is not only felt by a small portion of the student body. Over 11,000 international students are affected by this and that is just located within Penn State.

Methods/Findings

The purpose of the report is to understand these challenges faced and suggest ways for Penn State to offer better support. We conducted interviews, surveys, and research to gather information from credible sources. Sixteen international students from countries including Colombia, India, Mexico, and more completed our survey. About 75% stay with friends or family, while 25% have used the Break Access/HFS Housing and Food Service contract. One-third didn't know the program existed, and many said it was too expensive. Many students also said that they have felt disconnected and lonely during university breaks.

Interviews

Our interviews confirmed our findings since Mariana and Sofia, two international students from Colombia, stated that communication about housing can be confusing, especially for first- and second-year students, and that staying on campus can feel isolating. They suggested more programs and events in order to connect with international students who stay at State College.

Comparative Research

Research from other schools is the perfect example of a suggested program such as Lawrence University's "Friendship Family Program," where local families host international students during breaks when they can't go home, which very much reduces isolation. Studies from Boston University and CASE.org support the need for mental health and alumni involvement.

Our Recommendation

The report recommends that Penn State improve break housing communication, lower fees, and build programs that connect students with families, peers, and alumni during breaks. By implementing these changes, international students and their families would feel more supported and included year-round.

Analysis and Visuals

Defining the Problem

Every semester, Penn State University goes through a process of closing down its facilities to accommodate student break periods. However, hundreds of international students are left with limited housing and food options, as it seems that Penn State takes its international students and their housing as a subset of their break planning instead of one of the main problems. These students, who make up nearly 10% of the University Park population, often cannot travel home because of distance, cost, or visa restrictions. Domestic students, on the other hand, can more easily return home, and are removed from this issue. Due to the way colleges have scheduled out their break periods, international students face financial stress, loneliness, and a lack of community support during those times.

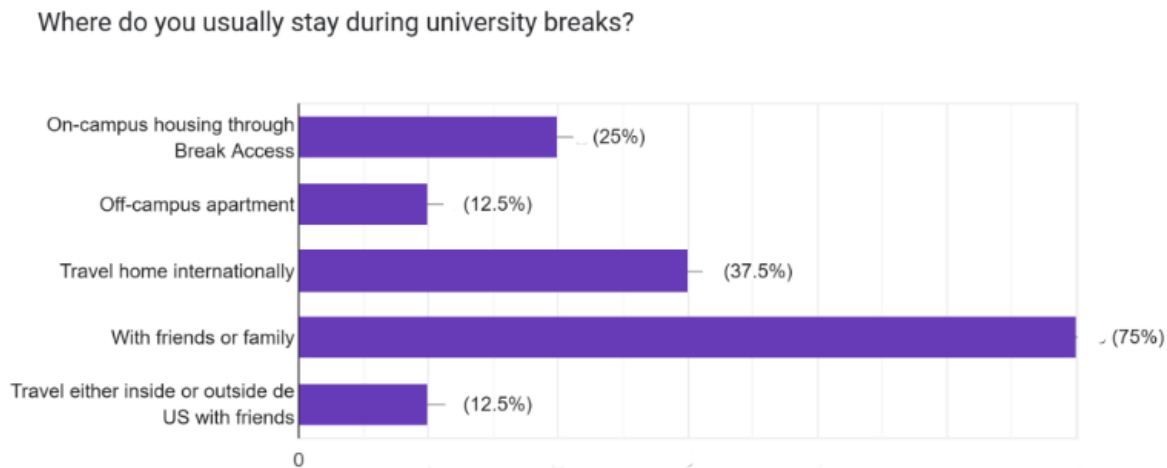
Penn State University does offer a package for international students staying offers the Break Access/Holiday Housing and Food Service (HFS) contract, which costs about **\$1,020 per academic year**, allowing students to remain in designated on-campus housing. However, this fee is an added financial burden on top of already high tuition and living expenses. In addition, dining options during breaks are extremely limited, leaving students to buy their own food or rely on nearby stores that may also close for the holidays.

In our **survey of 16 international students** from countries including India, Colombia, Argentina, and Mexico:

(See both Figure 1 and 2)

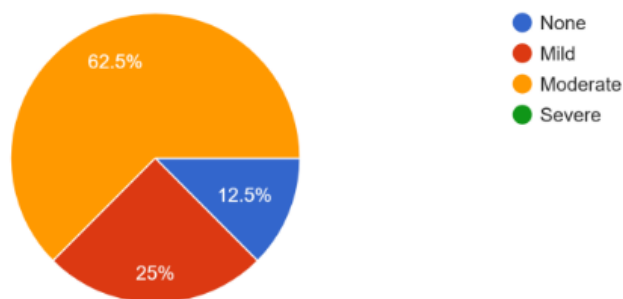
- **75%** said they stay with friends or family during breaks.
- **25%** stay on campus using the Break Access contract.
- **33%** said they were unaware of the Break Access option.
- **62%** said the cost of housing and food during breaks causes financial strain.
- Many students described feelings of **loneliness and isolation** while staying in State College.

(Figure 1: Location of Stay During Breaks)



(Figure 2: International Financial Strain During Breaks)

How much financial strain do you experience due to housing or food costs during breaks?



To further our findings, we also conducted personal interviews of international students. One of our interviews was conducted with, Mariana Puerta, a fourth-year student from Colombia. She explained how State College can feel “lonely,” especially when few people remain on campus. Another student, Sofia Urrego, said the communication process of reaching out to HFS “wasn’t clear,” and overall, the process felt complicated and hard to navigate.

Our interviews conducted really helped to bridge the gap between faceless surveys, and actual in-person student responses. Overall, our collected data gave us insight into the actual affordability, and ease of access into the Penn State HFS program for

international students, while housing technically exists, awareness, affordability, and emotional support are lacking. This disconnect can negatively impact on students' mental health, well-being, and sense of belonging within the Penn State community.

Criteria for a Satisfactory Solution

Our meaningful solution, while trying to stay aligned with Penn State's values, follows a few important criteria that need to be met. Our successful program or policy should focus on three main areas:

1. **Accessibility** – Housing and meal options should be simple and affordable.
2. **Awareness and Communication** – Students need to clearly understand their options through communication from Penn State. HFS should be a key factor in this.
3. **Emotional and Social Support** – Beyond just housing, students should feel connected to the community.

Meeting these goals ensures that international students will have both a community and affordable access during breaks.

Alternative Solutions

Expand Break Access and HFS Housing Program

Penn State could make improvements to the current housing system by lowering fees or offering financial help to students who cannot afford the **\$1020 yearly cost**. Dining options could also stay open on a limited basis or include prepaid meal kits for students staying during breaks.

- **Pros:** Builds on an existing system and can be put in place quickly.
- **Cons:** May still be too expensive for some students and does not create much social interaction.

2. Improve Communication and Awareness

Close to 33% of surveyed students said they did not know the Break Access option existed. Overall, this shows a huge lack of student understanding for current programs. Better communication through email reminders, HFS led sessions and information shared during orientation would make sure students know what is available before each break.

- **Pros:** More people will have knowledge of the program.

- **Cons:** Does not change the price for HFS.
3. **Create a Friendship Family Program**
This model would pair international students with local families who invite them to board in their homes. Overall, would help students feel connected locally.
 - **Pros:** Builds meaningful relationships within local communities.
 - **Cons:** Requires careful planning and reliable volunteers. Additionally, there could be some outstanding risk factors.
 4. **Engage Alumni Support and Donations**
According to the **Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE)**, alumni funding can help universities grow programs like such as the one we discuss here. Penn State has a large Alumni network, both internationally and domestically, therefore a lot of capital could be raised quickly. There has been linked correlation between the raise in Alumni donations over the last few years and their importance to overall college funding (see figure 3).

(Figure 3: Correlation between Alumni and Total Giving)



- **Pros:** Sustainable funding and strengthening alumni student relationships.
- **Cons:** Needs coordination and long-term commitment.

Recommended Solution

Here is our most affective plan:

1. **Enhanced Communication**
Penn State should develop their plan around crystal clear communication that helps international students stay informed with their access to the housing plan.

Housing Services and ISC could work together to send informational emails, host workshops and create multilingual flyers before each break.

2. **Penn State Friendship Family Program**

The university should start a pilot program that connects international students with the possibility of housing with local families within State College. This would encourage community engagement, cultural exchange and emotional well-being.

3. **Alumni and Donor Partnerships for Funding**

By working with the Penn State Alumni Association, both domestic and international, the university could establish a Break Support Fund to help cover housing or dining costs for students staying on campus.

All three main goals, while working in tandem, could make housing more accessible, improving communication and building stronger community support.

Why This Solution Works Best

This combined approach should drastically benefit International Students. Here's how:

- **Affordability:** Donations and partnerships reduce financial strain.
- **Awareness:** Better communication helps bring the program to light within the international student community.
- **Community:** Programs with host families and social events help students feel connected to the local community.
- **Reputation:** Supporting international students improves Penn State's global image and could lead to better alumni donations to the school in the future.

Our surveys and interviews show clear student interest in better housing options and community support. After our research, this plan seems the most plausible to fix these current issues.

Conclusion

Penn State has both the resources and the capital to better fund international students during to better support its international students during university breaks. While the Break Access and HFS Housing program is a good start, there is room to grow. By improving communication, partnering with families and alumni and making housing more affordable, Penn State can make sure every student no matter where they come from feels welcome and supported all year long.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Survey Summary

Survey Title: International Student Break Housing Survey

Date: October 2025

Responses: 16 international students from India, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, and others

Main Results:

- 75% stay with friends or family during breaks
- 25% stay on campus using Break Access housing
- 33% didn't know Break Access existed
- 62% said housing and food costs cause financial stress
- Most suggested more communication, events and support

Appendix B: Research Highlights

Mariana Puerta (Colombia):

"I cannot go home sometimes because the flights are too expensive and it's too long to travel. Campus is quite lonely when most of the students are away, but some of my friends must stay too but we just stay in our apartments most of the time."

Sofia Urrego (Colombia):

"I remember freshman year they would give us 1-2 weeks' notice to send in a note if we wanted to stay in our dorms for the breaks. Now I do not hear from them anymore about support."

Appendix C: Research Notes



Break Access/Holiday Housing

The University has [three closedown periods](#) during the academic year. During these periods, University Housing also closes. Students are not permitted to remain in University Housing during the closures (personal items are permitted to remain in the room).

For students who are unable to leave campus during the [three closedown periods](#), **Break Access/Holiday Housing** is an option that permits the student to stay in their permanent room assignment. There is an additional fee of \$1020 per academic year for Break Access/Holiday Housing for ALL housing options (including Nittany and White Course Apartments).

Once a student has selected a housing option and created the HFS Contract offer, they will be able to indicate housing preferences. If Break Access/Holiday Housing is available in the selected housing option, the student will be able to indicate that Break Access/Holiday Housing is required and the system will automatically add this to their eLiving account.

- **Break Access/Holiday Housing** at Penn State
- **Lawrence University:** “Friendship Family Program” connects students with local families for meals and holidays.
- “A survey by a **Boston University** researcher of nearly 33,000 college students across the country reveals the prevalence of depression and anxiety in young people continues to increase.”
- **CASE Research:** Alumni involvement strengthens funding and student support.

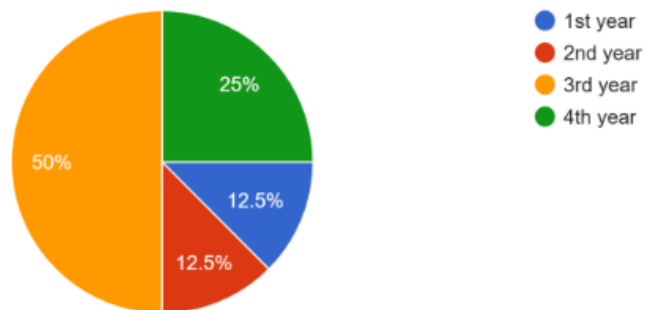


Appendix D:

Additional Survey Graphs

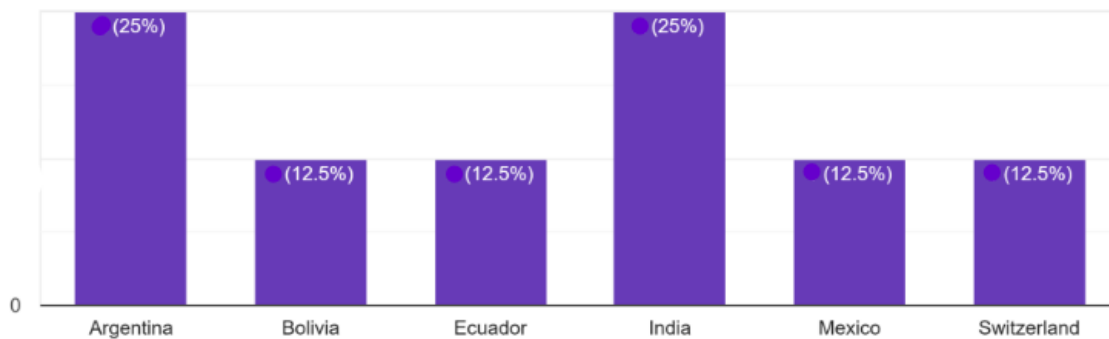
Questionare of current year from international students survey:

What year are you?



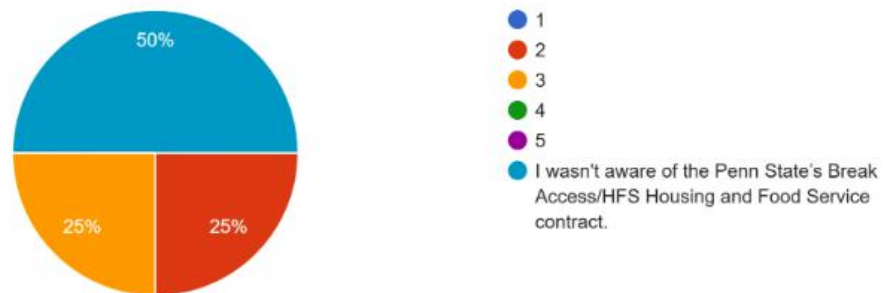
Questionare of country of origin from international students survey:

Where are you from?



Questionare of rating HFS and housing/food contract from international students survey:

On a Scale of 1-5 (5 being the best), how would you rate Penn State's Break Access/HFS Housing and Food Service contract?



Questionare of interpreted support from intenational students survey:

How supported do you feel by Penn State during university breaks?

