

International Graduate Student Challenges and Support

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Abstract

With a growing number of international graduate students pursuing degrees in the United States, universities must understand what unique challenges this population faces when transitioning to the United States and how to properly support students through this transition. This study looks at the experiences of seven international graduate students and how they have found support during a challenging transition to a large, public, research university in the United States. Results revealed that students had difficulties with language barriers, academic differences, and finding resources, but were able to find support within their academic departments and smaller communities. Recommendations are presented for practitioners and future researchers to continue to develop support for international graduate students.

Keywords: international students, student services, international orientation

As domestic enrollments in higher education in the United States have leveled off in the past years, colleges and universities have looked to international students to both increase enrollments and bring diversity to campus. In the 2016-2017 school year, the number of international students studying in the United States was at its highest level to date, with one million eighty thousand students (Institute of International Education, 2017). However, there was a 3% drop in the number of newly entering international students. This was the first time enrollment had dropped in the 12 years since the Open Doors report began releasing data regarding international student entry (Institute of International Education, 2017). For reasons as: the number of incoming international students is decreasing, the is world becomes increasingly globalized, the American political and social dynamic grows more tense; understanding the experiences of international students is crucial to any higher education institution striving to best support these students' personal and professional development.

The setting for this research is a large, public, research university, which boasts the largest enrollment of international students in the state of North Carolina. There were 3,715 international students enrolled in the Spring 2018 semester, according to a report by the Office of Institutional Research and Planning (OIRP, 2018). Of those students, almost 75% are graduate students, comprising about one-third of the graduate student population (OIRP, 2018). The top five countries from which students matriculated to the institution that Spring were India (1,242), China (752), Iran (99), South Korea (91), and Bangladesh (65) (OIRP, 2018). International student enrollment varied greatly between academic colleges. For example, in the College of

Engineering there were 1,095 domestic graduate students and 1,790 international graduate students in the Spring of 2018, whereas in the College of Education there were 1,096 domestic graduate students but only 24 international graduate students (OIRP, 2018). The academic department and its makeup of international and domestic students can greatly impact a student's experience, as can the number of students enrolled in the same department from one's home country.

This paper will examine the experiences of seven international graduate students at this large, public, research university and add to some of the current research regarding the experiences and transitions to academic life in the United States of international graduate students in similar situations. Based on these interviews, recommendations are proposed for researchers and practitioners to better understand and support international graduate students.

Literature Review

Three main themes appear in literature on international graduate students: challenges they face on campus, support they receive, and the sense of belonging they experience. The following literature review includes literature on undergraduate students but is primarily concerned with the experiences of international graduate students. While the undergraduate student population is different in some ways and may experience higher education differently, the findings in the literature on this group share many commonalities with these known themes and can still be applied to all international students, including graduate students.

International graduate students in the United States face many challenges, not only those limited to cultural adjustments and transition challenges, but also academic and social isolation during graduate school. Cardona, Milian, Birnbaum, and Blount (2013) interviewed 12 international graduate students to understand their experiences inside and outside the classroom. This research revealed that although these students receive many benefits from studying in the United States, such as developing multicultural experiences, critical thinking skills, and writing skills, they face many challenges including adjusting to a new culture and country. Often language alone is a significant challenge and can cause stress and anxiety for many students. Language barriers can be particularly difficult inside and outside the classroom. Even though most admissions offices check English language competency for international students, many students are not used to taking courses in English and can have difficulty adjusting to the language. Participants in this study mentioned the stress they felt when professors constantly asked if they wanted to discuss material after class or the frustration of having to speak in class. Students were also not used to the dynamics and high interaction levels of a typical American classroom. This study found that in and out of the classroom experiences are very much intertwined for graduate students. Additionally, it revealed the importance for faculty and staff to understand that international graduate students need time to adjust and may require different kinds of support than other domestic graduate students. It is imperative for staff and faculty to understand that each student will have different support needs. Some students may not want any extra support, and some students may not feel comfortable asking for or receiving the support

they may want or need, depending on many factors, including their culture's gender roles and expectations (Cardona, Milian, Birnbaum, & Blount, 2013).

Findings about the lack of understanding of academic expectations and classroom engagement students may experience are echoed in Erichsen and Bollinger's (2011) study, where they interviewed international graduate students in order to understand their experiences with academic and social isolation in the classroom and in an online setting. Several themes emerged from this research including the students' lack of understanding of the academic culture and expectations in the United States. Participants felt it was necessary for there to be more opportunities learn about the academic culture, such as how to properly write papers without plagiarizing, proper interaction and relationships with professors. They wanted to learn about this academic culture through professional development events or general guidance and orientations of these topics. Participants also felt that they received little support from the institution as international graduate students and that others did not care about learning about their experiences as international students (Erichsen and Bollinger, 2011). Additionally, because of the long hours of academic work, many of them mentioned the lack of a social life and social interactions as well as the other commitments they had, such as family responsibilities. Finally, the researchers reported that undergraduate students have more opportunities to be involved than graduate students and that the financial and visa/immigration pressures many of them faced contributed to a strict work schedule in order to complete their degrees. The researchers concluded that many international graduate students feel isolated academically and socially and it would be of significant value for international student services offices recognize this and plan appropriate events, programs, and support to minimize isolation (Erichsen and Bollinger, 2011).

In addition to academic and social isolation, international students face many acculturative stressors during their time in the United States. Smith and Khawaja (2011) compiled a review of the literature on current acculturation methods applied to international students. Smith and Khawaja (2011) used Berry's definition of acculturation as "the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (p. 701). It is important to note that acculturation is a two-way process between international students and their host community and society. None of the seven acculturation methods reviewed by Smith and Khawaja (2011) specifically described the experiences of international students, but certain group and individual factors can be analyzed to better understand the acculturation processes of these students, as the acculturative stressors faced by international students can cause several challenges in the students' experiences.

The first major stressor is language barriers, in both academic and sociocultural contexts. In the academic context, low level of English proficiency can impact assignment quality, ability to understand classroom lectures, and difficulty with oral and written exams. Socially, language barriers can prevent students from making friends and interacting with the local community. Other academic stressors for international students include a mismatch in their expectations and the reality of university life and the teaching style of their host country. Sociocultural stressors can be difficult for students to overcome and may often leave students feeling lonely and

isolated. An interesting finding was that Asian international students seem to have greater difficulty making friends with locals compared to their European peers. Research by Lee and Rice (2007) found that another acculturative stressor for international students may be discrimination. Discrimination may manifest in the form of feelings of inferiority, direct verbal insults, discrimination when seeking employment and physical attacks such as having objects thrown at them. Experiences of discrimination can have a detrimental impact on international students and have been linked with poor psychological well-being and depression. The previous literature has not pinpointed the exact manifestation of acculturative stress in international students, but acknowledges that it can manifest in a variety of ways. Some examples are sleep and appetite disturbances, fatigue, headaches, increases in blood pressure, and gastrointestinal problems (Mori, 2000). Smith and Khawaja (2011) also discussed the buffering effect of social support on acculturative stress and depression. A study by Yeh and Inose (2003) of 359 international students found that those who felt socially connected and were content with their social support networks had lower levels of acculturative stress.

This review of the literatures highlights the need for continued research in the lived experience of international students. To address many of the challenges international graduate students are facing, campuses have started to increase their support for this student population through staff support, university services, and increased engagement with these students.

In terms of support for international graduate students, many studies found that students attribute their success to university services, engagement across campus, good language skills, and surrogate families. Perrucci and Hu (1995) conducted quantitative research that focused on the several dimensions of satisfaction for international graduate students. They used a theoretical model of the determinants of satisfaction with a student's academic program, academic appointment, and social relations. The four factors found in the research that contribute to satisfaction include: the student's social status, individual resources, social resources, and the student's perception of their social context. Results showed that gender of international graduate students did not consistently affect their satisfaction (Perrucci and Hu, 1995).

Another noteworthy finding is that students' financial situation, grades, and aspirations may be correlated with satisfaction, but they do not have an influence independent of their relation to other factors. Grades may be important to satisfaction, for example, but only through their relationship with language skills. Also, satisfaction in social and community relations was more common among married students and those who had more exposure to the local culture. The data shows that the satisfaction of international graduate students is shaped by their language skills, self-esteem, and feeling of positive involvement in their social context. Perrucci and Hu (1995) state that universities should give students the opportunity to strengthen their language skills and host social gatherings to improve students' satisfaction. Additionally, universities should "foster a better climate of international awareness and understanding, both on and off campus, for the different countries represented by its students" (Perrucci & Hu, 1995, p. 507).

Research has also found that international students' interactions with American students prove to be positive for international students (Trice, 2004). In light of research which showed that international students who spend time socially with American students are more satisfied

academically and better adjusted culturally, while being less likely to experience anxiety and alienation, Trice (2004) surveyed 497 graduate international students about their social experiences. This study employed the social capital theory as an explanation for the social benefits of international students interacting with American students (Trice, 2004). The study also used a three-part conceptual framework to analyze international students' social interaction with American students through their social status, cultural competency, and interactions with other students, both domestic and international (Trice, 2004). The data showed that the frequency of interaction with American students by international students varied greatly by world region. Middle Eastern and African students interacted the least with Americans, but were not concerned about this. Students from East and Southeast Asia were concerned about functioning in the American culture and establishing American friendships. Two factors that were positively related to the amount of social contact students had with American students were coming from Western European countries and communicating well in English, which can make establishing relationships easier and more likely. The findings also showed that having friendships with other co-nationals did not impact international students' commitment to developing relationships with Americans. In addition, the longer students had lived in the United States, the more frequently they interacted with American students (Trice, 2004).

Other studies have found how international students create surrogate families to help them during their time in the United States (McLachlan and Justice, 2009). American students as well as other students can be a part of this surrogate family. In their study, McLachlan and Justice (2009) revealed the many challenges international students face when studying in the United States and how those students adapted to survive during their transition and time in the United States. Among the many difficulties these students faced during the transition to a different culture included the weather differences, food differences, academic and social differences, homesickness, loneliness, pressure, language barriers, and the reluctance to seek help (McLachlan and Justice, 2009). The researchers also revealed how the students survived and worked through these challenges using approaches such as creating surrogate families with their mentors and peers as well as using university services (McLachlan and Justice, 2009). All of these factors can contribute to whether students feel a sense of belonging, not only in the United States but also in the university.

There was little research on international graduate student sense of belonging and connections to campus; however, some research focused on social sense of belonging vs. academic sense of belonging. In their study, Curtin, Stewart, and Ostrove (2013) examined the difference between international graduate students and domestic students in terms of their sense of belonging, academic self-concept, and advisor support. Their study revealed that international students rated research and professional experiences as more important than domestic students did; however, that was not the case for social experiences. This shows the importance that international students place on skills developed through research and academic experiences as well as professional development opportunities. Additionally, their study also showed that although international students did not report any additional advisor support, they did show higher levels of belonging within their departments than their domestic classmates and revealed

stronger academic self-concepts (Curtin, Stewart, and Ostrove, 2013). In terms of the study's implications for practice, it is imperative to note the importance of an advisor when considering a student's sense of belonging and academic self-concept. Students felt a stronger sense of belonging if they had a positive relationship with their advisor as well as a stronger academic self-concept. It is also interesting to note that the advisor support international students received was related to their sense of doing well in academics (Curtin, Stewart, and Ostrove, 2013).

Although international graduate students in Curtin, Stewart, and Ostrove's (2013) study placed more importance on an academic rather than social sense of belonging, the social interactions they have on a day to day basis still affect their sense of belonging. In their study, Gladd and Westmont (2014) found that the discriminatory experiences that students faced had a negative effect on belongingness. Belongingness in turn had a positive effect on academic success and cross-cultural interaction. They also found that students participation in co-curricular activities had a positive effect on belongingness as well. Although their study focused on undergraduate students, these findings are significant because many international graduate students also face discriminatory experiences. For practitioners it is important to note that events, programs, or general engagement outside of the classroom could significantly impact sense of belonging for these students (Glass & Westmont, 2014).

Methodology

The sample population for this study was composed of international graduate students at a large, public, research university. All participants were at least 18 years of age. Interviews were conducted in a comfortable and neutral space on campus in a classroom or conference meeting space. All participants completed a consent form before their interview, which explained the purpose of the study and the research goal.

To better understand some of these unique experiences, we interviewed seven participants from different countries and various educational backgrounds. Based on student availability, four were interviewed individually and three were interviewed together in a focus group format. To provide anonymity for the participants, each has been given a pseudonym. The first four students were interviewed individually. The first interviewee was Flora, a first-year master's student in Architecture who is originally from Iran and earned her bachelor's degree in New York City. The second was Daniela, a first-semester doctoral student in Animal Science from Brazil who earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees from the same small institution in Brazil. Third was Wanda, a first-year master's student in Food Science from Venezuela who had attended both high school and college at the undergraduate level in the United States. Finally, Sandy was a third-year doctoral student from India studying Civil Engineering who had earned previous degrees in India.

The students who participated in the focus group were Jennifer, a second-year master's student in Accounting from China; Sarah a second-year PhD student in Parks Recreation and tourism Management from Brazil; and Baalam, a first-year master's student in Cultural Anthropology from Colombia. A snowball sampling technique was used to identify the participants for the study. The participants were asked questions about their transition to the institution and the challenges they faced being both an international student and a graduate

student on campus. They were also asked questions about how they perceived the campus culture at the institution and how they had gotten involved on campus. The interviews were transcribed and coded to find themes among the students' responses.

Results

From the transcribed and coded interviews, the following themes emerged: challenges at the institution, lack of support, sense of belonging/involvement, and institutional perspective.

Challenges International Graduate Students Face

Just as the literature and research predicted, the interviews quickly presented the theme of how challenging the transition to graduate education in the United States can be for an international student. One of the main difficulties international graduate students faced was the decentralization of information concerning immigration and academics prior to and during their transition to the United States. Flora was the only student to have visited campus before matriculating, but began in the summer session and thus was given conflicting information from various offices about orientation and was not fully acclimated until the fall orientation program in August. Wanda expressed how it was difficult to know whether to ask her department, the Graduate School, or the Office of International Services (OIS) questions about how her financial aid was being applied and thus had to register late. In general, participants described initial confusion in navigating the academic culture and not just in the difficulty of their courses.

Daniela described a difficulty with being able to understand fast-talking Americans delivering important information, while Wanda described a difficulty finding apt words to express herself in an culturally-effective manner:

It was difficult to communicate with them. Not only to understand what they're saying but also communicating in general because it's a different culture. Getting my point across was difficult sometimes. I remember one time I was talking to a friend and was telling her that I didn't know how to translate what I was trying to say in a way that they would understand. I'm not saying English words but like culturally wise.

Students in the focus group echoed this sentiment and said that one of the most challenging elements of their transition to the institution was the language. Despite difficulties in communication and finding information, almost all of the participants expressed how smaller communities helped them during the transition. These smaller communities are similar to the surrogate families described in the research (McLachlan and Justice, 2009). For Daniela, the Brazilian Student Association reached out before she arrived to answer questions about the campus and Raleigh more broadly. Sandy took advantage of the airport pick-up service offered by MAITRI, the Indian Graduate Student Association, when she first arrived on campus. Flora described how the first few weeks were difficult, but her program cohort was a lifeline in the first few weeks of class for information and community:

For me the hardest parts were those first few weeks because I didn't know anyone and it's a fairly quiet city so that made me feel a little sad. Once I

started school and I met people, it got better. The first place I got involved was in my academic department.

A second prevalent theme about difficulties transitioning to the institution was the pedagogical differences in American classrooms. Even for the two participants who had already earned degrees in the United States, this still presented a challenge. There are many facets to the struggles our participants faced in the classroom, especially when it came to constructivist pedagogy and more learner-centered approaches to the classroom. Constructivist pedagogy, which is the dominant pedagogy of American college classrooms, places an emphasis on knowledge being constructed among the students and instructor. Many students came with experience and expectations of a pedagogy wherein the knowledge is transferred from professor to student. Daniela was not used to being graded on participation and struggled to speak up in class, especially when she was apprehensive about using the correct English words:

Probably the most difficult part was that in Brazil, with rare exceptions, the teacher teaches the class...here you have to participate and I don't like to participate so it's difficult because they grade participation. I know it's important to participate. In Brazil when someone talks every time in the class then we don't like that students because they interrupt but here the one who asks questions and participates is the one that is most liked by the professor so it's different to transition to that.

For Daniela, knowing the technical terms was not difficult, as she had read journal articles in English for a long time. She confided that grammatical structures such as prepositions and adjectives especially confused her up in papers when trying to make her writing and speech sound natural. Sarah talked about the high expectations her graduate program had:

The way courses or classes happen or the expectations--especially in the graduate program. Where I'm from you don't have to turn in things every week...that was a bit of a cultural shock. The expectations seemed very high.

Sandy and Wanda both serve as teaching assistants and expressed frustration with being the teacher at the front of a room and trying to get students to engage and cover large amounts of material. They experienced the pedagogical differences from both the student and instructional side. These findings are supported by existing literature that shows that international graduate students struggle with the differences in academic culture (Bollinger, 2011).

As mentioned in the literature, adjusting to the culture, norms, and traditions of the United States was a challenge for many international students (McLachlan and Justice, 2009), and this challenge was prevalent throughout our interviews. In general, participants faced other challenges outside of academics in their transition to life in Raleigh generally. All students expressed frustration that the Wolfline bus system did not run regular routes on the weekend and about half expressed that they would get more involved on campus if it were easier to access events on the weekends. For the students who were new to the United States, American cultural norms such as taxes and tipping were confusing and challenging to get used to at first. All participants also expressed confusion and frustration about finding affordable housing, signing a

lease, and navigating the healthcare system. While none of the students interviewed for this project expressed that any of these elements contributed to a significant interruption of their life, it was clear that little things like these added to the acculturative stress they faced overall.

Support for International Students & Sense of Belonging

This large, public, research university provides a variety of different programs and staff to help support international students. Despite this, many students talked about the difficulty of finding these resources: Wanda said: “It’s not like the support doesn’t exist. It’s just that I don’t know how to tap into it. I don’t feel enough trust to tap into them.” Participants talked about how academic departments gave them support and how connections within the department fostered their sense of belonging. It was evident that the students’ academic departments were often their first social connection at the university. Sarah talked about the influence of her academic department:

The department determines your experience because that’s where you spend most of your time. I’ve had a very good experience because we’ve had very diverse cohort and faculty and that helps a lot. I know that the professors that are international look for students who are international. There is a culture of diversity that is international...The mandatory courses usually unite the cohort and it gives you the opportunity to connect and make friends.

The importance of the students’ connection to their department through relationships with fellow students and faculty was a prominent theme in the interviews. Although many felt supported by the relationships they had in their academic department, Balaam pointed out how some of those relationships have put pressure on him:

For me I came straight from undergrad to graduate program and one of the things I noticed is that there is a much closer relationship with you and your advisor or thesis director. That is not as evident in undergrad and there is a lot more pressure when you have that one to one relationship.

Even though Balaam felt this pressure, he still felt a connection to his academic department. For Sandy, having a research assistantship allowed her to build a close relationship with her faculty mentor, and thus she was able to ask questions and learn more. Considering that each student noted that the reason they attended the institution was for their specific academic program, it is significant that each had positive interactions with their department and that their department was a source of community.

All seven students had a second site of connection to their department outside of the classroom, whether it was in the lab, studio, or offices. These proved to be a critical component of fostering relationships within the department. For Wanda, having office mates who were fellow classmates allowed her to discuss class material in a more intimate setting. Flora worked on projects in her studio with classmates and thus was able to build strong connections with them. Daniela spent long hours in the lab and at a farm building relationships with fellow lab

mates that extended beyond the lab to outside social opportunities. Jennifer and Balaam both mentioned their office as one of the places that meant most to them on campus because of the amount of time they spend there. Sarah echoed this sentiment:

The office [is important] because that's where we spend most of the time and I have a huge window that you can see a lot of green and the rain and sunset so it's really nice--also the space between the two buildings. Lake Johnson is my favorite place that I go to every single day.

Another theme of support for international graduate students at the institution was the presence of fellow students from their home country. Again, these connections mirror the surrogate families seen in the literature (McLachlan and Justice, 2009). At this institution, these groups vary greatly in size and involvement, and each student's interactions and involvement differed depending on how strong the community was. Daniela expressed that the Brazilian Student Association was very active and hosted frequent events to help students explore Raleigh the local area and to foster community among its members. Flora was not as involved in the Iranian Student Association, since it was not very active in terms of the numbers of events and members it had. Nevertheless, Flora still enjoyed knowing fellow Iranians around campus. Wanda described how there were not many other students from Venezuela, and while she wanted to be a part of the Latin American Student Association, it was difficult as there were not many opportunities to get involved. For Wanda, the greatest connection she had fostered was with a fellow Venezuelan student and his wife who would constantly check in on her to make sure she was okay. It was common for many to see their friends around Raleigh as their family away from home. For Sandy, the Indian graduate student community was large and diverse. She spoke about how all her friends spoke English with each other because that was the only common language even among all Indian students in her friend group. She described how the size of the Indian graduate student population was both good and bad in that their association, MAITRI, was able to put on large and well-attended cultural events, but it was harder to create community among so many students.

For Jennifer, finding other students from China was not a challenge. She said there were about 500 students in a group chat who talked about events, finding roommates, selling furniture, and more. On the other hand, Sarah did not know many Brazilians, especially her first year:

I spent most of my first year without knowing any other Brazilians here until I saw someone in the bus who had the shirt with the flag and then we connected and there was a group chat with all Brazilians who attend the university. There are about 20 of us in the group chat. There are a lot more Brazilian undergrads but they don't mix with graduate students. We maintain this group chat and sometimes meet. Share events, etc. Some of us are closer because we've known each other the longest.

Sarah's connection to the Brazilian community started on the bus, while Balaam's connection to the Latin American students was much more formal, through a student organization; however, he did not feel it was very inclusive:

I've been to some meetings for the Latin American association for graduate students, and there is a wide range of nationalities. I wish it were more inclusive, not only in terms of the language but also in terms in terms of college inclusion. I barely see any social science graduate students from Latin American countries. Even though we speak the same language it can be difficult to connect.

Balaam talked about the exclusivity felt within a group where everyone was expected to speak Spanish. If someone was not fluent in Spanish, then they would feel excluded. However, he still felt like he connected with Latin American students on campus outside of the organization and within Raleigh as well. Contrary to Trice's (2004) research, the interviews in this study show that peer support through other international students was important to finding connection on campus and being academically successful. Wanda and Flora especially emphasized how it was easier to become friends with other international students and how they found a great sense of community that way. This is especially salient for those students in programs with large numbers of international students. Daniela described how it was surprising how her fellow classmates from China and South Korea relied on her so much to understand aspects of American culture because she was from a more westernized country than them. Opportunities to connect with other international students also allow for students to connect to campus and grow their community. Flora, Daniela, and Wanda all attended a spring break service trip led by OIS and all cited how they all felt like their campus became smaller after the trip because of their new friends and community, in addition to the learning experience of serving in schools and charities in the mountains.

Institutional Connection & Involvement

In the vein of academic belonging, all interviewees expressed that they felt the strongest connection to the university through their academic department, which aligns with Curtin, Stewart, and Ostrove's (2013) findings about the centrality of the academic and professional experience for international students. Balaam described his involvement on campus mainly in his department:

I'm a TA for an undergrad anthropology class. I haven't really done volunteering. Maybe my involvement is more academic including my thesis or projects that we do for school. Ideally, I would really like to volunteer in an international office, mentor, or offer my testimony as an international student.

Jennifer also volunteered within her academic department during CPA service days, but she still wanted to be more involved on campus. Sarah talked about how graduate students need to look for these opportunities rather than wait for them to come:

I feel like it's something you have to go after even though you get emails with information if you don't read them through or search for things. Most people would just read and not do anything about it. You really have to put yourself out there in order to get involved. Every activity is so

receptive to international students, but when getting involved, it's up to us to go after the activities.

Flora talked about how graduate students interact with the campus culture:

Graduate students don't really get involved in the larger campus culture and are more focused on their academics. When I got here I wasn't looking to get involved and then I decided to reach out.

Furthermore, when asked about important traditions that occurred on campus, the interviewees generally had not participated in many of the major events on campus, citing them as conflicting with their academic duties or geared towards undergraduate students. Some cited sports as being important traditions but said that they had not attended: "I honestly have never been to a sports game. Anything that says international I'm attracted to. Makes me feel more connected." (Baalam)

This is not to say these students did not have pride in the institution. Four out of seven of the participants felt very proud to be a part of the Wolfpack. Flora described a key moment to her sense of belonging on campus:

One thing that really resonated with me was the Wolfpack. When I went to get my ID in Talley I saw the statue of the Wolfpack outside and I had this moment when I really felt like I was part of the Wolfpack. Because wolves are fierce, it instills this feeling of being fierce and excited about your academic life.

However, in general the graduate students were content to be involved in the ways they had found, but were open to participating more on campus if they had free time and knew about events and activities with ample time to make plans to attend.

Discussion

The participants in this study talked extensively about the challenges they faced when transitioning to graduate school as an international student, such as language barriers, moving to a new city, and adjusting to the academic expectations. This study highlighted some of the ways in which international students find their place and support on campuses. Their academic departments were a strong influence on their sense of belonging not only in terms of academic achievement, but also in feeling connected to classmates and faculty. Students revealed that they were not as involved in the overall campus culture, traditions, and norms. It is important for institutions to understand which tools and services students are utilizing as forms of support on campus so that time and effort is put in the proper places to support international graduate students.

Students often struggled with the norms and expectations of schoolwork, social life, and understanding different aspects of the institution and the United States. Based on our findings, we recommend that orientation programming both at the university-level and the department-level should address these norms and expectations so that students know early on what to expect. Orientation programs should explain the academic rigor and expectations of the graduate program, relationships between professors/TA's and students, and general cultural differences

they will experience living in the United States. Orientation programs should also properly prepare students to find the help and resources necessary if they are struggling. Additionally, assessment after orientation programming should be critical and a priority in order to understand what international graduate students need during this transitional period.

Programs for international graduate students should not stop at orientation. All students expressed wanting to be more involved on campus but not knowing where the resources were or how to tap into them. Continued outreach to these students after orientation is critical to continue making social connections and building their sense of belonging on campus. We see from participants that academic departments do a great job at keeping students involved, mostly because they take courses together and are in their respective spaces every week, but it is important for students to build connections outside of their academic department. Building connections outside of their academic department may lead to a stronger sense of inclusion within the university and not just their academic department.

The results of this study should be considered alongside its limitations. Participants came from a large pool of international graduate students attending a large, public, research university in the Southeastern U.S. The challenges and support discussed in this study by the participants may not be applicable or present in other universities since other universities might have smaller international graduate student populations, might not have as many culturally specific student organizations or other reasons. Additionally, the snowball sampling method might affect responses, as participants might hold similar viewpoints. Despite these limitations, the results showed themes of challenges and support among all participants that are relevant for other universities.

Discussion and Conclusions

The large, public, research university where this study took place is an institution that attracts many international graduate students from all over the world. Due to the number of participants in this study, it is limited in its generalizability to other institutions. Yet, the study shows it is important to learn about their experiences and unique needs. These results could help similar institutions develop support for international graduate students. Our interviews with international graduate students supports the literature on the topic, and also reaffirms the importance of connection to the students' academic departments. Some common themes that emerged were acculturative stress, the importance of community and connection, and how a campus community may influence a student's sense of belonging. The students interviewed felt strong connections with their academic departments, not isolation as the literature suggests. Schools should evaluate how their academic departments are helping international students build connections in order to make them feel welcomed.

The results and recommendations presented in this study will be able to help student affairs professionals understand international graduate students' challenges and needs. In addition, this study will aid in informing future research. Future research is needed to help student affairs and academic affairs professionals better understand international graduate student experiences and explore models to identify how to meet these students' unique needs related to multiple levels within the university community. Research should continue to focus on

international graduate students' unique experiences as well as what current professionals are doing to properly support these students and how these support systems and resources in place are helping them develop. Although domestic graduate students might face similar challenges to international graduate students such as isolation, moving to a new city, transportation, etc., international graduate students have the added pressure of being of adjusting to a new culture, language, and way of life. Their feelings of isolation and confusion are amplified by the fact that they might not even have family in the United States, meaning they are far from any family, or they might not have taken their academic courses in English. Students might not be used to taking graduate level courses such as accounting, physics, or others in English because they are used to hearing the terminology used in these courses in their own language.

These factors could contribute to their overall mental health and wellbeing. These factors also provide a rationale to why future research should focus on international graduate students' mental health and wellbeing. Equally important for international educators is how institutions are supporting graduate students through their transition to academic and social life in the United States.

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