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## Faculty Support and Belonging among International Students: Chain Mediation of Perceived Campus Climate and Self-Efficacy

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study examined how faculty support influences international students' sense of belonging, with a focus on the mediating roles of perceived campus climate and self-efficacy. A total of 512 international students at four public universities in Iran completed online questionnaires. Using Hayes' PROCESS Model 6, the results showed that faculty support was positively associated with perceived campus climate, which, in turn, predicted students' sense of belonging. However, the direct effect of faculty support on belonging and the indirect effect through self-efficacy alone, were not statistically significant. Although campus climate was positively associated with self-efficacy, full mediation was not supported. These findings highlight the key role of a supportive campus climate in enhancing international students' sense of belonging, whereas self-efficacy plays a less central role. This study emphasizes the importance of institutional and interpersonal factors in promoting the socioemotional integration of international students in higher education.*

**Keywords:** Campus climate, Faculty support, Higher education, International students, Self-efficacy, Sense of belonging

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## INTRODUCTION

International students encounter a range of academic, social, and psychological challenges while studying abroad (Hajar et al., 2025; Tajvar et al., 2024; Xue et al., 2025). Language barriers often hinder comprehension and engagement in coursework, leading to lower academic performance (Smith, 2020). Adjusting to a new culture and building social networks can also cause isolation and loneliness (Girmay & Singh, 2019). Moreover, separation from family and familiar environments may increase stress, anxiety, and depression (Lin et al., 2022). These challenges are influenced by factors such as cultural distance, language proficiency, and the availability of support services, while inclusive campus climates and supportive networks can buffer their negative effects.

In Iran, the number of international students, particularly those from neighboring countries such as Afghanistan, has grown in recent years. The experiences of these students are deeply shaped by sociopolitical contexts that affect access, inclusion, and adaptation. Afghan students, in particular, represent one of the largest and longest-standing refugee and migrant populations in Iran. They face substantial barriers in higher education, including restricted admission pathways, financial hardship, and social discrimination, as well as requirements to renounce refugee status to pursue university education. Policy analyses and empirical studies indicate that although access to primary education has improved for many Afghans, higher education remains limited by administrative, legal, and economic constraints that undermine integration and psychosocial well-being (Seddighi et al., 2024; Naseh et al., 2018).

A sense of belonging is a crucial psychological and social resource for international students, facilitating academic and social adjustment and mitigating the effects of these challenges. Strayhorn (2018) defines sense of belonging as students' perceived social support and connection to the institution, encompassing feelings of acceptance, value, and recognition as members of the university community. A strong sense of belonging has been consistently linked to increased motivation, self-efficacy, engagement, academic performance, and psychological well-being (Pedler et al., 2022; Samadieh & Rezaei, 2024; Samadieh & Tanhayeh Reshvanloo, 2023; van Kessel et al., 2025).

Given that belonging is multifaceted and context sensitive, it is essential to examine the academic (e.g., curriculum design, engagement), individual (e.g., basic psychological needs), and social (e.g., relationships, support, cultural empathy, and perceptions of climate) factors that shape it (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Samadieh et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b; Shalka & Leal, 2022; Yong et al., 2025; Yuan et al., 2024). Despite the growing body of research, most studies have been conducted in Western higher education contexts, with limited attention to

underrepresented groups such as racial and ethnic minorities, low-income students, and international students (Strayhorn, 2018). The present study addresses this gap by examining both individual and contextual predictors of international students' sense of belonging within a non-Western educational context. The following hypotheses were proposed:

- H<sub>1</sub>: Faculty support has a significant effect on students' sense of university belonging.
- H<sub>2</sub>: Campus climate mediates the relationship between faculty support and belonging.
- H<sub>3</sub>: Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between faculty support and university belonging.
- H<sub>4</sub>: Perceived campus climate and self-efficacy serially mediate the effect of faculty support on institutional belonging.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Faculty Support and Belonging to the University**

Faculty–student relationships are a key social factor influencing students' sense of belonging in higher education (Glass et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2023). Faculty members influence not only students' academic development but also their personal and emotional adjustment to university life. As mentors and role models, they provide both academic and interpersonal support through accessibility, encouragement, constructive feedback, and sensitivity to individual needs (Tinto, 2012). Empirical studies indicate that supportive faculty–student relationships foster greater motivation, engagement, positive emotions, and retention (Bordbar, 2021; Raboca & Carbuarean, 2024; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). According to Tinto's (2012) theory of student integration, belonging reflects students' perceived membership in the academic community and is substantially shaped by institutional support. Meaningful faculty interactions enhance students' academic success and commitment to their institutions (Severiens & Schmidt, 2009). However, few studies have explored these dynamics in non-Western contexts. In particular, no prior study conducted in Iran has examined how faculty–student relationships contribute to international students' sense of belonging, especially among Afghan students. Furthermore, existing research has often conceptualized faculty–student relationships in terms of interaction frequency rather than quality. For example, Kim et al. (2023) measured faculty contact based on how often students discussed academic, personal, or career issues with faculty. Although informative, such measures may overlook the relational depth and perceived support that form the emotional basis of belonging. To address this conceptual gap, the present study examines perceived faculty support as a qualitative dimension of interaction that may more effectively promote students' sense of belonging.

## **The Mediating Role of Perceived Campus Climate**

Faculty support is widely recognized for enhancing motivation and academic outcomes, yet the mechanisms linking faculty support to university belonging remain underexplored, particularly in non-Western contexts. Prior research has examined individual mediators such as self-efficacy, resilience, and academic emotions (Guo et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2024), but these studies are limited by their focus on homogeneous populations (primarily Chinese students), reliance on individual-level factors, and small effect sizes for the direct and indirect roles of faculty support. Evidence from Iranian contexts suggests that organizational factors may exert stronger influence on life satisfaction (Soltani et al., 2020) and belonging (Samadieh et al., 2023a), underscoring the need to examine contextual mediators such as perceived campus climate.

The perceived campus climate reflects students' subjective evaluation of the institutional environment, including inclusivity, equity, and opportunities for academic and social engagement (McQueen et al., 2023). Faculty support shapes these perceptions, as accessibility, mentorship, and encouragement foster a welcoming and equitable climate (Souza et al., 2019). For international students, a supportive climate mitigates isolation, enhances peer and faculty interactions, and strengthens a sense of belonging (Jean-Francois, 2019). Empirical evidence indicates that discriminatory climates increase stress and anxiety, whereas inclusive climates promote engagement, performance, and institutional attachment (Huang & Fan, 2024; Berhanu & Sewagegn, 2024; Shalka & Leal, 2022). Collectively, these findings suggest that the perceived campus climate may mediate the relationship between faculty support and students' sense of belonging.

## **The Mediating Role of General Self-Efficacy**

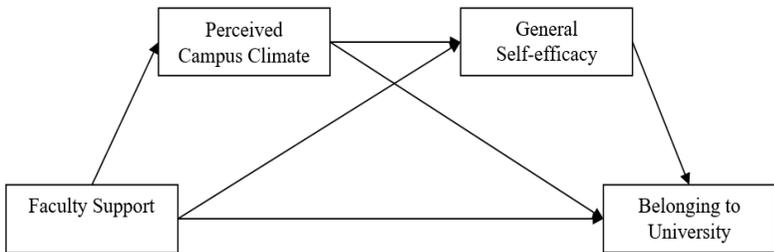
In addition to contextual influences, individual factors may also shape students' sense of university belonging. General self-efficacy, defined as a broad and stable belief in one's ability to manage a variety of challenging demands (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), represents a potential psychological mediator. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) posits that self-efficacy develops through mastery experiences, observational learning, and verbal persuasion, processes often reinforced through faculty mentorship, encouragement, and guidance (Daliri et al., 2021; Nhien, 2025). Previous research has primarily examined academic self-efficacy as a mediator and focused on outcomes such as engagement or learning performance (Guo et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2024). Two notable gaps emerge from this literature. First, general self-efficacy, which captures broader confidence in navigating academic, social, and personal challenges, has received limited attention. Second, the mechanisms through which faculty support promotes university affiliation or a sense of belonging, particularly among international students, have rarely been investigated. Addressing these gaps is critical for understanding how faculty support fosters stronger institutional attachment.

## **The Serial Mediating Role of Perceived Campus Climate and Self-Efficacy**

Research indicates that the campus climate can influence students' self-efficacy (Museus et al., 2021; Zysberg & Schwabsky, 2021). Specifically, a welcoming environment may foster students' confidence in their academic abilities (Zysberg & Schwabsky, 2021). Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) highlights that self-efficacy is shaped through social modeling, verbal persuasion, and emotional regulation. Thus, when students perceive the campus as nurturing and resourceful, they may internalize stronger self-efficacy (Abd-Elmoteleb & Saha, 2013). Similarly, the study-demand-resources model suggests that a positive climate provides academic and social resources that mitigate stress and reinforce self-efficacy (Berhanu & Sewagegn, 2024). Faculty behaviors such as mentorship, accessibility, and encouragement can foster a supportive environment where students feel valued (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1997). These perceptions function as motivational resources that enhance self-efficacy by reducing uncertainty and offering mastery experiences (Chemers et al., 2001). In turn, stronger self-efficacy contributes to belonging by motivating active engagement in academic and social contexts, encouraging faculty interactions, and supporting peer relationships (Hausmann et al., 2007). While the literature has examined the individual roles of campus climate and self-efficacy in student outcomes, few studies have investigated their combined mediating effect between faculty support and institutional belonging. This gap is particularly evident among international students, who may experience unique challenges and require tailored support mechanisms.

### **The Current Study**

This study addresses a gap in the literature by examining a serial mediation model in which perceived campus climate and self-efficacy jointly mediate the effect of faculty support on international students' university belonging. This approach highlights the sequential interplay of social, environmental, and psychological factors, providing a nuanced understanding of how faculty support indirectly shapes students' academic and socioemotional adjustment, particularly in non-Western higher education contexts. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model.



**Figure 1: Hypothesized Model for Predicting Belonging to University**

## METHOD

### Sampling and Participants

This applied study employed a descriptive-correlational design. The sample included 512 Afghan international students (180 women, 332 men) aged 17–50 years ( $M = 25.28$ ,  $SD = 4.96$ ) who were enrolled in four public universities in Iran during the 2024–2025 academic year. Most participants were single (80.1%,  $n = 413$ ), and 19.3% ( $n = 99$ ) were married. In terms of education level, 2.7% were associate degree students, 49.1% undergraduate, 29.1% master's, and 18.0% doctoral students. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Inclusion criteria were Afghan nationality, active enrollment, and informed consent; exclusion criteria included incomplete or invalid responses. Data collection followed ethical standards outlined in the Checklist for Reporting Results of Internet E-Surveys (CHERRIES) (Sischka et al., 2022; Turk et al., 2018). The questionnaires were administered via the Porsline platform and distributed through social networks. Participation was voluntary, and the online invitation described the study purpose, confidentiality, and data use. Informed electronic consent was obtained. Measures such as browser cookies prevented duplicate submissions and ensured data integrity. Participants could skip items or withdraw at any time. All procedures adhered to ethical principles for online research.

### Measures

#### *Perceived Faculty Support*

To assess international students' perceptions of faculty support, the Perceived faculty support subscale was employed. This subscale is derived from the instrument developed by Hoffman et al. (2002) to investigate factors influencing student retention and attrition. Comprising six items, the scale uses a five-point Likert format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating more favorable perceptions of faculty support. An example item is "I feel comfortable asking a professor for help with a personal problem." In Hoffman et al.'s original study (2002), the subscale demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87. In the current study, the reliability of the subscale was similarly high, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89.

#### *Students' Perceptions of Atmosphere*

In this study, perceived campus climate refers to students' subjective evaluation of the university's academic and social environment, particularly its supportiveness, inclusivity, and conduciveness to learning and interpersonal growth. Consistent with previous research (Hurtado et al., 2012; Museus, 2014), campus climate was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising academic and social facets. The academic facet reflects perceptions of

instructional quality, fairness, and intellectual engagement, whereas the social facet captures students' feelings of comfort, inclusion, and peer support within the university community. To assess this construct, the Persian version of the Student Perception of the Climate subscale of the Dundee Ready Education Environment Measure (DREEM; Roff et al., 1997) was employed. This 12-item subscale, rated on a five-point Likert scale (0 = completely disagree to 4 = completely agree), measures students' perceptions of the educational environment, with higher scores indicating a more positive climate. The original DREEM demonstrated excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .91$ ), while the Persian adaptation validated by Fallah et al. (2012) showed strong reliability ( $\alpha = .93$ ). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha for this subscale was .78, indicating acceptable reliability. The items assess key dimensions such as the teaching-learning atmosphere ("The atmosphere is relaxed during teaching"), interpersonal comfort ("I feel comfortable in teaching sessions socially"), and overall satisfaction ("The enjoyment outweighs the stress of the course"), reflecting both academic and social dimensions that together promote engagement, motivation, and a sense of belonging.

### ***The General Self-Efficacy Scale***

To assess perceived general self-efficacy in managing everyday challenges, the General Self-Efficacy Scale developed by Jerusalem and Schwarzer (1992) was employed. This unidimensional instrument consists of 10 items, each rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 4 (completely true of me), with total scores ranging from 10 to 40. None of the items are reverse-scored. Higher total scores reflect stronger self-efficacy beliefs. The scale has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across diverse populations, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.76 to 0.90 in samples from 23 countries. Its criterion validity has been established through consistent positive correlations with optimism and positive emotions, and negative correlations with depression, anxiety, stress, burnout, and physical health complaints. A sample item is "I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort." In the present study, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89.

### ***The Belonging to University Scale***

The Belonging to University Scale (Karaman and Cırak, 2017), adapted and validated in Persian by Samadieh et al. (2023), was used to assess students' sense of belonging. The 12-item scale includes three subscales—motivation, expectations, and identification—rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = never to 5 = always), with total scores ranging from 12 to 60. Higher scores indicate greater belonging. Convergent validity was supported by positive correlations with the General Basic Psychological Needs Satisfaction Scale. Prior reliability coefficients ranged from 0.58 to 0.67 (subscales) and 0.76 to 0.80 (total). In this

study, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.60. An example item is “I feel that I am a valuable person at this university.”

The data were analyzed via SPSS version 26.0. To examine the serial mediation effects, Model 6 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS was utilized. The significance of the indirect effects was assessed using a bootstrap method with 5,000 resamples, applying a 95% confidence interval.

**RESULTS**

Initially, the dataset was screened, and missing values were imputed using the mean substitution method. Univariate outliers were assessed through box plot analysis, which indicated the absence of any extreme values. Multivariate outliers were subsequently evaluated via the Mahalanobis distance. This analysis was conducted on the basis of the model’s degrees of freedom (i.e., the number of predictor variables) and assessed using the chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) distribution at a significance threshold of  $p < 0.001$  (Meyers et al., 2016). The findings revealed no evidence of multivariate outliers. The descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations of the Study Variables (N = 512)**

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Faculty Support	1			
2. Campus Climate	0.540**	1		
3. Self-efficacy	0.197**	0.257**	1	
4. Belonging	0.333**	0.551**	0.109*	1
<i>M</i>	19.30	25.63	27.80	36.18
<i>SD</i>	4.631	6.461	5.709	5.004

Note. *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation. \*\* $p < .01$  \* $p < .05$

As shown in Table 1, all the study variables were significantly intercorrelated in the expected directions. Faculty support demonstrated a strong positive association with students’ perceptions of campus climate ( $r = 0.540, p < 0.01$ ) and a moderate relationship with belonging to university ( $r = 0.333, p < 0.01$ ). Campus climate was positively related to both self-efficacy ( $r = 0.257, p < 0.01$ ) and belonging ( $r = 0.551, p < 0.01$ ), indicating that students who perceived their university environment more favorably also reported greater confidence in their abilities and a stronger sense of connection to the institution. Although the association between self-efficacy and belonging was weaker ( $r = 0.109, p < 0.05$ ), it remained statistically significant. Overall, the correlation pattern supports the hypothesized relationships among faculty support, campus climate, self-efficacy, and university belonging.

### Testing the Serial Mediation Effect

Prior to mediation analysis, statistical assumptions were evaluated. Skewness and kurtosis values within  $\pm 2$  indicated univariate normality (Schumacker & Lomax, 2012). The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test supported multivariate normality. Harman's single-factor test revealed no major common method bias (24.43% variance < 50%). Tolerance (0.68–0.93) and variance inflation factor (VIF; 1.08–1.46) values indicated no multicollinearity (Stevens, 2002). The Durbin–Watson statistic (1.83) confirmed the independence of the residuals (Neter et al., 1996).

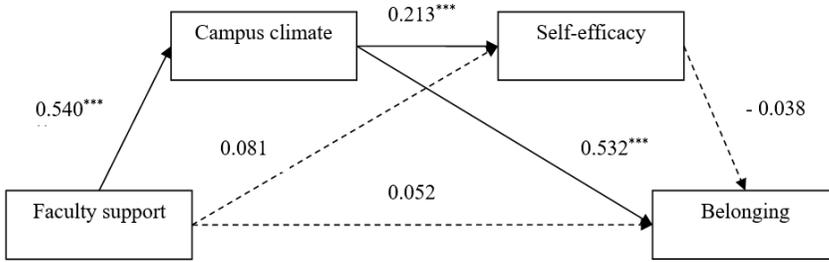
The serial mediation analysis was carried out using Model 6 of the PROCESS macro in SPSS. As presented in Table 2, faculty support was positively and significantly associated with students' perceptions of the university climate ( $\beta = 0.540, p < 0.001$ ). Moreover, campus climate emerged as a significant positive predictor of students' sense of belonging ( $\beta = 0.533, p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that students who perceive the university climate more favorably report a stronger sense of belonging. However, the direct effect of faculty support on university belonging was not significant ( $\beta = 0.053, p > 0.05$ ). Similarly, no significant associations were found between faculty support and self-efficacy ( $\beta = 0.081, p > 0.05$ ) or between self-efficacy and belonging ( $\beta = -0.038, p > 0.05$ ). In contrast, campus climate was significantly and positively related to self-efficacy ( $\beta = 0.213, p < 0.001$ ). The path model is shown in Figure 2.

Bootstrap analysis (Table 3) indicated that perceived campus climate and self-efficacy do not jointly serve as serial mediators between faculty support and belonging. Specifically, three indirect pathways were tested: (1) a significant indirect effect of faculty support on university belonging via perceptions of the campus climate, (2) a non-significant indirect effect through self-efficacy beliefs alone, and (3) a non-significant serial indirect effect involving both perceptions of university climate and self-efficacy.

**Table 2: Regression Equation of Chain Mediation**

Model (N=512)		Fit indicator			Coeff. (Sig.)	
DV	IV	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>F</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
CC	FS	0.540	0.292	210.477	0.540***	14.507
SE	FS	0.266	0.071	19.447	0.081	1.611
	CC				0.213***	4.197
SOB	FS	0.332	0.110	63.559	0.332***	7.972
SOB	FS	0.554	0.307	74.997	0.052	1.194
	CC				0.532***	11.930
	SE				-0.038	-1.011

*Note.* *DV* = dependent variable, *IV* = independent variable, *CC* = campus climate, *FS* = faculty support, *SE* = self-efficacy, *SOB* = sense of belonging. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$



**Figure 2: Serial Mediation Effects**

**Table 3: Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects**

	Effects	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Total effect	0.359	0.045	0.271	0.448
Direct effect	0.056	0.047	- 0.036	0.150
Total indirect effect	0.280	0.030	0.221	0.342
Indirect effect 1	0.288	0.031	0.228	0.353
Indirect effect 2	- 0.003	0.004	- 0.014	0.003
Indirect effect 3	- 0.004	0.004	- 0.014	0.005

*Note.* *Boot SE*, *Boot LLCI*, and *Boot ULCI* refer to the standard error and the upper and lower bounds of the 95% confidence intervals of the indirect effects estimated by the bootstrap method, respectively. Indirect effect 1: faculty support → campus climate → belonging; indirect effect 2: faculty support → self-efficacy → belonging; indirect effect 3: faculty support → campus climate → self-efficacy → belonging

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate how perceived university climate and self-efficacy beliefs mediate the relationship between faculty support and institutional belonging among international students in Iran. The findings yielded a mix of expected and unexpected results.

### Faculty Support and Sense of University Belonging

The findings indicated that the direct effect of professor support on belonging to the university was statistically significant only in the absence of mediating variables. International students who perceived greater support from their professors tended to report a stronger sense of belonging. This result is consistent with prior research demonstrating that instructor support is a significant predictor of students’ belonging within educational contexts (Kim et al., 2023; Kim & Lundberg, 2016).

However, when perceived campus climate and self-efficacy were introduced as mediators, the direct effect of professor support on belonging became non-significant, thereby rejecting the first hypothesis. This change underscores the

complexity of the relationship and suggests that the influence of faculty support may be largely indirect. According to Pascarella's (1985) social cohesion theory, students' experiences in higher education are shaped by multiple interacting factors, including individual characteristics, institutional structure, campus culture, social interactions, and quality of engagement. In this context, faculty-student interactions may enhance belonging indirectly by influencing psychological and environmental conditions. A review of the literature revealed that many studies have examined the direct association between social support and belonging (Kim et al., 2023; Handagoon, 2017), whereas fewer have investigated the mediating mechanisms involved. Given the multifaceted experiences of international students, shaped by linguistic, cultural, and sociopolitical challenges, identifying these pathways is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of belonging.

### **The Mediating Role of Perceived Campus Climate**

Faculty support appears to shape international students' sense of belonging partly through its influence on their perceptions of the campus climate. When faculty members provide academic guidance, emotional encouragement, and interpersonal respect, international students are more likely to view the campus as inclusive and responsive to their needs (Glass et al., 2015). In turn, a positive perception of the campus climate fosters stronger psychological and social connections to institutions, thereby enhancing belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). One possible explanation is that faculty interactions may function as a proxy for broader institutional culture: supportive faculty signals to students that the university values diversity and inclusion, shaping their perceptions of the wider campus environment (Kim et al., 2023). This process can be explained through Pascarella and Terenzini's (1985) model of student persistence and social integration, which highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships in fostering social cohesion and institutional commitment. Within this framework, supportive academic interactions facilitate both social and academic integration, which contributes to favorable perceptions of the campus climate and stronger belonging. Thus, faculty support operates not in isolation but as part of a chain of perceptions and experiences that influence international students' adaptation to the university context.

### **The Mediating Role of General Self-efficacy**

The findings indicated that self-efficacy did not significantly mediate the relationship between faculty support and students' sense of belonging. This result underscores the complexity of interactions between individual and contextual factors in diverse educational settings. Previous studies have reported mixed evidence regarding the role of self-efficacy in belonging. For example, Handagoon (2017) reported no significant relationship between self-efficacy and belonging among Taiwanese students, whereas Singh (2018) showed that academic self-efficacy indirectly predicts belonging through academic adjustment

among international students in the United States. One possible explanation for the present findings is that this study assessed general rather than academic self-efficacy. Research has consistently shown that academic self-efficacy is directly related to university outcomes such as engagement, performance, and belonging (Guo et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2024). In contrast, general self-efficacy represents a broad and cross-situational belief in one's competence, which may be less sensitive to faculty support and less predictive of institution-specific outcomes such as belonging.

The absence of a significant mediating effect may also reflect the gradual and experiential nature of self-efficacy development, which arises through mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and emotional regulation (Bandura, 1997). While faculty support may facilitate some of these processes, its influence may not be sufficiently strong or sustained to meaningfully alter self-efficacy beliefs among international students. Conversely, the perceived campus climate is a more immediate, socially constructed perception shaped by faculty engagement, peer relationships, and institutional inclusion (Strayhorn, 2018). Because belonging is fundamentally interpersonal (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), it may be more directly influenced by relational and environmental factors than by self-referential cognitions.

From a broader cultural perspective, these findings suggest that the mechanisms underlying belonging among international students in non-Western contexts may differ from those typically observed in Western-based models. In collectivist and hierarchical educational cultures such as Iran's, belonging tends to be grounded in relational and contextual factors—such as fairness, faculty approachability, and inclusion—rather than in individual appraisals of competence (Hofstede, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 2014; Samadieh et al., 2023a). For Afghan students in particular, who have historically faced structural and sociopolitical marginalization within Iranian higher education, such contextual dynamics may further constrain the influence of self-efficacy on belonging. Collectively, these results highlight that in certain cultural and institutional environments, relational and environmental factors may play a more central role than cognitive self-evaluations in shaping students' sense of belonging.

### **The Serial Mediating Role of Perceived Campus Climate and Self-efficacy**

The non-significant serial mediation of perceived campus climate and self-efficacy in the relationship between faculty support and international students' sense of belonging highlights both the psychological complexity of belonging and the influence of cultural context. While perceived campus climate independently mediated this relationship, the sequential pathway through both climate and self-efficacy was not significant, suggesting that these variables may not operate in a strict causal chain. Belonging is a multidimensional construct influenced by relational and contextual cues rather than linear cognitive processes (Strayhorn, 2018). A positive campus climate can foster inclusion and support, but its effects

may not necessarily enhance self-efficacy, particularly among international students facing linguistic, cultural, and structural barriers (Glass et al., 2015).

Theories of belonging posit that the need to belong is universal (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), yet its experience and expression are culturally contingent. In individualistic contexts, belonging is often rooted in self-expression, personal choice, and mutual validation, with self-efficacy and personal achievement strongly influencing belonging (Markus & Kitayama, 2014; Cross et al., 2011). In contrast, collectivist cultures emphasize relational and context-dependent belonging, shaped by group harmony, social expectations, and hierarchical norms (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 2001). These findings suggest that, for international students in collectivist and hierarchical educational settings, relational and environmental factors may outweigh self-referential beliefs in fostering a sense of university belonging.

### Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The descriptive–correlational design precludes causal inference. The use of convenience sampling and the focus on a single nationality group (Afghan students in Iran) also limit the generalizability of the findings. However, this specificity represents a notable strength, providing rare empirical insight into a marginalized and understudied international student population. The sociocultural and political context of Afghan students in Iran likely shaped their responses in meaningful ways. Although they share certain linguistic and cultural features with the host community, they often face systemic barriers such as financial hardship, restricted academic opportunities, legal insecurity, and social exclusion. These conditions may heighten their sensitivity to faculty support and perceptions of campus climate as key signals of inclusion and acceptance. Consequently, their sense of belonging may reflect both cultural affinity and the challenges of marginalization. Future research should investigate whether these patterns hold among international students from other cultural or national backgrounds. Although the CHERRIES guidelines were followed, the online format limited opportunities for clarification during data collection. The Belonging to University Scale demonstrated modest internal consistency ( $\alpha = .60$ ), which is acceptable for exploratory and cross-cultural studies where belonging is a multidimensional and context-dependent construct (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Hair et al., 2019). The slightly lower reliability likely reflects cultural adaptation and the relational nature of belonging among international students rather than a measurement weakness.

### Implications

#### *Theoretical Implications*

This study advances understanding of international students' university belonging by integrating faculty support, campus climate, and self-efficacy into a unified framework. The significant mediating role of perceived campus climate

underscores the importance of institutional and environmental factors in students' socioemotional adjustment, which is consistent with ecological and social integration theories (Tinto, 1993; Strayhorn, 2018). In contrast, the non-significant mediation of self-efficacy suggests that individual cognitive factors may play a lesser role in culturally diverse contexts, emphasizing that belonging is fundamentally a socially embedded process.

### ***Practical Implications***

The findings highlight the need to foster a positive and inclusive campus climate as a key mechanism through which faculty support enhances international students' sense of belonging. University leaders, faculty members, and student affairs professionals should prioritize initiatives that promote inclusive pedagogy, culturally responsive communication, and welcoming academic environments.

Practical strategies may include structured faculty mentorship programs that pair international students with supportive faculty who provide both academic guidance and psychosocial encouragement. Universities could also offer professional development workshops to strengthen faculty and staff competencies in intercultural engagement, inclusive teaching, and proactive outreach to international students. Additionally, peer support and student ambassador programs can facilitate social integration and promote meaningful cross-cultural interactions.

Institutional policies might further reinforce these goals by formally recognizing faculty contributions to international student engagement, establishing regular feedback mechanisms to monitor campus inclusivity, and offering targeted services for underrepresented international groups. Given that self-efficacy does not significantly mediate the relationship between faculty support and belonging, interventions focused solely on enhancing individual confidence may be less effective than those addressing structural and relational dimensions of the university experience. The implementation of such strategies can strengthen faculty–student connections, improve perceptions of campus climate, and ultimately foster a deeper sense of belonging among international students.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study sheds light on the mechanisms through which faculty support shapes international students' sense of belonging within the university context. The findings indicate that a perceived campus climate significantly mediates this relationship, emphasizing the role of supportive and inclusive institutional environments in strengthening students' socioemotional connection to their academic community. In contrast, the non-significant mediation of self-efficacy and the absence of a serial mediation pathway underscore the multidimensional and context-dependent nature of belonging among international students. These results suggest that relational and contextual factors, rather than individual cognitive beliefs, are central to fostering belonging. By highlighting the

importance of faculty engagement and positive campus climates, this study contributes to the broader literature on student integration and well-being and offers practical directions for enhancing international students' experiences in higher education.

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