



Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 14 (2026), pp. 179-196
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750
(Online) jistudents.org
<https://doi.org/10.32674/mm10gy32>



Navigating Between Worlds: An Autoethnography of a First-Generation International PhD Student's First Year

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ABSTRACT: *The doctoral stage is often described as an isolating and individualistic journey, making belonging particularly challenging. Sense of belonging is closely linked to doctoral persistence, especially in the early stages, when marginality is heightened. As first-generation and international doctoral populations grow, understanding how belonging develops in the first year becomes increasingly important. This study draws on autoethnography and is informed by Van Gennep's rites-of-passage framework to explore the first-semester experience of an international, first-generation PhD student. Through iterative reflection and interpretive analysis, the study traces how belonging emerges through moments of uncertainty, interaction, and adjustment. The findings show that belonging is a dynamic, processual experience that is unevenly negotiated across shifting academic, social, and cultural contexts. The study develops a process-oriented mapping of early belonging formation, extending the literature by foregrounding temporality and transition. The implications highlight the need to cultivate a sense of belonging through relational engagement and participation in academic communities.*

Keywords: Autoethnography, first year, higher education, international first-generation PhD student, sense of belonging

Received: Feb 1, 2026 | **Revised:** April 18, 2026 | **Accepted:** April 29, 2026

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INTRODUCTION

First-generation students are defined as those from families in which neither parent has completed a college degree or higher (Pascarella et al., 2004). Approximately one-third of doctoral degree recipients identify as first-generation students (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2022). In addition, a considerable proportion of doctoral degree recipients in the United States are international students (Curtin et al., 2013).

To understand how international and first-generation doctoral students make sense of their experiences, it is necessary to place their cognition and identity restructuring at the core of discussions of student mobility, resisting the tendency to homogenize these diverse groups (Gargano, 2009). Sense of belonging is often theorized to reflect students' integration into the college system, and is closely linked to academic success, completion (Matheka et al., 2025; O'Keeffe, 2013), and well-being (Morris, 2021). Belonging is also associated with overall satisfaction and persistence (Van Rooij et al., 2021). The first year represents a critical stage of adjustment, during which students move from outsiders to insiders; however, students are particularly vulnerable to marginalization during the initial term (Jeong et al., 2019; Tinto, 1988).

A growing body of literature has examined belonging among first-year international or first-generation doctoral students (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Paik & Braxton, 2026; Park et al., 2023). However, prior literature has largely conceptualized belonging as a static outcome, with limited attention to how it is experienced and negotiated over time, particularly for students navigating intersecting identities.

To address this gap, this study adopts an autoethnographic approach to explore the first-semester experience of an international first-generation PhD student. It explores the process by which belonging develops in the early stages of doctoral education and highlights how this experience is shaped by shifting academic, social, and cultural contexts. The study further contributes to international student research by clarifying how belonging is constructed, disrupted, and sustained in the daily academic environment.

This study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How is a sense of belonging experienced and negotiated during the first semester of doctoral education as an international first-generation PhD student? (2) How do academic and social contexts influence shifts in this sense of belonging over time?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sense of Belonging of First-year PhD Students

In the early stages of postgraduate study, students need to respond to new academic requirements with less structured support, often amid ambiguity and role transition. This transition is accompanied by the challenges of students maintaining well-being and a sense of belonging while managing courses, meeting study expectations, and managing personal responsibilities (Mastronardi

et al., 2025). These challenges are unevenly distributed. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often report reduced social integration, including difficulty establishing academic friendships and a sense of not fitting in with peers (Park et al., 2023). Similarly, international doctoral students tend to experience narrower socialization in their first year, with interactions limited to the academic field (Jeong et al., 2019).

Across the literature, first-year belonging appears to be closely tied to how students access support, form relationships, and experience early recognition in their programs. Limited advising constrains academic and psychosocial support, particularly for first-year students (Marijanovic et al., 2021). At the same time, peer and mentor networks are critical for socialization and persistence, especially for marginalized students (Bayati et al., 2025; Sweitzer, 2009). The institutional environment shapes students' sense of belonging and identity, particularly in a supportive environment (Guo et al., 2018; Mastronardi et al., 2025; Sweitzer, 2009). Finally, early engagement in research and collaboration helps students build recognition and enhance belonging within the academic community (Matthews, 2021).

However, prior literature tends to explore these aspects in isolation, with limited attention to how belonging develops over time, particularly during the early stages of doctoral education.

Sense of Belonging of International PhD Students

International doctoral students' experiences of belonging are complex and often influenced by structural and cultural challenges (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014). International students feel that they do not belong in an academic environment full of unfamiliar norms and expectations (Morris, 2021). At the same time, the sense of belonging is not fixed but is shaped and continuously negotiated by the academic, social, and cultural environment (Paik & Braxton, 2026).

The literature suggests that belonging for international doctoral students is influenced by multiple intertwined dimensions, such as language, relationships, and participation. First, language and cultural adjustment influence students' ability to be accepted and recognized in the academic community (Collins et al., 2022; Mantai, 2019). Second, relationships with advisors and peers are important for doctoral students. However, international students may be less likely to seek faculty support and more likely to rely on peer networks with similar cultural backgrounds. These networks can support integration but may also limit broader engagement (O'Keeffe, 2013; Rivas et al., 2019). Third, participation in research and academic fit can enhance a sense of belonging, especially among those with strong self-efficacy (Matheka et al., 2025). However, the findings are still mixed. International students may have a higher sense of belonging or use academic status to strategically distinguish themselves from other immigrant groups (Bilecen, 2013; Curtin et al., 2013).

At the same time, the literature often explores multiple dimensions of experience in isolation rather than reflecting how these dimensions are integrated to shape the sense of belonging.

Sense of Belonging of First-Generation Graduate Students

First-generation graduate students remain underrepresented and tend to experience lower completion rates than their continuing-generation peers (Council of Graduate Schools, 2022; Gardner, 2013). The belonging of first-generation graduate students is formed by intersecting individual, social, and institutional constraints. First, limited familiarity with academic implicit norms and expectations often creates a gap between the student's background and the postgraduate environment, thereby exacerbating the sense of alienation (Gardner, 2013). Second, this challenge is exacerbated by broader structural and cultural reasons, including economic pressures, limited understanding from family and community members, and the influence of disciplinary and institutional norms. These conditions heighten the uncertainty and identity tension of socialization, which is described as "living in two worlds", and the values of the family and academic community may conflict (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Holley & Gardner, 2012). Third, experiences of otherness are closely related to the impostor phenomenon, an internalized sense of inadequacy that can undermine a sense of belonging, even among high-achieving students (Gardner, 2013).

However, the literature also shows the differences in results. First-generation graduate students may rebuild their academic identities with resilience and persistence (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Empirical findings remain mixed, with some showing no significant differences in sense of belonging between first-year students and their peers, although there are differences in long-term outcomes, such as publication productivity (Roksa et al., 2018). In addition, the literature on first-generation graduate students often emphasizes structural constraints, identity tension, and adaptation strategies but pays less attention to how these elements interact to shape a sense of belonging over time.

Taken together, the literature has largely conceptualized a sense of belonging as a relatively static outcome, often examining structural, relational, and identity-related elements in isolation, while paying limited attention to belonging as a dynamic, evolving process. This gap is particularly significant among international first-generation doctoral students because their experiences span academic, cultural, and personal transformations. To fill this gap, this study adopts a process-oriented perspective to explore how the sense of belonging is negotiated through ever-changing experiences and interactions. Drawing on Van Gennep's (1960) concept of rites of passage, belonging is understood as an evolving process of separation, transition, and incorporation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Van Gennep's rites of passage theory (Tinto, 1994; Van Gennep, 1960) conceptualizes life transitions as movements through three stages: separation,

transition, and incorporation, which reflect shifts in social roles and status. The framework provides a useful perspective for understanding how individuals adapt to the new social and institutional environment.

Specifically, the separation stage is reflected in the students' initial sense of alienation from the original environment. The transition stage depicts an adaptation period, during which students face new expectations, new relationships, and practices while experiencing ambiguity and instability. The incorporation phase refers to the gradual development of a sense of belonging. Students begin to establish connections, gain recognition, and position themselves within the academic community. This framework guides the analysis by providing a process-oriented lens to explore how belonging is continuously negotiated.

This study adopts Van Gennep's rites of passage theory as an analytical perspective to interpret how an international first-generation doctoral student experiences and negotiates a sense of belonging in the first semester. Before fully integrating into new academic communities, students often move through an in-between period, experiencing ongoing shifts in identity, as identity development is understood as a dynamic and context-dependent process (Phan, 2022). While Van Gennep's framework conceptualizes transition as a staged process, subsequent literature extends this view by suggesting that transitions are often more fluid and nonlinear in lived experience (Janusz & Walkiewicz, 2018; Turner, 1969). This liminal condition may be particularly pronounced for international first-generation doctoral students, whose transitions span academic, cultural, and relational domains, further complicating belonging.

Building on the literature that emphasizes the evolving nature of belonging in graduate education (Gardner, 2009; Paik & Braxton, 2026), this study adopts a process-oriented perspective to examine how belonging unfolds across overlapping transitions. While prior literature does not explicitly draw on Van Gennep's framework, it points to belonging as an ongoing and uneven process rather than a linear progression.

RESEARCH METHODS

Autoethnography

As a qualitative methodology, autoethnography integrates personal narrative (auto), cultural interpretation (ethno), and systematic analysis (graphy) to explore meaning-making processes (Ellis et al., 2011). Rather than minimizing subjectivity, this approach treats emotion, positionality, and reflexivity as integral to knowledge production (Adams et al., 2016). It is especially suitable for exploring belonging, which is often tacit, emotionally embedded, and shaped by institutional contexts.

This study adopts an autoethnographic approach that combines analytic and evocative orientations (Anderson, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This approach enables both the evocation of lived experience and interpretive analysis. As a participant embedded in this context, I documented daily interactions, institutional encounters, and moments of inclusion and exclusion through

reflexive fieldnotes, capturing both observed practices and embodied responses. I positioned myself as a fully integrated member researcher by navigating socialization, institutional expectations, and identity. Personal experiences were not isolated stories but rather situational narratives, revealing a broader process within the academic and cultural context.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study is based on data generated during my first semester of doctoral study (Fall 2025), during which I navigated my role as an international first-generation PhD student. Data sources include reflexive journals, class notes, personal writings, and analytic memos capturing critical moments of belonging. These materials capture daily interactions and emotionally meaningful experiences in academic, research, and social contexts.

Data selection focuses on “epiphanies”, which are the critical moments that mark shifts in my sense of belonging. Through iterative engagement with these materials, I revisited fieldnotes and reflections to identify recurring patterns and tensions across experiences. Through repeated and systematic reflection, I compared these epiphanies across context and time, identified how they were later organized into themes and developed into narrative vignettes, revealing how the sense of belonging was negotiated over time. Analysis then occurred through the integration of narrative and reflection, with personal experiences interpreted with a broader theoretical and cultural context (see figure 1).

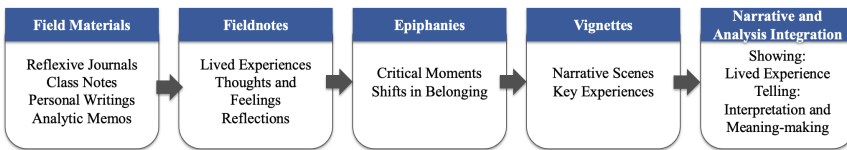


Figure 1: From Field Materials to Narrative and Analysis in Autoethnography

To enhance credibility, I shared my writing with peers who had experienced similar doctoral transitions, which served as a form of peer debriefing, eliciting reflective feedback and fostering resonance. I adopted an autoethnographic approach that balances “showing” and “telling” (Adams et al., 2016), combining narrative accounts with analytic reflection and developing the analysis in continuous dialogue with literature to situate lived experience within broader contexts. Credibility was further enhanced through continuous interaction with the data. The process of writing, revisiting, and reinterpreting fieldnotes allowed patterns to emerge gradually instead of being imposed at a single point. I maintained the transparency of analytical decision-making in reflective memos by recording and explaining changes and moments of uncertainty, ensuring that the analysis is grounded in real experience while allowing continuous reinterpretation.

FINDINGS

I am an international first-generation PhD student, and this was my first time studying abroad. Before that, I had two years of full-time work experience in college student affairs, following my master's degree in education. I had already spent years studying and working away from my hometown since my undergraduate years. However, despite these experiences, this was the first time I found myself struggling with a sense of belonging for such an extended period, which lasted an entire semester at the age of 25+. What follows are moments from this experience as they unfolded over time. These vignettes are presented not only as personal experiences but also as reflections of broader cultural and institutional contexts.

From Silence to Uncertainty: Learning to Speak Without Words

I served as an assistant hall director (AHD) during my first year as a graduate assistant. Thinking back now, it was no doubt a big challenge for an international student. I began the AHD training only two days after I arrived in the U.S., still reeling from jet lag. "Panic" is the word I would use to describe the training.

The room was filled with people of different backgrounds, and conversations were already flowing when I walked in. Most of them seemed to know each other already since they greeted each other naturally and shared what they did during the summer vacation. I caught the greeting, "Hey, how's it going?", but the rest of the conversation slipped past me. I found it hard to keep up with their slang, so I could only smile politely to respond. I tried to say hello to some people who looked Asian like me, but when they said that they were from a state in the United States, I felt gloomy and realized that they were born in the United States, and I seemed to be out of place with these people. In the self-introduction session, people all introduced themselves easily in American pronunciation. No one asked me where I came from or how to pronounce my name. I said to myself, "Thank God, it's finally over." Strangely, that brought me a moment of relief, as I could remain silent without having to speak or justify myself.

As the training progressed, I gradually found that what made me most uneasy was my limited English proficiency. I could follow the lectures, but when it came to speaking, I even felt nervous when the host proposed having a discussion. In group discussions, I often paused, searching for words, while others quickly changed the topic. To mask the embarrassment of failing to express myself, I began to rely more on facial expressions, such as smiling and nodding. I hope that would be enough. I realized I could no longer go back to the world of communication that I was familiar with but couldn't fully participate in this new world. The problem had quietly changed. It was not only about language itself but also about not knowing how to position myself in the new environment. That uncertainty stayed with me throughout the training period.

To offset this sense of alienation, I began to ask people around me for help. I contacted the returning AHD assigned to me by the office. She provided practical advice to improve my oral skills, guided me to understand school life from her

perspective, and encouraged me to adapt. More importantly, she was willing to practice with me. I remember having lunch with her, trying to repeat the phrase, and sometimes stopping to correct myself. Taking this step to seek help made me feel more grounded. It was the first time I believed that I could slowly find a way to enter this new environment. Later, I gradually became more willing to express myself in this English-speaking environment, although I still struggled at times. The initial strong sense of alienation began to ease.

This process reflected a growing separation: the ways I used to communicate no longer worked, which shaped how I position myself as an international first-generation college student in the new environment (Collins et al., 2022; Van Gennep, 1960). In addition, this experience was not only a language adaptation issue but also reflected an unspoken expectation of communication, participation, and cultural familiarity in the academic environment. These norms shaped who could speak freely and who was marginalized, which revealed that the sense of alienation emerged from unequal access to linguistic capital in campus participation.

Between Detachment and Engagement: Seeking a Place in Academic Life

After a month of AHD training, I gradually adapted to life in the new country. Then, I began to take on the main responsibilities of a doctoral student: taking classes and starting to work in the lab. With my previous work experience in providing advice to students, I have cultivated a sense of navigation in campus life with a clear goal: to engage in research after graduation. However, even with this goal, a stable sense of belonging was still out of reach. What I felt was more complex emotions intertwined between the moment of dedication and the lingering sense of alienation.

I often switched back and forth between two spaces: the classroom and the lab. Exposure to multiple critical lenses in the classroom pushed me to reflect more deeply. I began to question how these neoliberal, postcolonial, and equity-oriented perspectives might take shape in practice within existing academic structures. I felt a sense of powerlessness: when I understood the epistemology behind the phenomena I once took for granted, I questioned whether individual efforts contribute to social justice in such a complex environment. In addition, I deeply perceived the national borders of education. In the class here, there was no longer the familiar name of education scholars that I had learned before. Except for the empirical research in the reading materials used to apply the articles of Asian authors, other theoretical frameworks were basically Western. As others shared, I followed along, pausing before speaking, unsure how to enter the conversation situated in the U.S. context. In some moments, I felt included in these conversations; sometimes, I found myself listening more than speaking, trying to linger my thoughts within the unfamiliar academic discourse.

The other part of my academic life unfolded during the lab internship. My advisor, lab research directors, and colleagues were very thoughtful, especially considering my status as a first-year international student. Tasks were usually conveyed in a considerate and respectful manner, such as “Could you please...”,

which created a relaxed atmosphere for me. Personally, even if participation was described as optional, I rarely refused lab-related tasks. On the one hand, I had not learned to refuse the advisor's request; on the other hand, I was eager to improve my research ability. As my work in the lab continued, I found myself involved in multiple projects, often acting in an auxiliary role instead of an independent leader. At the meeting, I occasionally wondered what it meant to be a member of the lab in this way. With the deepening of my participation, I developed a clearer understanding of the operation of the lab. I began to discover the meaning of each project and accumulate experience for myself, instead of the title. I felt more engaged and belonging after I adjusted my positionality and my way of thinking.

In this way, belonging can be understood as part of a transitional phase marked by ambiguity and a sense of being in-between (Van Gennep, 1960). The habit of accepting tasks without refusal and the uncertainty about one's place in the lab also reflected the conflict between personal cultural capital and the existing academic structure. Belonging was constantly negotiated between existing academic norms and personal cognitive adjustment.

Engaging, Doubting, Returning: The Rhythms of Belonging

On the first day of the orientation, my advisor hugged me warmly: "Take your time, enjoy the new environment and everything here, and no stress." The people around me also gave me similar advice. Hearing these words, I didn't agree in my heart. I didn't think it would be my way to lead in the first semester. Moments of enjoyment came and went, but they did not bring lasting well-being. Instead, I found my sense of belonging was gradually formed through engagement in planning, writing, and producing. From the first semester, I began to look for opportunities to develop research ideas. I submitted the first grant application with my peers and participated in three research proposals, all of which revolved around the topics I was interested in. At the time, these efforts were not regarded as formal achievements. What is more important was the whole process itself, even if it was just a small and tentative feeling of participating in the academic field. It was through writing, discussing ideas, and revising drafts, sometimes rereading the same paragraph repeatedly, that I began to find my place in the academic world.

However, even during the period of active participation, I occasionally fell into uncertain moments, especially when progress was stalled. Sometimes, when I encountered logical difficulties when writing or kept thinking and comparing when coding, I was still unsatisfied with the topic I wrote. I found myself staring blankly at the screen, questioning whether the decision to resign before was the right decision. These gloomy moments did not last long, but they would reappear from time to time. Once these feelings arose, I would try to recover myself, such as taking a short break, leaving the desk, or reminding myself that my path was shaped by experience, not a correct answer. Through this continuous self-dialogue, I found my way back to myself.

During this period, the sense of belonging was not a one-time acquisition but a gradual negotiation through the cycle of interaction, doubt, and recovery, reflecting a continuous transition process. At the same time, these cycles were not only personal but were also connected to the expectations of academic work, particularly the need to produce and meet ongoing expectations.

From Isolation to Intimacy: Building Connections at the Age of 26

In my first semester as a doctoral student, I often stopped thinking about what this stage of life meant. At 26, I was no longer at the beginning of my learning journey, yet I had not reached the stability that many of my peers, whether at home or abroad, seemed to have, as they were already married or settled into stable jobs. The new environment, shifting responsibilities, and uncertainty about the future made this period feel particularly tense. “You are so awesome that you can study for the highest degree in the United States!” This was exactly the praise I often heard. However, hearing this, my heart tightened. I felt trapped in a besieged city: the people inside wanted to leave, and the people outside were eager to go in. When others appreciated my path, I envied their stability and predictability. This comparison left me with a subtle sense of anxiety about age and timing, especially after a long day.

The sense of belonging was gradually formed through immersion in the relationship of mutual understanding and sympathy. In my academic life, I was lucky to be surrounded by many fellow international PhD students. At conferences far from home, we shared rooms, watching each other rehearse presentations during the day and staying up talking about our lives. With shared academic backgrounds and research interests, we were companions in navigating uncertainty: We can always understand each other’s meaning tacitly and share experiences to encourage. In my spare time, I often participated in activities organized by international student groups on campus, such as “English Corner”, “DIY mooncake”, and celebrations during Thanksgiving. Sitting around the room with a plate of food in my hand, people listened to one another’s stories, asking questions and showing a genuine curiosity about each other’s cultures. I began to see these organizations as a safety net in moments of loneliness, knowing there was always someone who would listen.

The sense of belonging that emerged in the classroom came from the professor’s care and reminder. In the last class of the semester, the professor brought homemade dishes from her kitchen to celebrate. Despite the difficulty of movement, she bent down and carried the steaming pots out of the car one by one, encouraging us: “Please always remember your unique identity and keep in touch with me during the doctoral journey. I’m very happy to witness all this.” After class, I took the initiative to ask the professor if she could take a photo with me, but I couldn’t help crying. At that moment, I felt that the doctorate I had been pursuing was important: it was seen, and someone cared about it.

Looking back on these moments, I began to see my sense of belonging as moving toward incorporation. It develops through relationships across academic and everyday life but is never fully settled (Ellison, 2011; Gardner & Barnes,

2007; Van Gennep, 1960). Belonging emerged more easily in spaces where shared cultural backgrounds created a sense of familiarity; however, for international students, entering a new environment required navigating unfamiliar norms and expectations, often demanding additional effort. While interactions with faculty and organized activities provided opportunities for connection, they were shaped by existing roles and expectations within the academic setting, reflecting institutional norms that could limit how students participated and were recognized.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION

Through an autoethnographic lens, I mapped my sense of belonging as a first-year international, first-generation PhD student (see Figure 2). Rather than a stable state, belonging shifted through the interplay of internal tensions and external conditions. Moving to a new country, learning to work in a second language, and transitioning from a full-time professional to a doctoral student gradually reshaped how I understood myself in academia. At times, I felt caught in transition, suspended between who I had been and where I might belong (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Morris, 2021).

In this space, belonging felt fragile and often uncertain, shaped by the challenges of being an international first-generation student. It rose and fell with moments of progress and setbacks across academic and social life, taking form through ongoing interactions with peers, advisors, and institutional spaces. At the same time, these experiences were shaped by unspoken expectations, norms, and opportunities in the U.S. academic context, which influenced how to participate and connect. Therefore, belonging was not equally accessible. In this way, belonging remained adaptive, iterative, and enduring, shifting across contexts and interactions and continuously renegotiated rather than ever fully attained (Cena et al., 2021; Rivas et al., 2019).

These findings suggest that belonging can be strengthened through the interaction between external conditions and individual agency. First, actively seek support from significant others, including advisors, instructors, and peers. First-generation and international doctoral students may need additional support when adapting to a new cultural and academic environment (Rivas et al., 2019). Doctoral students can broaden their social circles so that their experiences are not confined to research and classrooms; engaging in diverse activities and student organizations can enrich their lifeworlds. Since support also involves the structural inequities of the system, such as uneven access to resources (Mai et al., 2025), institutions could establish a more transparent and proactive support system rather than assuming that students will take the initiative to seek help. This may include structured peer-coaching programs, centralized resource-navigating platforms, and regular care mechanisms that are not entirely student-initiated. Shifting the support mode from passive to active could reduce the burden on students exploring the system on their own and create more equitable conditions for fostering a sense of belonging.

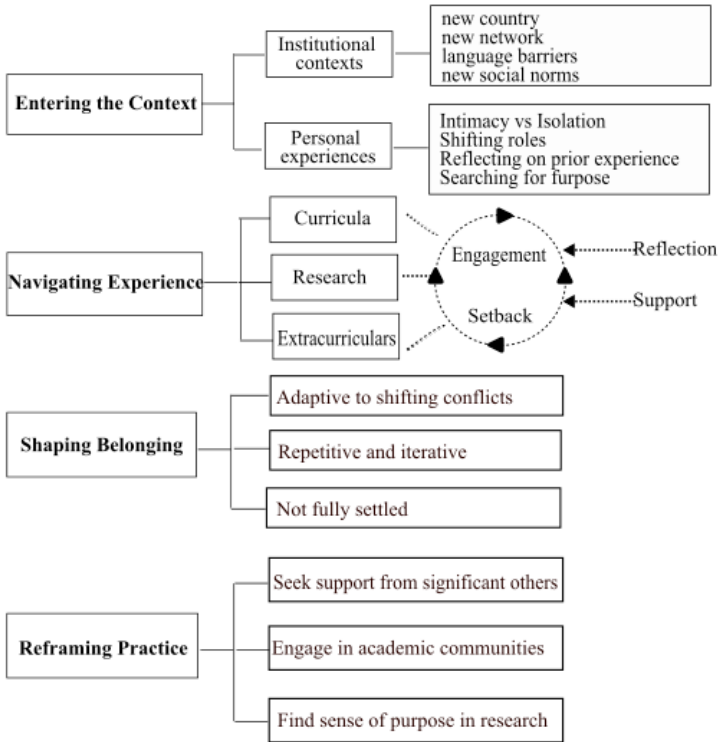


Figure 2: My Sense of Belonging as a First-year International First-generation PhD Student

Second, engage in the scholarly community with a constructive mindset. At the initial stage of enrollment, doctoral students often focus on coursework, reflecting a highly academic lifestyle with limited engagement beyond it (Gardner, 2009). Therefore, actively engaging in the scholarly community can support students’ sense of belonging, which includes collaborating on research, attending conferences, and contributing to academic discussions (Pyhältö & Keskinen, 2012). At the same time, adjusting the mindset toward research and engagement with a reflective and positive attitude is important to scholarly identity formation. In addition, institutions can also support participation by organizing guidance seminars and roundtable discussions to clarify expectations, create an inclusive discussion environment, and recognize diverse forms of contribution. This is especially important for students who are not familiar with academic norms, as prior understanding of the situation can help them feel welcome and confident in the early stages of academics.

Third, find a sense of purpose in the research. The decision to study abroad and even to pursue a PhD is not easy. Students may feel like outsiders because of their underrepresented status and question the decision. This doubt stems from a lack of clarity about how pursuing a PhD can affect career decisions (Gardner,

2013). Clarifying a sense of purpose includes reflecting on why to learn and what learning means and connecting research to a greater life purpose and society (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018). At the same time, institutions could support this process by creating opportunities for students to integrate research with broader social and practical contexts. This may include early participation in community-based projects, providing space to discuss the purpose and impact of the research, and providing feedback to help students see the value of their work beyond academic requirements.

LIMITATION

As an autoethnographic study based on a single researcher-participant, the findings are not intended to be generalizable but rather to provide an in-depth and situated understanding of belonging as a process. While this approach allows for an in-depth exploration of lived experience, it may not capture the full range of experiences across different institutions and cultures. The study focuses on the first semester of doctoral education and therefore does not capture how belonging evolves over time. Future research could build on this study by exploring belonging across multiple stages of doctoral learning and by including diverse student groups to examine the various processes.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that belonging is a dynamic process that unfolds through interactions between individual experiences and broader contexts. Drawing on my experience, I found that challenges such as language barriers, shifting roles, and periods of isolation did not simply diminish over time; rather, they became part of how my sense of belonging developed. In this sense, my journey can be understood as a process of separation, transition, and incorporation (Van Gennep, 1960), through which belonging was continuously negotiated.

For international first-generation doctoral students, belonging emerges through cycles of engagement and uncertainty, shaped by relationships, participation, and meanings attached to academic work. At the same time, these processes are influenced by institutional expectations around participation and productivity, which may not be equally accessible to students. Enhancing belonging therefore requires attention to both individual agency and the structural conditions that shape opportunities for participation.

Acknowledgment

In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation in the following capacity:

- None
- Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- Some sections, with extensive editing
- Entire work, with minimal or no editing

□ Entire work, with extensive editing

This article did not incorporate content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools. There are no sections where AI tools were employed. The article was written in accordance with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

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