



*Journal of International Students*  
Volume 16, Issue 3 (2026), pp. 191-210  
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)  
jistudents.org  
<https://doi.org/10.32674/df9sjd07>

## **“Belonging is a Luxury to Us”: International Graduate Students’ Sense of Belonging at a Predominantly White Institution in the U.S.**

Eun Jung Paik

*Pennsylvania State University, USA*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5560-3894>

Marcelius Braxton

*Pennsylvania State University, USA*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7524-7585>

**ABSTRACT:** *This qualitative study explores international graduate students’ sense of belonging at a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the northeastern United States. Drawing on focus group interviews with 12 students from diverse academic disciplines, this study examines how institutional, academic, and sociocultural contexts shape their experiences of belonging. The analysis identified six key themes: (1) fragmented social belonging; (2) heavy reliance on ethnic communities; (3) academic belonging contingent on funding, advisor support, and research alignment; (4) language proficiency and pressure to prove oneself constantly; (5) performative versus genuine diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts; and (6) the importance of physical and symbolic space. While participants appreciated some aspects of academic support, many reported marginalization related to language-based bias, limited cultural understanding, and underrepresentation. The study highlights the importance of intentional, equity-driven institutional practices and concludes with six actionable recommendations to enhance the academic and social integration of international graduate students.*

**Keywords:** international students, higher education, sense of belonging, predominantly white institution, focus group, academic belonging

**Received:** 15 May 2025 | **Revised:** 21, August 2025 | **Accepted:** Oct 10, 2025

**Corresponding Author:** Eun Jung Paik, Pennsylvania State University, USA  
eup86@psu.edu

**Academic Editor:** Elena de Prada Creo, University of Vigo, Spain

**How to Cite (APA):** Paik, E. J., & Braxton, M. (2026). “Belonging is a luxury to us”: International graduate students’ sense of belonging at a predominantly white institution in the U.S. *Journal of International Students*, 16(3), 191-210. <https://doi.org/10.32674/df9sjd07>

---

## INTRODUCTION

The United States is one of the top host destinations for international students worldwide. Over the last 20 years, the number of international graduate students at institutions of higher education in the United States has grown significantly. This trend is reflected in recent enrollment data: according to the Institute of International Education (2024), the number of international graduate students enrolled at U.S. institutions reached 502,291 in the 2023-2024 academic year. This group represents approximately 45% of the total international student population (1,126,690), making them the largest segment compared with undergraduates, nondegree students, and those on optional practical training (OPT). Notably, the population of international graduate students has increased significantly over the past two decades, increasing from 274,310 in the 2003-2004 academic year to 502,291 in the 2023-2024 academic year, an increase of approximately 83.1%. Given their substantial and growing representation, it is crucial to pay closer attention to the experiences, challenges, and support systems that shape international graduate students’ sense of belonging within U.S. higher education institutions.

In higher education settings, a sense of belonging has been closely associated with academic motivation, success, and persistence (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Hausmann et al., 2009; Hoffman et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2019). Moreover, Drezner and Pizmony-Levy (2021) reported a strong relationship between graduate students’ sense of belonging and their long-term alumni engagement, including an increased likelihood of financial contributions. Thus, fostering a sense of belonging during graduate studies not only improves students’ immediate academic experiences but also strengthens their sustained commitment and involvement with their higher education institutions (Drezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2021). However, several scholars mention that most research on international students in higher education has focused primarily on undergraduates (Koo & Nyunt, 2022; Mohamad & Manning, 2024; Van Horne et al., 2018). There is a significant gap in our understanding of the unique experiences and challenges related to a sense of belonging among international graduate students. International graduate students may face distinct belonging-related issues that differ from both domestic graduate students and international undergraduates. Prior research noted that many international students, particularly those who are

also racialized as people of color in the U.S. context, may face challenges of misrecognition or conflation with domestic racialized groups (Yeo et al., 2019). While our study did not explicitly collect data related to racial identity, we are aware of the multifaceted nature of identity and how these dynamics may influence international graduate students' experiences at a predominantly white institution (PWI).

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of international graduate students enrolled at a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the northeastern U.S. This research seeks to address the following research question: How do international graduate students at a PWI in the northeastern United States perceive and experience a sense of belonging within both the academic and social domains?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this section, we review prior literature on the unique challenges international graduate students face in U.S. higher education, paying particular attention to the factors that shape their sense of belonging.

### **Challenges Faced by International Graduate Students**

Prior studies have identified several challenges that international graduate students commonly face, including language barriers, economic hardships, cultural differences, social isolation, and difficulties navigating the educational environment (Koo et al., 2024). Compared with undergraduate students, international graduate students often perceive campus environments as less culturally relevant, primarily due to fewer opportunities for knowledge exchange about their home cultures, limited involvement in community service activities, and reduced cross-cultural engagement (Glass et al., 2022). Additionally, international graduate students frequently manage intense academic pressures while simultaneously addressing concerns related to their immigration status and experiencing both overt and subtle forms of discrimination (Herridge et al., 2023; Koo et al., 2024; Ra & Trusty, 2017; Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022). Further challenges stem from the dynamics between international and domestic students.

International students in the U.S. are sometimes perceived as passive and weak due to their limited English proficiency and unfamiliarity with American norms (Lee & Rice, 2007). International students' language abilities are frequently scrutinized, limiting their ability to participate fully and assuming leadership roles in academic settings (Seithers et al., 2022). These dynamics are further complicated by processes of racialization, in which international students, particularly students of color, are subjected to the racial microaggressions and exclusionary behaviors that domestic minority students experience (Yeo et al., 2019). Research also reveals that international students' experiences of discrimination vary by region of origin: students from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East often report racial or cultural discrimination,

whereas those from Europe, Canada, and New Zealand rarely encounter such treatment (Lee & Rice, 2007).

### **International Graduate Students' Sense of Belonging**

While the literature on international graduate students' sense of belonging remains relatively limited, existing studies emphasize culturally responsive environments, the central role of advisor and faculty support and academic success, and leisure activities in shaping their experiences of belonging (Antonio & Baek, 2022; Curtin et al., 2013; Glass et al., 2015; Le et al., 2016; Findlay et al., 2025; Tewari et al., 2024; Yuan et al., 2024).

Previous studies have noted that international graduate students report equal or even higher levels of departmental belonging than their domestic peers do (Curtin et al., 2013; Le et al., 2016; Li & Wu, 2025). In a qualitative study by Le et al. (2016), international female graduate students described their Midwestern U.S. university as having a welcoming atmosphere for women, characterized by openness, friendliness, and nonjudgmental attitudes, which they viewed as critical to their successful transition and sense of belonging.

Advisor and faculty support play pivotal roles in shaping the academic self-concept, well-being, and sense of belonging of international graduate students (Antonio & Baek, 2022; Curtin et al., 2013; Findlay et al., 2025; Glass et al., 2015; Yuan et al., 2024). Positive relationships with advisors facilitate students' academic and cultural adjustment, enhancing their professional growth and fostering belonging in academic departments (Glass et al., 2015; Yuan et al., 2024). Moreover, academic integration shapes the sense of belonging among international graduate students rather than broader social integration. Studies have shown that belonging is frequently tied to academic success, research productivity, and relationships within departmental communities rather than campus-wide social life (Antonio & Baek, 2022; Findlay et al., 2025). Departmental diversity occasionally facilitates ethnic-based social groups, inadvertently reinforcing national divisions and limiting broader community integration. (Antonio & Baek, 2022). While international graduate students may perceive their institutions as welcoming, many still struggle to form meaningful social connections beyond academic spaces, especially in highly competitive environments (Antonio & Baek, 2022).

Recent studies have also highlighted the importance of leisure activities in enhancing the sense of belonging among international graduate students. For example, Tewari et al. (2024) emphasized the significant influence of the availability and accessibility of leisure opportunities on the integration experiences and connectedness of international graduate students. Discovering new leisure activities post-migration positively influences integration, fostering stronger community ties and belonging (Tewari et al., 2024).

The literature on international graduate students' belonging primarily emphasizes academic contexts (e.g., faculty/advisor relationships, departmental environments) and highlights what facilitates belonging (e.g., supportive departments, leisure activities) but offers limited insight into how international

graduate students navigate and negotiate their belonging in daily practice, particularly in relation to structural factors such as nationality and the broader institutional and social landscape of predominantly white institutions. Thus, a significant gap remains in understanding how international graduate students develop meaningful social connections and foster a sense of belonging across both academic and social domains. Our findings aim to offer further insights for U.S. higher education administrators on how to better support international graduate students' experiences of belonging.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

To guide our exploration of international graduate students' sense of belonging, we draw on a conceptual framework informed by multiple scholars' definitions and models of belonging. McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe belonging as the feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, fostering confidence that individual needs will be met through mutual commitment. Strayhorn (2019) frames sense of belonging as a basic human need and motivational force that significantly influences individual behavior. In higher education, a sense of belonging is often characterized by mutual social support, interpersonal connectedness, and reciprocal feelings of being valued, respected, and cared for by community members, including peers, faculty, and staff. Expanding on these foundations, Nunn (2021) proposes a tripartite model of college belonging consisting of (1) academic belonging, defined as feeling comfortable, confident, and supported in academic settings; (2) social belonging, referring to interpersonal relationships and friendships; and (3) campus-community belonging, which captures a student's sense of feeling "at home" in an environment that affirms their identities and preferences. Although Nunn's work focuses on first-year, first-generation undergraduate students, her conceptual distinction across three dimensions of belonging offers useful guidance for our analysis. Together, these frameworks, which were initially applied to domestic undergraduate populations, provide useful theoretical grounding for exploring how international graduate students experience and make sense of belonging in U.S. higher education.

### **DATA AND METHODS**

The institution under study is a large, public land-grant research university located in the northeastern United States. Situated in a rural context, this university attracts a diverse student population, including approximately 9,000 international students, and is classified as a predominantly white institution (PWI), with 69% of its student body identified as White.

We adopted a qualitative research methodology to explore international graduate students' sense of belonging and lived experiences on campus. Specifically, we conducted in-person focus group interviews (Hennink, 2014) to explore participants' sense of belonging and lived experiences on campus, as focus groups facilitate collective narratives, synthesizing individual perspectives into broader group understandings distinct from those typically obtained in one-

on-one interviews (Hennink, 2014). This method is particularly suitable for exploring context-specific experiences, making it ideal for examining how international graduate students define and experience belonging. We intentionally designed smaller focus groups, consisting of three to five participants, to foster deeper conversations and allow each individual sufficient time to share their experiences comfortably. However, due to participant cancellations, some groups ultimately included only two or three students.

### **Participant Selection and Recruitment**

Purposive sampling was used for this study (Robinson, 2014) to recruit international students who were born and raised in foreign countries and were currently studying in the United States on temporary student visas (e.g., F1 student visas) during the 2024-2025 academic year. All focus group interviews were conducted during the Fall 2024 semester between October and November 2024. Purposive sampling involves an intentional and iterative process of selecting participants based on their countries of origin and relevant experiences of belonging.

To recruit participants, the researchers distributed an email and a QR code through the student listserv managed by the global and student affairs offices, international student organizations, and social media platforms within their professional networks. The provided link included detailed information about the study's purpose, inclusion criteria, and a Qualtrics survey link. Interested participants could access the informed consent form through the Qualtrics survey, consent to participate, and provide basic demographic information. Researchers then contacted eligible participants directly to schedule focus groups. Semi-structured focus group interview questions were designed to explore participants' backgrounds, personal definitions of a sense of belonging, and perceptions and experiences related to belonging within the university context. The interviews were limited to a maximum of 1.5 hours and were recorded and transcribed verbatim via transcription software.

A total of four focus groups were conducted separately for master's and doctoral students, involving 12 participants overall. Conducting separate groups ensured that participants felt comfortable discussing experiences specific to their respective degree levels. To maintain anonymity, participants selected their own pseudonyms, and their majors were generalized by department or college affiliation. Table 1 summarizes participant details, including pseudonyms, gender, degree pursued, department/college, country of origin, academic year, and focus group number.

Following data collection, two researchers independently analyzed the transcripts through a structured coding approach involving three stages: open coding (initial identification of categories), axial coding (defining central categories aligned with theoretical frameworks), and selective coding (integrating categories into a cohesive narrative) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The emergent themes were then systematically categorized to provide nuanced context and insights into participants' experiences at a PWI. This study received an exempt

determination from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and a formal determination letter was issued prior to data collection.

**Table 1: Focus Group Participant Information**

Pseudonym	Gender	Degree Pursued	Department/ College	Country of Origin	Year	Focus Group
Vish	M	Doctoral	Engineering	India	5+	FG1
Ryan	M	Doctoral	Engineering	Bangladesh	3	FG1
Cathy	F	Doctoral	Liberal Arts	China	4	FG1
Lu	F	Doctoral	Business	China	5+	FG1
Kim	M	Doctoral	Education	South Korea	4	FG2
Gauri	F	Doctoral	Agricultural Sciences	India	2	FG2
Ruby	F	Doctoral	Health and Human Development	Iran	2	FG2
Nancy	F	Master	Science	China	2	FG3
Jay	M	Master	Engineering	India	2	FG3
Amanda	F	Master	Business	Russia	2	FG3
Alice	F	Master	Education	China	2	FG4
Sathiyajith	M	Master	Engineering	India	2	FG4

*Note.* M = Male, F = Female. "5+" indicates students in their fifth year or beyond. FG = Focus Group. All names are pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Two researchers conducted this study together. The primary researcher identifies as a South Korean woman, a doctoral candidate currently studying within the U.S. higher education system in the field of social sciences. Her positionality as an international graduate student in U.S. higher education shapes her understanding of belonging and informs her approach to moderating discussions on this topic. The other member of the research team is a Black American man who serves as a student affairs professional, teaching professor, and doctoral student, whose work and research revolve around the intersection and impact of social change and belonging. His positionality of belonging to a racially minoritized population and having attended and worked at numerous predominantly white institutions informs his understanding of belonging.

### **FINDINGS**

This study examined how international graduate students who participated in our focus groups described their sense of belonging at the university in which they are enrolled. In the following section, we present six themes derived from our analysis. Our findings show that the experiences of these participants reflect (1)

fragmented social belonging, (2) heavy reliance on ethnic communities, (3) academic belonging that is conditional on funding, advisor support, and research alignment, (4) language proficiency and constant proving, (5) performative versus genuine approaches to DEI, and (6) space matters.

### **Fragmented Social Belonging**

Many of our participants shared experiences reflecting fragmented social belonging. Most participants expressed expectations of forming meaningful social connections within their departments upon enrolling in their programs. However, few described having department culture and interactions within their own department and academic programs that fostered a genuine sense of belonging. They characterized interpersonal interactions as primarily “professional or academic,” contributing to their perception of social belonging as fragmented and lacking in wholesomeness. Vish, a doctoral student from India, shared:

Department-wise, relationships are more professional or academic rather than social. Everyone is nice, and I like my department, but even though that’s where I probably should belong, I still feel a disconnect.

Ryan, a doctoral student from Bangladesh, also noted difficulties in forming meaningful connections at departmental gatherings:

Professors and students, there are quite a lot of them, but it’s also scattered. I know people from my lab, but I don’t know many others from different professors’ research groups. So, we don’t really get the social gatherings or something. The department tries to organize social events, but people usually try to avoid those stuff and participation is low. People often just come for the food and leave... I’ve tried attending a few department events to make connections, but usually it’s the people who know each other, they usually hang out and it’s difficult. People tend to stick with those they already know, and it can feel awkward to approach new groups.

Despite Ryan’s efforts to participate in the events held by the department, Ryan found it challenging to engage socially, perceiving these meetings as primarily beneficial to students who already had established interpersonal connections. The participants shared that there seems to be an implicit American culture of socializing in which international students perceived it to be difficult to navigate, especially in the early years, overwhelming the participants from non-U.S. backgrounds.

Ruby, a doctoral student from Iran, shared that she faced significant challenges related to academic and social belonging within her department as well, primarily because of the lack of diversity and cultural representation. Ruby shared feeling isolated and disconnected due to her status as an international and first Iranian student in the department, which is predominantly White, female, and American. She articulated feeling labeled or reduced to a single identity, being known primarily as “that Iranian girl.” Ruby further described the difficulty she

experienced in connecting socially, as her peers gravitated toward their existing groups, sharing cultural references and humor that was unfamiliar to her. The absence of shared experiences and common cultural backgrounds created substantial barriers to having meaningful conversations or forming genuine relationships.

Additionally, some participants experienced further challenges related to intersectional identities, such as parenthood. Cathy, a doctoral student from China who moved to the U.S. with her family and who identified as a mother, shared her distinctive experience:

I'm not just a student here, I have a family, and I'm a mom. In my department, for the past three years, I've been the only student parent. I don't feel a strong sense of belonging with my cohort because my colleagues are all single... For example, they want to go to the park, but I can't always do that with a child. Or I want to participate in family-related activities, but they're not interested in those things. They are younger, single, and in a different stage of life. So, in terms of department life, I don't really feel a sense of belonging.

Cathy's experience underscores the intersectional nature of belonging. Differences in life stages and family responsibilities as parents further complicate the experiences of international graduate students in their academic and social groups. The participants also shared how institutional culture more broadly centers on undergraduate student life, leaving graduate students with international backgrounds to feel sidelined. Jay, a master's student from India, shared:

I remember the first week during orientation; it was truly fun; I got to meet many different clubs. However, I noticed that most of the clubs were heavily biased toward undergraduate students, which makes sense because they are more actively involved.

Jay's reflection highlights a structural imbalance in student engagement, where institutional programming often presumes that participants have ample free time and similar social needs, assumptions that do not align with the reality of many international graduate students. Cathy further emphasized the cumulative pressures that make belonging especially difficult for international graduate students:

For international [graduate] students, balance is really hard. This is not just because we are Ph.D. students with a heavy workload and much pressure every day but also because of the visa status.

She explained that, unlike their U.S. citizen peers, graduation students with international backgrounds must constantly navigate immigration requirements and often feel limited in their postgraduate options:

They are U.S. citizens, so they can stay here as long as they want. Even if they don't publish papers, they can go into industry with no problem. ... But for international [graduate] students, if you want to stay in the

U.S. after graduating from your Ph.D. program, the only option, or at least the most common option, is academia, find a stable job as a faculty because they provide the visa sponsorship to stay here. ... International [graduate] students are disadvantaged in this respect, so they have to push themselves harder beyond the normal pressures that Ph.D. students already face.

Cathy later described belonging as a “luxury good.” For international graduate students, cultivating a sense of belonging can feel out of reach amid academic, financial, and immigration-related pressures. One can pursue belonging, but it often means trading off the chances of being able to stay in the U.S. As a result, many international graduate students ultimately focus more on being productive in research and academic life than on social life.

### **Heavy Reliance on Ethnic and International Peer Networks**

The participants frequently emphasized their heavy reliance on ethnic and international peer networks for emotional and practical support, which created culturally familiar and safe spaces for them. Alice, a master’s student from China, described how important these ethnic peer groups were for her sense of belonging:

I’m in a group of Chinese students at [this university], and I feel a very strong sense of belonging in this group. Since we belong to the same culture, we can communicate without much effort. That’s a moment I feel like I truly belong here.

Such ease and comfort, derived from shared cultural backgrounds, allowed many focus group participants, such as Alice, to communicate effortlessly, thus fostering genuine feelings of belonging within their respective ethnic communities. For Alice, a sense of belonging meant feeling “safe and comfortable, free to say whatever I want without pretending to be another person or trying to fit in.” However, she also noted that her sense of belonging was significantly challenged when interacting with American peers. The participants frequently found cross-cultural friendships, particularly with American peers, challenging due to perceived social barriers and cultural differences. Alice elaborated:

Most of my cohort is American. Sometimes, when a professor asks a question, they react faster and understand the background better. I’m not given the chance to even speak, which makes me feel invisible and silent. There always seems to be barriers between them and me. When they tell jokes and everyone else starts to laugh, I feel quite isolated and not a sense of belonging.

Amanda, another master’s student from Russia, noted that her friendships predominantly consisted of other international students rather than American peers. Given that Russian students are not widely represented among the international student population at this university, Amanda found it easier to

connect broadly with students from other international backgrounds. She mentioned that although she had few American friends, these individuals were typically second-generation Americans whose parents had immigrated to the United States.

Once participants gravitated toward ethnic communities outside their academic programs, these communities often transformed into social enclaves. These enclaves became crucial sources of information, emotional support, and practical assistance. The participants described these ethnic communities as spaces where they felt safe and comfortable asking even trivial questions that might otherwise be challenging to address in broader institutional contexts. Most participants reported having community-based digital platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, WeChat, and KakaoTalk, to facilitate communication among those groups. These platforms were used extensively for sharing information related to moving, renting, subleasing, exchanging free items, addressing trivial inquiries about flights, and finding carshare opportunities or carpools to the nearest major international airport around holidays and breaks. Furthermore, the participants emphasized the essential role these networks played in navigating institutional challenges, particularly visa and immigration processes, which often added considerable stress and pressure.

### **Conditional Academic Belonging**

The participants described academic belonging as highly conditional and significantly influenced by tangible factors such as funding, the quality of mentorship from academic advisors and other faculty members, and alignment between their research interests and departmental research priorities. Funding was frequently identified as crucial for academic validation, substantially contributing to participants' sense of belonging. Kim, a doctoral student from Korea, particularly highlighted how funding in the form of assistantships impacted his sense of academic belonging:

In my first year, I struggled a lot because I came here without an assistantship, and I think it's not extremely rare in Education, as this is a field with limited resources. The majority of the guys in my department are teaching assistants and not just TAs, but instructors as well. Now I teach two courses as a solo instructor. But back then, since I didn't have an assistantship, for example, we had this colloquium class where people talked about their experiences as first-time college instructors. Part of me understood their feelings of discomfort, their difficulties and challenges, but the other part of me also felt jealous about that because I didn't have the assistantship.

Without an assistantship, Kim felt disconnected from peers who shared challenges and teaching-related experiences that were built on assistantship experiences. Consequently, he was unable to fully participate in or empathize with others and the discussions about teaching tips and difficulties associated with such experiences, amplifying his feelings of exclusion during departmental

conversations. A lack of funding was notably more common among master's-level participants, who consistently emphasized that securing funding significantly enhanced their perception of academic belonging.

The participants also shared the critical role of advisor support and mentorship. The presence or absence of supportive mentorship shaped how they perceived their sense of belonging. Gauri, a doctoral student from India, noted notable differences in mentorship styles among graduate course instructors. Whereas her previous institution's faculty members encouraged debate and critical dialogue in an intellectually safe environment, her current institution's faculty members did not seem to foster such openness. This shift negatively impacted on her sense of belonging, leaving her feeling unsupported and intellectually constrained. Similarly, Ruby noted that even though her research aligns closely with her personal identity and interests, the predominantly white departmental atmosphere and curricula, which are primarily geared toward American contexts, complicated her academic belonging. Ruby emphasized that despite her intellectual connection to her research topic, the lack of representation and cultural inclusivity within her department intensified feelings of alienation, limiting her ability to fully experience academic belonging. Gauri also emphasized significant differences between her master's and Ph.D. programs:

Here, at least in my program, none of the advisors in their own experience have worked outside of the U.S. or China... They have [international] students who are trying to get work done in another country, but they themselves do not have the network, power, connections, or data to support our work.

Gauri described her current Ph.D. department as primarily focused on research within U.S. contexts, limiting faculty networks, data availability, and intellectual support for research beyond these regions. As a result, she felt academically isolated, describing her situation as "battling alone." This disconnect prompted her to seek intellectual support from her co-ethnic peers in the master's program. Kim similarly reflected:

When your research aligns closely with what the professors prioritize, you feel recognized and supported. If it doesn't, you constantly struggle to justify your presence and your academic value.

Doctoral participants in non-STEM fields have suggested that academic belonging is conditional upon the alignment between students' research interests and those of their advisors or departments. This poses particular challenges for international doctoral students, who must negotiate the knowledge and perspectives they bring from their home countries within departments, which are primarily centered on U.S.-focused scholarship. When their intellectual contributions fall outside these prevailing research priorities, students often feel less valued and experience a diminished sense of academic belonging.

## **Language Proficiency and Constant Proving**

The participants also shared that language proficiency was important to their academic belonging, with international participants repeatedly feeling compelled to prove their intellectual competencies. The participants articulated the challenges of navigating biases that equated language fluency with intellectual capability, reinforcing perceptions that a lack of language proficiency indicates limited knowledge or expertise. Amanda, a master's student, clearly captured this dynamic:

People perceive foreigners' lack of language as a lack of knowledge. However, once they realize that I understand the subject well and have good ideas, they start valuing my input.

Amanda further explained her experience of initially feeling excluded in classroom interactions due to language barriers, noting that meaningful engagement from peers and professors came only after demonstrating her knowledge and abilities:

I do feel a sense of belonging in class, but it took some time. I had to prove myself. Therefore, all professors and colleagues at the beginning of classes were mostly avoiding, not avoiding exactly, but not communicating much. However, after seeing my work and performance, they started engaging with me more. Eventually, classmates would come to me for help. Americans did that too, but not initially, it took time. I needed to prove myself.

Other participants in the master's program also highlighted how overcoming initial skepticism required them to prove themselves to classmates and instructors. Jay echoed this experience, sharing similar pressures in his role as a teaching assistant (TA). Jay described feeling the need to establish credibility with undergraduate students in his class early in his TA assignment.

In my second semester, I had to TA for a course. Initially, I felt I had to prove myself because the students might have been judging me a bit since I was not a native speaker and was an international student. I had to prove myself in the first few weeks to ensure that they knew I was qualified enough and understood the topic I was teaching or helping them with.

## **Performative Versus Genuine Approaches to DEI**

Some participants critiqued institutional diversity efforts as superficial, particularly in how they relate to international students. These efforts were often described as performative gestures that did not foster meaningful belonging. Kim, a doctoral student, shared:

When people talk about diversity, inclusion... I think people usually try to celebrate differences rather than focus on commonality. I have

attended some international diversity-inclusive kind of events, but I stopped going because many of those events were so focused on differences. We talk about our food, our holidays, things like that. However, that doesn't really mean anything to me. I eat kimchi; I don't wear shoes in my house, but what does that do for me to communicate with other people in this diverse setting? I think that has to be changed in a more authentic and meaningful way.

Kim's reflection underscores the limitations of events that emphasize cultural displays without fostering genuine dialogue or mutual understanding. While acknowledging that visible differences such as food and traditions may be well-intentioned, participants expressed a desire for diversity initiatives that build connections across cultural lines through shared experiences and deeper communication. Other participants emphasized the need for environments where international graduate students are seen, understood, and respected in their full complexity. Jay reflected on his experience with campus events designed specifically for international students, which can unintentionally reinforce separation from the broader campus community:

If events are just for international students... it still feels like a separate experience. You don't feel the same sense of connection to the larger community or to the region.

Amanda extended the conversation by shifting the focus from cultural awareness to cultural action. She reflected:

It made me realize that simply being aware of different cultures isn't enough. Cultural intelligence involves interaction, adaptation, and deeper understanding. If more students had access to that kind of training, it could be beneficial.

Amanda noted that the burden of building belonging is often placed disproportionately on international students. She advocated for more reciprocal and shared responsibility, suggesting that cultural intelligence education should be extended to all students, not just those from international backgrounds.

### **Space Matters**

Nancy, a master's student from China, highlighted the importance of physical and social spaces in shaping international graduate students' sense of belonging. While she appreciated the presence of the campus cultural center located in the student union building, she noted that it was predominantly used by a single affinity group, which made her feel uncertain about whether she was welcome there. As an "Asian student", she expressed hesitation about entering a space that did not reflect visible diversity, even though she believed the group was welcoming. She understood the space to be dedicated to Black students and felt that it should be respected as such.

Since the [student union building] is already a central space for students, it would be nice to have a designated area for international students from different cultures. It could be a place where students work while also interacting with others and may even include cultural displays or introductions to different cultures. ... I think I would feel more involved if there were a space dedicated to it.

Nancy's reflection illustrates how space functions not only as a practical resource but also as a symbolic indicator of visibility and recognition. For international graduate students, the presence or absence of dedicated, inclusive spaces sends implicit messages about their place within the university community. A culturally inclusive space can affirm international students' membership in the institution and foster cross-cultural engagement, whereas a lack of such space may reinforce feelings of marginalization or ambiguity about belonging. Several participants also described how access to departmental workspaces shaped their sense of belonging. Kim explained that not receiving a graduate assistantship in his first year also meant that he was not assigned a departmental workspace, unlike other students in his cohort. The absence of a designated on-campus space reinforced feelings of exclusion and limited his connection to the department. For many doctoral participants, physical space was not just about convenience. Rather, it provided an opportunity to engage in meaningful social interactions and connect with others who share similar identities.

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

The findings reveal that international graduate students at a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the northeastern U.S. experience belonging as a multifaceted concept shaped by both structural and interpersonal factors. Academic belonging is often conditional on access to funding, advisor support, and alignment with departmental research priorities. Social belonging remains fragmented, particularly within departmental contexts, leading many students to rely on co-ethnic and international peer networks for emotional and practical support. The participants also described ongoing challenges related to language proficiency and the need to demonstrate their academic competence continually. The participants viewed institutional diversity and inclusion efforts as performative and expressed a desire for more authentic and reciprocal engagement. Ultimately, physical and social spaces, such as cultural centers and workspaces, were recognized as crucial for fostering a sense of connection and belonging within the broader academic community.

Our findings suggest that academic factors significantly influence focus group participants' sense of belonging (Antonio & Baek, 2022), often overshadowing opportunities for broader social integration. The participants overwhelmingly prioritized academic belonging. Notably, for both doctoral and master's participants, a sense of belonging was closely tied to indicators such as academic success, competence, departmental integration, funding, research alignment, and supportive mentorship from advisors. Our study extends prior

findings by demonstrating the relevance of academic belonging across multiple disciplines, among both male and female international students, and at both the doctoral and master's levels. Similarly, Li and Wu (2025) reported that international graduate students' relationships with academic advisors and peers tended to revolve around academic troubleshooting, updates on research progress, and navigating program requirements. However, our findings show that participants still desired a sense of belonging outside their labs and departments. They felt limited for two main reasons: campus programs were often designed primarily for undergraduate students, and participating in social activities felt like a "luxury good," something accessible to others but not to them given their academic, financial, and immigration-related pressures.

The findings of this study contrast with those reported by Le et al. (2016), who described positive experiences of belonging to and thriving on the U.S. campus among female international graduate participants. Our findings align more closely with those of Garcia (2020), who emphasized how institutional belonging for racially minoritized students at PWIs is often tenuous, whereas microsystems such as student subcultures or affinity-based organizations become essential sites of belonging. Similarly, the international graduate students in our study often found meaningful social belonging through ethnic or international peer networks and struggled to feel included in institutional spaces at a PWI that centered white, or domestic in general, and undergraduate norms.

This reliance on ethnic communities serves as a critical support system but also creates ethnic social enclaves (Kaul & Renzulli, 2022), resulting in noticeable divisions not only between domestic and international students but also between undergraduate and graduate students. Such divisions amplify feelings of isolation, leaving participants socially cornered and limited in their opportunities for broader integration. Additionally, some participants emphasized the essential role these networks were important for them but also often added considerable stress and pressure. Moreover, reliance on ethnic peer networks is not equally accessible to all international graduate students. Students from countries with a strong presence on campus (e.g., China and India) may benefit from established social networks and community infrastructure, whereas students from underrepresented national or regional backgrounds (e.g., Iran and Russia) may experience greater isolation and develop broader international or cross-ethnic support systems instead. Our findings also reveal that motherhood significantly shapes international graduate students' experiences of belonging, as student parents such as Cathy feel excluded from departmental life because of differing social priorities (Koo & Nyunt, 2022) and a lack of peer understanding.

Our study has several limitations. The study did not explicitly collect data related to racial identity, so we do not present findings related to the racialized experiences of international doctoral students at PWI. Furthermore, our study does not capture the experiences of international graduate students regarding the shifting governmental and political climate toward international students, as the focus groups were conducted in October and November 2024, prior to the U.S. presidential election results. Watt et al. (2018) suggested that changes in the political climate can significantly impact marginalized student populations,

potentially affecting their sense of safety, campus engagement, and academic participation. Future research could address these limitations by examining the racialized experiences of international graduate students at PWI, as well as how political events and changes in governmental policy and immigration policy shape their experiences and sense of belonging.

## **Recommendations**

On the basis of the findings of our study, we offer six recommendations to better support international graduate students' sense of belonging. While this research was conducted at a single PWI in a specific region and is not intended to be broadly generalized, our recommendations contribute to ongoing efforts in U.S. higher education to increase inclusion and equity in graduate education.

To support international graduate students' sense of belonging, we recommend a combination of institutional and departmental actions. First, institutions should move beyond symbolic diversity efforts by embedding equity, inclusion, and belonging into everyday campus practices. Second, institutions should provide ongoing professional development that emphasizes cultural proficiency, inclusive mentoring, and awareness of the unique challenges international students face. Third, institutions must address language-based bias through DEIB training, which promotes communication equity. Fourth, departments should foster inclusive cultures by actively including international voices, ensuring equitable mentoring, and challenging assumptions tied to language or nationality. Fifth, clear and transparent communication about funding and professional opportunities is essential, as these factors significantly impact students' academic belonging. Sixth, institutions and departments should create welcoming physical and social spaces where international graduate students feel included, supported, and connected.

## **Acknowledgment**

*This study was supported by the Center for Social Change and Belonging at Pennsylvania State University, which provided funding for participant compensation for those who participated in the focus group sessions. The authors are grateful for this support.*

*In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation with 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 incorporates content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools, used specifically for the correction of minor grammatical checks. The use of AI tools complied 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.*

## REFERENCES

- Antonio, A. L., & Baek, C. (2022). Beyond survey measures: Exploring international male graduate students' sense of belonging in electrical engineering. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education, 13*(2), 132–150. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-02-2021-0015>
- Curtin, N., Stewart, A. J., & Ostrove, J. M. (2013). Fostering academic self-concept: Advisor support and sense of belonging among international and domestic graduate students. *American Educational Research Journal, 50*(1), 108–137.
- Drezner, N. D., & Pizmony-Levy, O. (2021). I belong, therefore, I give? The impact of sense of belonging on graduate student alumni engagement. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 50*(4), 753–777. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764020977687>
- Findlay, M., Wan, G., Press, A., Jones, K. E., & Maranto, M. (2025). Hidden struggles: Increasing international graduate students' sense of belonging. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education, 17*(1), 167–181.
- Garcia, C. E. (2020). Belonging in a predominantly White institution: The role of membership in Latina/o sororities and fraternities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 13*(2), 181–193. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000126>
- García, H. A., Garza, T., & Yeaton-Hromada, K. (2019). Do we belong? A conceptual model for international students' sense of belonging in community colleges. *Journal of International Students, 9*(2), 460–487. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i2.669>
- Glass, C. R., Heng, T. T., & Hou, M. (2022). Intersections of identity and status in international students' perceptions of culturally engaging campus environments. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 89*, 19–29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2022.05.003>
- Glass, C. R., Kociolek, E., Wongtrirat, R., Lynch, R. J., & Cong, S. (2015). Uneven experiences: The impact of student–faculty interactions on international students' sense of belonging. *Journal of International Students, 5*(4), 353–367.
- Gopalan, M., & Brady, S. T. (2020). College students' sense of belonging: A national perspective. *Educational Researcher, 49*(2), 134–137. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19897622>
- Hausmann, L. R. M., Ye, F., Schofield, J. W., & Woods, R. L. (2009). Sense of belonging and persistence in White and African American first-year students. *Research in Higher Education, 50*(7), 649–669. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-009-9137-8>
- Hennink, M. M. (2014). *Focus group discussions*. Oxford University Press.
- Herridge, A. S., Al-Sharif, M. A. B., Leong, M. C., & Garcia, H. (2023). LGBTQIA+ international students and socioemotional well-being: Impact of intersectionality on perceived experiences and campus engagement. *Journal of International Students, 13*(2), 95–113. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v13i2.4553>

- Hoffman, M., Richmond, J., Morrow, J., & Salomone, K. (2002). Investigating “sense of belonging” in first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 4(3), 227–256.
- Institute of International Education. (2024). *International Students By Academic Level, 1999/00—2023/24*. Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange. <http://www.opendoorsdata.org>
- Kaul, V., & Renzulli, L. (2022). The duality of persistence: Academic enclaves and international students’ -aspirations to stay in the U.S. *Journal of International Students*, 12(2), 467-488. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12i2.3198>
- Koo, K., Bista, K., & Al-Sharif, M. A. B. (2024). “From surviving to thriving” next steps for international graduate students: A call to action. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20623>
- Koo, K. K., & Nyunt, G. (2022). Mom, Asian international student, doctoral student, and in-between: Exploring Asian international doctoral student mothers’ mental well-being. *Journal of College Student Development*, 63(4), 414–431.
- Le, A. T., LaCost, B. Y., & Wismer, M. (2016). International female graduate students’ experience at a midwestern university: Sense of belonging and identity development. *Journal of International Students*, 6(1), 128–152.
- Lee, J. J., & Rice, C. (2007). Welcome to America? International student perceptions of discrimination. *Higher Education*, 53(3), 381–409. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-005-4508-3>
- Li, L., & Wu, J. (2025). Beyond the barriers: Examining the socialization experiences of STEM international doctoral students in research-intensive universities. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-02-2025-0012>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (Fourth edition). John Wiley & Sons.
- Mohamad, D., & Manning, K. D. (2024). What does it mean to ‘belong’?: A narrative literature review of ‘belongingness’ among international higher education students. *Journal of International Students*, 14(1), 21–37. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v15i1.5783>
- Nunn, L. M., 1975-. (2021). *College belonging: How first-year and first-generation students navigate campus life*. Rutgers University Press.
- Ra, Y.-A., & Trusty, J. (2017). Impact of social support and coping on acculturation and acculturative stress of east Asian international students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 45(4), 276–291. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12078>
- Robinson, R. S. (2014). Purposive Sampling. In A. C. Michalos (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (pp. 5243–5245). Springer Netherlands. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5\\_2337](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_2337)
- Seithers, L., Amankulova, Z., & Johnstone, C. (2022). “Rules you have to know”: International and domestic student encounters with institutional habitus through group work. *Journal of International Students*, 12(2), 384–402 <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12i2.1651>

- Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students* (Second edition). Routledge.
- Sustarsic, M., & Zhang, J. (2022). Navigating through uncertainty in the era of COVID-19: Experiences of international graduate students in the United States. *Journal of International Students, 12*(1), 61–80.  
<https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12i1.3305>
- Tewari, K., Lundin, E., Cho, S.-J., Du, X., Oliveira, J. R., & Fernandez, M. (2024). International graduate students' perspectives on sense of belonging in leisure. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education, 35*, Article e100505. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2024.100505>
- Van Horne, S., Lin, S., Anson, M., & Jacobson, W. (2018). Engagement, satisfaction, and belonging of international undergraduates at U.S. research universities. *Journal of International Students, 8*(1), 351–374.  
<https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i1.169>
- Watt, S., Candal, C. C., & Quiason, M. (2018). Marginalization and fear? Concealed carry and campus climate in the Trump era. *Women, Gender, and Families of Color, 6*(1), 126–132.  
<https://doi.org/10.5406/womgenfamcol.6.1.0126>
- Yeo, H. T., Mendenhall, R., Harwood, S. A., & Hunt, M. B. (2019). Asian international student and Asian American student: Mistaken identity and racial microaggressions. *Journal of International Students, 9*(1), 39–65.  
<https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i1.278>
- Yuan, X., Yang, Y., & McGill, C. M. (2024). The impact of academic advising activities on international students' sense of belonging. *Journal of International Students, 14*(1), 424–448.

---

#### Author bios

**EUN JUNG PAIK** is a doctoral candidate in the Educational Theory and Policy Program at Pennsylvania State University. She has professional experience in Korean and U.S. higher education institutions, specializing in international admissions and student services. Her research interests include diversity, a sense of belonging, transnational migration, multiculturalism, and underrepresented students in K-16+. Eun Jung can be reached at [eup86@psu.edu](mailto:eup86@psu.edu).

**MARCELIUS BRAXTON** is the director of the Center for Social Change and Belonging at Penn State University. He also holds an affiliate academic appointment as an Associate Teaching Professor of African Studies and Philosophy at Penn State. He is currently a doctoral candidate in D.Ed. (Doctor of Education) program at Penn State University. His research interests include the intersections of race, law, education, and philosophy as well as social justice, a sense of belonging, activism, and liberation. Marcelius can be reached at [mxb6032@psu.edu](mailto:mxb6032@psu.edu).

---