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## **Mirroring Yourself?: Peer Mentor Circle Support for International Graduate Student Transitions**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Transitioning to graduate school in the United States presents many challenges for international students including culture shock, academic shock, language barriers, and homesickness. As universities continue to bring international students to their classrooms, it is imperative that they feel welcome and supported. To this end, a university in the Southwest United States employed a peer mentor circle program aimed at easing the transition for international graduate students as they began their programs. Using Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory, this study examined the moving in and moving through phases of eight new international graduate students as they participated in the peer mentor circle program with six current international graduate students. The study provides insight into the moving in phase of new international graduate students and found that the peer mentor circle program eases transition to graduate school and fosters movement toward the moving through phase of the transition model.*

**Keywords:** internationalization, international graduate students, peer mentor circles, transitions

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International graduate students are important to university internationalization in a variety of ways. American universities benefit from their presence in the classroom as they bring a global perspective and provide interaction opportunities that can increase cultural competence among domestic students, staff, and faculty (Hunter-Johnson, 2016). Furthermore, international

graduate students provide financial, educational, and social benefits to American universities (Hunter-Johnson, 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007). As institutions place diversity, internationalization, cultural competence, and inclusivity at the forefront of their missions (Simmons, 2011), increased importance is also placed on welcoming and retaining these learners.

Since 1990, international students have come to the U.S. in pursuit of a graduate degree. U.S. higher education experienced decades of international graduate student enrollment increases reaching peak enrollment in 2015-2016 with over 390,000 students. Unfortunately, this enrollment trend was followed by tumultuous years of decline with international graduate students numbering 350,000 in 2020-2021 (Institute of International Education, 2021). Reasons for the decline are not clear, but some scholars point to travel bans and visa restrictions implemented (Boxer & Roach, 2018). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic likely played a role in fewer international students seeking education outside their home country. Pursuing a graduate degree comes with challenges for international enrollees. Numerous studies outline challenges faced by these students (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Lee & Rice, 2007) including the need to learn to navigate a new higher educational system, to transition to new social norms, and to face language barriers and homesickness. To mitigate these challenges, Duru (2008) suggested creating social support systems and finding ways to increase social connection among students. Others (Yang et al., 1994; Zimmerman, 1995) made similar suggestions asserting that relationships and social interactions can aid students' adjustment to the U.S. However, international students often desire more social integration opportunities to foster meaningful relationships with U.S. peers (Yang et al., 1994). Failing to provide international students with support through their transitions to the U.S. can lead to feelings of depression, isolation, anxiety, or inadequacy (Friday, 2018).

Mentorship is often an approach to address transitional needs in college (Glaser et al., 2006); however, one-to-one mentorships pose challenges as resources to support these programs are limited, and personality conflicts can arise easily in pairs (Darwin, 2004). As such, this study examined the use of a peer mentor circle (PMC) model to connect international students with one another to assist through their transitions. Mentor circles include one or more mentors working with a group of mentees through a multi-faced mentorship. This novel approach to mentorship contributes to the under researched area of mentor circles providing a unique program model that can be replicated for other underrepresented and underserved populations. The PMC program for this study consisted of a group of international graduate students (five continuing students and seven new students) from the same institution who met once a week for 2 hours during the first 5 weeks of a spring semester. The five continuing (current) students acted as mentors to the seven new students.

Through group discussions and activities, all students shared their experiences transitioning to graduate school in the U.S. With a focus on their transitions, our research questions were:

1. What are the characteristics of a transition for new international graduate students?
2. In what ways does a PMC program influence the transition process?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Currently, few studies differentiate between the experiences of undergraduate and graduate international students referring to “international students” in general. As such, this literature review consolidates the experiences of international graduate and undergraduate students while also noting important differences between the student groups including research demands, workload, and quality of writing, as well as strong motivation, clear goals, and increased maturity (Hofinger & Feldmann, 2001).

Following Lee and Rice’s (2007) call for research into the experiences of international students, several studies have examined the challenges and experiences of this student group (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Bai, 2016; Caligiuri et al., 2020; Duru, 2008; Friday, 2018; Hong, 2022; Shu et al., 2020). As such, we now have a deeper understanding of the obstacles encountered by international students and the acculturation process as they begin college in the U.S. We know that international students experience a myriad of challenges. These range from finding housing (Lee & Rice, 2007), coping with homesickness (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007), adjusting to different sociocultural customs while learning in a foreign university system (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004), and speaking, reading, and writing in English (Bai, 2016). These challenges and academic stressors can negatively affect students’ mental wellbeing and academic performance if not addressed.

### **Adjusting to Graduate School in the U.S.**

Adjusting to the new academic environment is also a challenging experience (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Studies have correlated academic adjustment with increased academic performance (Duru, 2008; Rienties et al., 2012). Mesidor and Sly (2016) recommended organizing welcome activities for incoming students and mentorship opportunities to facilitate adjustment to the new environment. A few studies have also examined ways to best ease the transition of undergraduate international students. For instance, Andrade (2006) examined how a cultural transition course assisted in international student transitions. Andrade studied participant perceptions about the importance of the content covered in the course including campus resources, American classroom culture, history and culture of the region, English as a Second Language, and academic success

skills. Participants shared that information about the host culture and university expectations and norms were most useful. In a similar study, Brunsting et al. (2018) created a one credit course with the intention of easing academic and cultural transitions for international undergraduate students. Participants felt they gained knowledge about communicating outside the classroom and exhibited increased perceived intercultural competence and self-advocacy. Other researchers (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Bai, 2016; Duru, 2008; Shu et al., 2020) identified acculturation and social support as essential in supporting international students once on campus.

## **Mentorship**

A traditional mentorship involves a partnership between two people with one person learning from the experience and wisdom of a more experienced/knowledgeable person (Dansky, 1996). MacCallum and Beltman (2003) asserted that mentoring can positively impact academic, social, and personal aspects of an individual's life, making mentorship ideal for international students who need support in all three areas. Peer-to-peer mentor programs are common in higher education but limit the relationship experience to only the two people involved (mentor and mentee). Moreover, personality conflicts and one's fit to be a mentor may also pose challenges with these types of programs (Darwin & Palmer, 2009). Group mentorships, which may consist of more than one mentor and a few mentees, can provide a variety of benefits including broader opportunities for learning, growth, and development as well as a "broader network of collaborative input into personal and professional needs" (Huizing, 2012, p. 44). Correspondingly, Hadjioannou et al. (2007) examined a self-regulated mentor group with doctoral students to find that the group encouraged participation within the academic community and fostered emotional support.

## **Mentor Circles**

Common in the workplace, mentor circles (MCs) are composed of individuals from various levels in the organization who meet regularly to discuss a shared topic of interest (Schnieders, 2017). There is typically a facilitator present during MC meetings who is responsible for steering conversations so that they are focused and productive (Darwin & Palmer, 2009). Unlike paired mentorships, MCs allow for multiple perspectives and stories to be shared thus combining energies and expanding knowledge bases of group members (Ambrose, 2003). As noted by Darwin and Palmer (2009), MCs allow group members to "share experiences, challenges, and opportunities for the purpose of creating solutions" (p. 126). MCs offer a wider social network, reduced feelings of isolation, increased confidence, improved career progression, new understandings of culture, and a better understanding of the nuances of academia (Darwin, 2004). We believed international graduate students could potentially benefit from the wide range of advantages MCs provide; however, because MCs

are a relatively new concept, few studies (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Kuhn & Castano, 2016) have examined their use in higher education.

The PMC model employed for this study was designed as a component of dissertation research conducted to investigate transitions to graduate school and with the hope of fostering a sense of belonging for international graduate students. The 5-week program consisted of 2-hour weekly meetings where participants shared experiences, shared a meal, and engaged in games to build camaraderie. To encourage conversation and relationship building, all participants were asked to discuss their 'high and low' experiences from the previous week, and then participants engaged in an activity or game intended to foster friendships and trust. The meetings provided opportunities and space for participants to share feelings and experiences and to dialogue about their time in graduate school in the U.S.

### **Theoretical Framework**

All adults experience transitions, whether anticipated or unanticipated (Schlossberg, 1991). Transitions are life events (or nonevents) that result in a change in relationships, routines, roles, and assumptions (Levinson, 1986). Generally, a transition is a time in one's life that alternates with a period of stability (Merriam, 2005). For many individuals, transitions can be frightening (Anderson et al., 2001) and result in a turning point in their lives thus triggering opportunities for personal growth (Bridges, 1980).

This study employed the integrative model of transitions which encompasses three phases: moving in, moving through, and moving out (Anderson et al., 2011). When an individual moves into a new situation, such as a new job or educational environment, they must "become familiar with the rules, regulations, norms, and expectations of the new system" (p. 57). As an individual becomes familiar with her new environment and situation, she begins the moving through phase, where she will learn to integrate and balance new activities and experiences with and into other aspects of her life. This phase tends to be a longer transition timeframe and may require assistance and more energy and commitment. Moving out is the third phase and is viewed as the end of a transition causing some individuals to grieve the conclusion of the transition process as they wonder what their next steps will be.

As international graduate students begin their graduate program in the U.S., they are experiencing a period of transition, whether anticipated, expected, or unexpected, and begin the moving in phase. Once a student has become familiar with the expectations of graduate school, local social norms, and new role as a student, they will hopefully then shift into the moving through phase of their transitions. As such, our study utilized these elements of transition theory to observe adult learners' periods of change while engaging in a social support system through the PMC. Mentors (the continuing international graduate students in the PMC) provided unique perspectives about the new students' transitions based on the mentors' reflections on their own transitions. Their perspectives also led to practical solutions to problems the new international students were

experiencing and allowed for the sharing of personal stories about overcoming obstacles.

## METHOD

Our unit of analysis was a group of international students involved in a PMC; as such, the research design was an instrumental case study (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). Specifically, the case under study was the PMC to investigate how engagement in the program may have influenced international graduate student learners' transitions to higher education in the U.S.

### Participants

After IRB approval we obtained a list of current and incoming international graduate students from the International Student and Scholar Services office on campus to begin recruiting participants. Using university email, we invited current (continuing) international graduate students with at least 18 earned graduate hours who had earned their bachelor's degree in a country other than the U.S. to participate in the PMC as mentors. Current international students, or individuals currently pursuing a graduate degree and were not born in the U.S., were invited to participate as mentors. Interested candidates were asked to complete a short questionnaire to ensure commitment and interest. After reviewing the responses, six current students were chosen to become mentors based on their on-campus involvement and clear indication of a successful transition to their new academic and social lives. Mentors received a \$200 gift card to a local grocery store as incentive to participate. Demographic information about mentors (pseudonyms are used) is outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Mentor Demographic Data*

Pseudonym	Program	Level	Country of Birth	Last Country Lived	Age	Gender	Marital Status
Natalia	Education	Doctoral	Uruguay	U.S.	50	Female	Single
Bayo	Material Science, Engineering, and Commercialization	Doctoral	Nigeria	Nigeria	29	Male	Single
Tala	Geography	Doctoral	Iran	Italy	34	Female	Married
Sur	Engineering	Master's	Bangladesh	Bangladesh	27	Male	Single
Teji	Material Science, Engineering, and Commercialization	Doctoral	Nepal	Nepal	33	Female	Single
Guneet	Engineering	Master's	Bangladesh	Bangladesh	30	Female	Married

After mentors were selected, an email to all new, incoming international graduate students was distributed. Only incoming students with zero graduate hours earned in the U.S. received a recruitment email to participate as a mentee

in the PMC program. The initial email was sent to 116 students, and four participants volunteered immediately. Subsequently, one of the researchers attended the university’s mandatory immigration check-in where two more mentee participants were recruited. Finally, recruitment emails were sent subsequently to incoming international students that were part of the same academic programs in which the PMC mentors were enrolled. The goal was to ensure that a variety of national backgrounds and graduate academic programs were represented. Mentees were given a \$50 gift card to a local grocery store as an incentive to participate. Information about the eight mentee participants (pseudonyms are used) is outlined in Table 2. All 14 participants were asked to sign a contract of intent to participate in the PMC and in the study.

**Table 2**  
*Mentee Demographic Data*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Country of Birth</b>	<b>Last Country Lived</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>
Ilan	Material Science, Engineering, and Commercialization	Doctoral	Bangladesh	Bangladesh	32	Male	Married
Mila	Geography	Master’s	Russia	Russia	23	Female	Single
Oili	Public Administration	Master’s	Iran	Iran	28	Female	Single
Bommi	Exercise Science	Master’s	India	India	23	Female	Single
Obi	Geography	Master’s	Nigeria	Nigeria	24	Female	Single
Upwan	Computer Science	Master’s	India	India	27	Male	Single
Hareesh	Physics	Master’s	Nepal	Nepal	32	Male	Married
Naveed	Engineering	Master’s	Iran	Iran	24	Male	Single

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were collected through a demographic data form, observations, interviews, and focus groups. Multiple sources were used to triangulate data to better interpret the participants’ experiences from difference perspectives. All participants were asked to complete the demographic data form at the start of the first PMC meeting. The form collected basic demographic data including country of birth, country in which they last lived, age, gender identity, marital status, and graduate program and level (master’s or doctoral). Group meetings, interviews, and focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed, and uploaded to NVivo qualitative data analysis software for analysis.

At each PMC meeting, the first author was the facilitator and took notes following an observation protocol throughout the meetings when indications of the moving in phase were mentioned. After each meeting the observation notes were reviewed, and voice memos were created to record actions taken and reflections throughout the research process. The notes were used as a guide when revisiting the recorded transcriptions. Bernard and Ryan (2010) emphasized that

constant interaction with participants through observations allows researchers to build rapport with participants allowing them to feel more comfortable and act as they normally would. Facilitating the PMC provided unique access to the participants' transitional development.

Between weeks 2 and 3 of the PMC program, all mentees participated in a 20-50-minute, in person, one-on-one, semistructured interview to learn more about their experience in the PMC as it related to their transitions. Through analysis of these one-on-one interviews, we were able to glean insight about the lived experiences of each participant and to "make sense of and construct reality in relation to the phenomenon, events, engagement, or experience; and explore how individuals' experiences and perspectives relate to other study participants" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 146). Also, at this time all mentors participated in an audio recorded, 60-minute focus group to get input on the program at that point, gather ideas to improve the mentees' experience during the final 3 weeks, and to learn more about the mentees' experiences in the PMC during the first 2 weeks. All interviews followed an interview protocol, which focused on checking in with the participants and included questions such as, what have been your biggest challenges so far? What has been your biggest adjustment? Tell me about your experience in the PMC so far.

The week following the conclusion of the PMC, all participants engaged in one of three audio-recorded, 90-minute focus group interviews. At least one mentor was present during each focus group and was asked to stay the full 90-minutes while mentees attended only the first hour. The focus groups aimed at learning more about the collective experience and to determine whether any mentees were beginning the moving through phase of their transition from the researcher, mentee, and mentor perspective. The goal was to go "beyond individual perspectives to generate a group perspective" to learn more about participants' experiences and transitions (Hennik, 2014, p. 3).

Schlossberg's (2001) transition theory underpinned our data analysis process. We began by composing a table complete with literature relevant to our participants' transitions. See Table 3 for analysis examples. We chose to use these tenets from the transition theory for our analysis because they intersect with literature about international student experiences in U.S. higher education.

After transcriptions were uploaded into the software, we followed Saldaña's (2016) two-cycle coding analysis employing holistic and emotion coding for the first cycle and pattern coding for the second cycle. We initially searched for instances in which participants were exhibiting characteristics of the moving in and moving through phases. The first cycle coding focused on exploring the data and searching for evidence of emotions through the lens of the transition theory. *Moving in* is characterized primarily by initial feelings of fear or anxiety, which are recognized during the emotion coding as well as through pinpointing role changes which are identified during holistic coding. Instances where participants described personal growth, development, or change were noted during the holistic process as evidence of the *moving through* phase.



**Table 3***Chosen Literature Used to Guide the Coding Process*

<b>According to the literature, transitions are:</b>	<b>Literature translated into questions to guide coding</b>	<b>Type of coding</b>
<b>frightening</b> (Anderson et al., 2011)	what were participants' initial thoughts as they began this new academic journey?	Emotion
turning points in an individual's life, which incites <b>personal growth</b> (Bridges, 1980)	how did the participants feel they have changed or grown over the first 5 weeks?	Holistic
a catalyst for adult learning and that much <b>learning in adulthood occurs in response to life changes</b> (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980).	What learning came from this change? How did participants navigate the social nuances of American culture? Relationships? Transportation? Food?	Holistic Emotion
encouraging of familiarity "with the <b>rules, regulations, norms, and expectations of the new system</b> (Anderson et al., 2011, p. 57)	In what ways have the PMCs assisted with the transition to the new academic program/ environment? What have been the biggest changes?	Holistic Emotional

*Moving through* was also characterized by a noticeable shift in viewpoints about their experiences; such instances were often noted during emotion coding. Before moving on to the second cycle coding, we met with participants for a member check to clarify themes and discuss initial findings. Second cycle coding was subsequently used to "develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization" from the first cycle codes (Saldaña, 2016, p. 234). We chose a pattern coding method for the second cycle, which involved a process of reviewing first cycle codes and identifying commonalities. The themes discussed in the following section were derived from the emerging codes in the analysis process and grouped together by commonalities that aligned with the *moving in* and *moving through* phases of transitions (Anderson et al., 2011).

## FINDINGS

Our findings provide unique insights into the transition process for new international graduate students. Interviews conducted between week 2 and 3 indicated that mentees entered the *moving in* phase of their transition experiencing new roles and social adjustments, academic shock, and feelings of homesickness and loneliness. Focus groups held after the conclusion of the program showed that toward the end of the 5-week program, mentee participants began exhibiting signs of entering the *moving through* phase as they settled into their new environment.

### New Roles and Social Adjustments

During the interviews held between week 2 and 3, mentees discussed leaving behind friends, family, and for many, full-time jobs, which led to adaptation to new roles and social adjustments. For many of the mentees, particularly those with spouses and children left behind in the home country, this was a major adjustment. Mila left her fiancé in her home country and shared that her biggest change was living her day-to-day life without him. Hareesh left his wife and young daughter in Nepal as he pursued his graduate degree, and Obi and Bommi, the two youngest participants, left close friends and family behind. As well, Oili described the social support system she left behind and her need to adjust to her new role as a student. She shared,

I was a girl who had a lot of friends, and every weekend I met friends and would come home and have coffee with them. So, I used to be very busy the whole day. But here it is like I have to be home with my laptop to study. (Oili)

Naveed also struggled with his new role as an independent student living without his mother who would take care of all the household duties leaving him plenty of time to study. During the first few weeks he was concerned with time management. He described this change, “back at home I would wake up at five AM studying and then going to sleep because I didn’t really care about anything. But here I have to cook, wash clothes... I have to do a lot of things.” Juggling new responsibilities and time management were adjustments shared by many participants. A few participants (Hareesh, Ilan, and Upwan) held leadership roles in their full-time jobs back home and were now shifting to full-time student. Upwan discussed the role he left in India,

adjustment from office back to school, that is one thing I will say is bad. Because that’s a difference life and this is totally different. Like I had money, I got everything, travel on weekend, so I’m leaving that and coming here. It was fair enough at that company, but my ambition is to pursue masters. (Upwan)

Though participants acknowledged these adjustments were difficult, they felt they were worthwhile because they were motivated to return home with a graduate degree.

### **Academic Shock**

The American classroom was significantly different from what mentees were accustomed. Mid-program interviews revealed mentees feeling that their academic expectations and communication barriers were incongruous with their previous experiences. For instance, Obi described feeling unprepared for her graduate program because she had never done “case studies or peer reviews” and had “zero exposure to software” but was expected to do “a proposal [and] case study” during her first week. Another participant shared similar sentiments saying that the “methods of study” were the biggest challenge so far because everything is based on “research articles and [she] had never read a single research or journal article.” Understanding the academic nuances of the American classroom was

challenging for the mentees since the method of instruction was often different from their home countries.

Communicating also proved challenging. While all participants scored well on the required English language exam to be admitted to their programs, they shared that they often felt self-conscious about their English and struggled with informal language and idioms. Communication challenges were particularly prominent for mentees on assistantships who also taught undergraduate students. Mila shared that she “started feeling confused because [she] had to speak really good in English” to teach her geography students. Mentees were regularly unsure of their English and often chose not to speak up in class. They also shared feeling intimidated by other international students whom they felt spoke better English than they did. Such feelings about their English led to feelings of self-doubt and insecurity among participants.

### **Feelings of Loneliness and Homesickness**

Throughout the PMC meetings as well as during interviews and focus groups, negative feelings rooted in loneliness and homesickness were discussed among all but one of the participants. Mentees shared comments such as, “Sometimes I feel lonely,” “I was lonely before coming to these meetings,” “I miss home a lot more than expected,” and “adjusting to being alone, to living alone or sometimes [feeling] emotionally unstable” during the first few meetings. Upwan described how his homesickness affected him physically as he lost weight after arriving here. Naveed described the isolation he experienced sharing,

when you come to this new place, some of us do not have anybody here, for instance like me. I don't have any of my family members here. My sister and brother are in Europe, so I try to get to know as many people as possible but it's going to be tough the first few weeks.

Ilan was the only participant who seemed unphased by these feelings, which may be because his wife and son moved to the U.S. with him. Instead, he was more focused on getting his family settled.

For most, feelings of loneliness and homesickness were so severe that a few considered quitting their graduate program and returning home, while others described the mental toll their negative thoughts and feelings took as they adjusted to life in the U.S. Bommi was most open with her feelings sharing, “mental problems with it, connected with it... I could not survive; I literally didn't want to stay here. I made up my mind that I wanted to go back. I felt very depressed to be honest.” Upwan described similar sentiments revealing, “I didn't want to come out of my room.” Not all participants referenced mental wellbeing issues related to their homesickness and loneliness, but those that did became more open about their feelings over their 5 weeks together. During this time, the new student participants began learning how to address their new roles and routines and thus began exhibiting characteristics of the moving through phase of their transition.

### Mentees Find Their Voice

As the weeks passed, data gathered from the mentors through focus groups held between week 2 and 3, and at the conclusion of the program indicated changes started to occur among the mentees. As well, we observed that PMC engagement increased over the first few weeks as relationships progressed. Guneet noticed increase participation over time sharing, “I think the meetings had been very empowering. I appreciate the change from the very first meeting – all attendees very shy- to a growing powerful atmosphere or participation and chatting.”

Upwan’s increased interactions were mentioned by several mentors as he started the program silently engaged through body language, and over time he made connections with other members of the group. Mentors felt that the ability to practice speaking English with the PMC members was helpful to develop Upwan’s confidence. Similar thoughts were shared about Bommi. Guneet recalled Bommi being “kind of down” when the program began, but with time she had “the course to share with us. And she was so happy, that’s the change.” Bayo agreed with Guneet’s observations about Bommi adding, “she gradually progressed, and I think this [PMC] is pretty much what is holding her down here and not going back to her country... this program was really helpful for her.”

Mentors also agreed that Mila found her voice as she began sharing very little during group meetings, focusing mostly on her studies, to developing a “sense of humor” with the group. Specifically, Tala noticed that Mila’s mindset shifted during the first few weeks as Mila began to enjoy herself; Tala felt that Mila’s “stress was relieved.” Mentors found that Mila’s initial serious, formal demeanor in the PMC shifted to humor and engagement over time. Like Mila, Ilan’s fun, joking personality began to emerge after a couple of weeks. Sur shared, “the first week he wasn’t as expressive, but he soon became comfortable to express his personality,” and Teji coined him as the “class joker.”

A shift in Hareesh’s demeanor was described by mentors as well. Guneet said, “I am sure that he was feeling that his English was not that good, because of the stopping repeatedly,” but over time she noticed that he “came out of his cocoon, even though he knows his English doesn’t sound like the Americans... he can explain so that others understand,” which allowed his confidence to grow. Likewise, Teji and Natalia noticed development with Naveed as most of his conversation at the start of the program revolved around “complaining about all the documents and how heavy the process was for him, but after that, he started to communicate more humorous things. It was not so pessimistic. He started communicating but very funny and very nice.” (Natalia). Teji described his “negative thing in mind” shifting to not making as many negative comments and engaging with the group in a more positive manner.

In terms of transitioning to the *moving through* phase over time, mentors felt that Obi made the most progress. Tala and Guneet attributed Obi “finding her voice” during the games held each week. “Especially the Pictionary game day.

She was like ‘Oh how do you do that? How do you do... show me that’ she was like involved, then she started talking about her problems, her personal life, and health problems” (Guneet). After a trip to the grocery store together, Tala noticed a significant increase in her communication, “Obi was stressed and she enjoyed the game, right after that we went to the grocery store with Mila and Naveed. She told me a lot of things.” In reflecting across the weeks in the program, Natalia noticed Obi “challenging herself and becoming better and better.” Over time and through sharing experiences and finding common ground, mentees became more comfortable with the group. Their ability to communicate was fostered through activities and conversation, and they were able to explore and discuss their new roles and establish important relationships with the other members. Listening to other international students in the PMC struggle to formulate thoughts and speak in English contributed to the perceived increase in comfort communicating over time. Participants indicated this communication growth began to extend into other aspects of their lives, such as in the classroom, and contributed to start of a transition into the *moving through* phase.

### **Mentees Begin the *Moving Through* Phase of Their Transitions**

In the final focus group, Mentees were asked to reflect on changes and development within themselves as they participated in the PMC. Ilan described his experience in the PMC as “mirroring yourself” or seeing himself as others shared experiences and thoughts similar to his own. Hareesh shared that each week he felt his self-confidence grow, and Bommi explained that the PMC “opened her up to different kinds of thoughts” and that the PMC exposed her to many cultures which helped her to “accept people where they are.” Similarly, Naveed revealed that his perspective about Americans changed; he said, “one thing that changed is I had an ‘ideal thinking’ about American people. But that changed to the fact that they are just like me.”

Toward the conclusion of the PMC program, mentees began displaying signs of the beginning of the *moving through* phase of their transition as they explored and experienced new roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. Comments such as, “I feel more comfortable now” or “I am getting used to the classes” became more common during weeks 4 and 5. Mentees became more involved on campus and met students outside the PMC. Oili signed up for student organizations, Mila registered for an off-campus expedition with her colleagues, and Upwan started playing cricket with other Indian students. These are a few examples of how participants started to become involved in their new environment and engage with their new roles and routines. Ultimately, participants indicated they had completed the *moving in* phase where they were unsure about their new roles and relationships and lacked confidence in their ability to be successful. By the end of the PMC, they were starting to become more comfortable and develop a support system for their journey, and as such were able to start their transition to the *moving through* phase.

## DISCUSSION

Transitions are events or nonevents that incite change in adults' relationships, routines, roles, and assumptions (Levinson, 1986). While they may be frightening (Anderson et al., 2001), transitions are a natural turning point in one's life (Bridges, 1980). In the current study, new international graduate students experienced the moving in phase and the beginning of the moving through phase of their transitions to life in the U.S. while attending graduate school. Similar to Tseng and Newton's (2002) findings about international student well-being, during the moving-in phase of their transitions our participants experienced sociocultural, psychological, academic, and general living adjustments. Evidence of loneliness, homesickness, and differences in social and cultural norms were common across the data. Newly arrived learners acknowledged overwhelming stress and emotion related to their transitions so severe that they considered returning home. They felt lonely, depressed, isolated, and concerned about meeting academic expectations, and while the university counseling center was available to assist them, the mentees felt they needed to talk to someone who could relate with them based on shared experiences. Feelings of isolation and loneliness are common among new international graduate students (Duru, 2008), and research shows that social engagement through programs like the PMC can alleviate depression and anxiety symptoms (Dao et al., 2007). Engaging with the members of the PMC, particularly the mentors, encouraged mentees to sort through their new roles, routines, relationships, and assumptions. Through discussions, mentees realized they were not alone in their feelings and that many international students shared the same feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and academic concerns. Moreover, mentors assured the mentees that their feelings would pass with time and offered possibilities for coping with their transitions.

Navigating new social roles was also an adjustment for the mentees. A few of the mentees left behind leadership positions in their home country to come to the U.S. to be full-time students. Others left behind close friends, family, and significant others forcing them to live on their own or with roommates in the U.S. In the PMC meetings, with new friends, socialization, and problem-solving activities, participants were encouraged to give themselves time and to be themselves as their new roles and identities were developing.

Similar to Tseng and Newton's (2002) international students' experiences, academic adjustments were of strong concern for participants early in the PMC program. New international students were developing the skills they needed to be successful in graduate school while simultaneously learning how to navigate the foreign education system. Feelings of inadequacy and stress about academic expectations were prevalent among the mentees. PMC mentors offered helpful experience-based recommendations including attending professor office hours and sharing resources on campus that were designed to help them academically. Their suggestions were welcomed, and by the end of the program, academic concerns (aside from language barriers) were discussed less frequently in meetings.

Language barriers are among the most common struggle for international students (Rienties et al., 2012) since language influences academic and personal communication, comprehension, and learning (Telbis et al. 2014). Almost all PMC participants shared concerns and struggles related to English speaking. Even speaking in front of the PMC group was difficult for many during the first week, however, after participants began sharing more and the games were incorporated, mentees became more comfortable speaking. Mentors noticed a difference in the English skills of several mentees and described the PMC as a judgment-free space for participants to share anything on their minds while simultaneously practicing their conversational English skills.

The novel PMC program differs from traditional mentor programs discussed in research (Abe et al., 1998; Dennison, 2010; Gunn et al., 2017) in several ways. The PMC included a variety of mentors from different cultures, educational and professional backgrounds, and varied personal experiences and situations. The PMC created a network of mentors rather than a single mentor's experience to be shared and drawn upon during the mentee's early transitions (Darwin & Palmer, 2009). Sometimes assigned mentor pairs experience personality conflict, lack of connection, and communication challenges between the mentor and mentee (Gunn et al., 2017). The experience of each participant was different based on their background, educational, personal, and professional, providing a unique transition experience for each participant and therefore a non-linear experience in the PMC. However, the PMC was designed to create a space for participants to share their experiences to process their individual transitions. Sharing feelings and experiences provided a rich learning experience for mentors and mentees. Meaningful relationships and support systems were established that aided in the transition process as the PMC buttressed the mentees' progressing through the moving in stage and toward the moving through stage as mentors modeled what moving through looked and felt like. The participants' experiences in this study align with findings from Hadjioannou et al. (2007) who examined a successful mentor group implemented to foster emotional support and academic community for doctoral students. Through support, openness to share, listen, and empathize, mentees engaged in the PMC to successfully navigate their early transition phase.

## **Implications and Conclusion**

This study identified important insights into international graduate student transitions. What we found is that current, continuing international students can provide unique supports for new international learners; these supports were found to be valuable in the form of group mentorship as it offers multiple perspectives. Our study indicates that international graduate students engaged in successful early phases of transition in the first 5 weeks of their studies, which were supported through the PMC program.

We suggest that Anderson et al.'s, (2011) transition theory as well as the use of PMC programs may be effectively applied to other life transitions such as freshman starting college or workers transitioning to remote work. As well, we assert that the culture, academic expectations, adult roles, and location provide

new understandings about what may initiate an adult transition. We further encourage scholars to engage in future research framed with transition theory that utilizes PMCs with historically marginalized populations such as veterans, people of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and women as they experience transitions. Finally, this study provides a glimpse into the positive outcomes of a peer-driven mentor circle program that helped to alleviate mental health issues and promote academic achievement for international graduate students. As such, administrators, educational institutions, and educators should strongly consider implementing and promoting programs similar to the PMC among international students as well as other student populations that experience similar adult transition challenges.

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