

Belonging Experiences of International Graduate Students: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT: This phenomenological study explored how international graduate students experience and make sense of belonging across academic, social, and institutional contexts. Fifteen international master's and doctoral students participated. Semi-structured interviews captured students' lived experiences of belonging, including comfort, connection, recognition, and value. Four themes emerged: (1) core experiences of belonging; (2) contexts for partial belonging; (3) negotiating language, culture, and identity; and (4) diversity paradox and belonging tensions. Findings suggested belonging is a relational, context-dependent process linked to well-being. Institutional efforts fostering inclusion, meaningful relationships, and cross-cultural engagement may support international students' mental health and academic success.

KEYWORDS: International students, belonging, phenomenology, inclusion, higher education

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Perceiving a sense of safety, closeness, and membership in social contexts is a fundamental human need and is essential to both physical and mental health (Maslow, 1943; Strayhorn, 2019). In higher education, belongingness has been commonly defined as students' subjective experiences of connectedness to the campus environment and their feelings of being respected, valued, and cared for by members of the campus community, including peers and faculty (Strayhorn, 2019). However, emerging scholarship suggests that belongingness is not a binary, static, or uniformly experienced condition (Allen et al., 2024; Mohamad & Manning, 2024). Rather, students may experience varied degrees of belonging depending on context, time, and relational factors, as they make sense of belonging through their lived experiences across spaces, identities, and institutional settings (Allen et al., 2024; Mohamad & Manning, 2024; van Kessel et al., 2025).

Belonging of International Students in U.S. Higher Education

Substantial research has shown that thwarted belongingness is associated with worsened student adjustment and wellbeing (Ploskonka & Servaty-Seib, 2015; van Kessel et al., 2025); whereas, greater belongingness is related to increased student engagement and wellness (Baldwin et al., 2017; Versteeg et al., 2022). However, much of this literature conceptualizes belongingness as a relatively global or binary construct (Mohamad & Manning, 2024; van Kessel et al., 2025), offering limited insights into how students experience partial, conditional, or unstable forms of belonging. As a result, existing studies often document whether belonging is present or absent, rather than how it is unevenly lived, negotiated, or constrained across contexts and relationships (Antonio & Baek, 2022; Mohamad & Manning, 2024). Such forms of belonging may involve being academically included while remaining socially peripheral or being formally recognized by the institution without experiencing psychological safety or relational closeness (Antonio & Baek, 2022). Cheng et al. (2025) suggest that these partial or conditional forms of belonging are often accompanied by heightened vigilance, silence, or relational withdrawal, which may function as strategies to preserve psychological safety and carry potential implications for mental health. These nuanced experiences are particularly salient for students from marginalized backgrounds, including international students.

Amid rapid changes in sociopolitical climate and immigration policy since the COVID-19 pandemic, international students have navigated increasing sociocultural and systemic challenges while developing a sense of belonging in U.S. higher education context (Mohamad & Manning, 2024; Park & Shimada, 2022; Tang et al., 2025a). In addition to acculturative and linguistic barriers (Soufi Amlashi et al., 2024; Xiong et al., 2024), rising xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiments since the pandemic have threatened international students' feelings of safety and connectedness on campus (Maleku et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2025b; Xiong et al., 2022), which could shape the level of belonging experienced by international students across institutional, interpersonal, and cultural contexts. To

support international students in post-COVID contexts, higher education institutions need to take proactive and culturally sensitive approaches to strengthen their senses of trust, connection, and psychological safety within institutional spaces (Chen & Yang, 2025; Mohamad & Manning, 2024; Tang et al., 2025a; Xiong & Yang, 2021). Achieving this goal requires nuanced understanding of how international students make sense of varying degrees of belongingness while navigating transitions, relationships, and identities in cross-cultural contexts.

A recent literature review of belongingness research on international education revealed a lack of clarity regarding the dynamic, contextual, and multidimensional characteristic of belonging for international students (Mohamad & Manning, 2024). Although existing literature has documented outcomes or associated factors of belongingness among international students, it remains unclear whether belongingness is experienced in varying degrees, whether it is mutual or conditional, stable or situational, or primarily individually experienced versus institutionally produced (Mohamad & Manning, 2024). Further, most quantitative studies on international student belongingness relies on global belongingness constructs developed for general student populations (García et al., 2019; McVickar, 2023), which might not fully capture the contextually and culturally specific ways international students experience inclusion, exclusion, visibility, and legitimacy within dominant campus norms (Antonio & Baek, 2022; Mohamad & Manning, 2024). Consequently, scholars have stressed the value of qualitative research that centers international students' lived experiences of belongingness, rather than fitting their narratives into pre-existing normative frameworks of relationship building and engagement (Mohamad & Manning, 2024). However, there is a paucity of qualitative studies on international student belongingness in the post-COVID era (Chen & Yang, 2025), indicating the need for updated data to inform international student support in the increasingly destabilized higher education landscape (Rickert, 2025).

Belonging among International Graduate Students

According to Open Doors (2025), approximately 55.3% of international students enrolled in U.S. higher education during the 2024–2025 academic year were graduate students. However, Mohamad and Manning's (2024) systematic review of international student belongingness identified only five studies specifically focused on international graduate students (IGSs) among the 47 eligible studies included in their review. Although more recent studies have begun to pay greater attention to IGSs' experiences (e.g., Findlay et al., 2025; Paik & Braxon, 2026), research on IGSs' sense of belonging remains limited.

IGSs' position and experiences are uniquely shaped by the intersection of graduate education and international student status (Lorenzetti et al., 2023). Compared with undergraduate education, graduate programs in the U.S. generally place greater expectations on student autonomy and self-directed learning (Kranzow & Bledsoe, 2017). However, qualitative findings suggest that IGSs may

experience limited support in highly autonomous academic environments while simultaneously adjusting to unfamiliar academic norms, disciplinary discourses, and institutional expectations (Gao & Wesley, 2024). Further, studies that primarily focus on domestic graduate students have identified family obligations, multiple social roles, and work-related demands as main sources of stress alongside academic pressure (Charles et al., 2022; Grady et al., 2014). By contrast, studies focusing on IGSs point out that they tend to have limited local family and peer networks outside of academic realms (Baines et al., 2022). In addition, they often face visa restrictions to work and obtain financial resources while attending school (Mahler, 2020). IGSs and domestic graduate students may navigate graduate education within different social and relational contexts, thereby requiring different institutional support. IGSs have found institutional support for graduate students more beneficial to students with established social networks in the U.S. (Paik & Braxon, 2026) and insensitivity to the needs of new-coming, non-citizen students (Calder et al., 2016). These concerns highlight the need for greater attention to IGSs' sense of belonging, connection, and support on campus.

Quantitative evidence suggests that IGSs' sense of belonging is shaped by multiple sources of support across different institutional and interpersonal spaces. Using cross-sectional survey data, Curtin et al. (2013) found that IGSs tend to value academic experiences more than domestic students and that advisor support significantly contributes to IGSs' sense of belonging. Building on Curtin et al. (2013), Jwa and Berdanier (2024) found both advisor relationships and general support network positively correlated with first-year IGSs' belongingness. Consistent with these findings, Myers et al. (2023), using survey data from approximately 1,000 IGSs across 12 U.S. universities, reported that support from peers, faculty, and mentors all significantly contribute to students' perceived connection on campus. These findings collectively suggest that IGSs' belonging could be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct. However, quantitative studies tend to use concise and generic survey questions to measure peer, advisor, or general support (Curtin et al., 2013; Jaw & Berdanier, 2024; Myers et al., 2023), providing limited insight into the exact strategies of support to foster IGSs' sense of belonging on campus.

Qualitative findings regarding IGSs belongingness remain dispersed across specific academic, institutional, and social contexts. Within academic contexts, Zhang et al. (2022) described how doctoral IGSs developed a sense of belonging to their academic disciplines through scholarly achievement, while Antonio and Baek (2022) found that academic progress shaped doctoral IGSs' sense of value and connectedness. At the classroom level, two studies identified culturally responsive teaching strategies, including acknowledging IGSs' diverse identities (Dannen et al., 2024) and establishing classroom norms of respect (Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2017) to empower IGSs' participation and foster their classroom belongingness. Outside of academic settings, Tewari et al. (2024) focused on leisure settings and found IGSs often need to navigate identity marginalization, safety concerns, and transportation limitations when developing a sense of belonging in social contexts. While these context-specific studies offered substantial insight, they provided only a partial understanding of IGSs' broader

belonging experiences, which also limits the exploration of different dynamics across contexts.

Only a small number of qualitative studies have examined IGSs' overall sense of belonging across the wider campus environment, and their findings remain mixed. In Findlay et al. (2025), 10 out of 10 IGSs at a midwestern U.S. university reported positive experience of belongingness. These students found it especially helpful to form rapport with faculty, attend affinity groups, and engage with extracurricular activities to connect with domestic students (Findlay et al., 2025). By contrast, Paik and Braxon (2026) described substantial challenges to belonging among IGSs attending a public university in the northeastern U.S. More importantly, participants' perceived belongingness appeared to be unevenly distributed across different campus spaces, with stronger connection perceived in IGSs affinity groups, weaker connection perceived in departmental social events, and unstable sense of belonging perceived in academic spaces depending on teaching quality (Paik & Braxon, 2026). These findings further suggest that IGSs may experience belongingness as conditional, dynamic, and contextualized. Considering the small sample sizes and different institutional contexts represented in both studies (Findlay et al., 2025; Paik & Braxon, 2026), additional qualitative research is needed to expand and diversify current understandings of IGSs belongingness.

Finally, little is known about how IGSs' sense of belonging evolves over time. Most quantitative studies have relied on cross-sectional designs (Curtin et al., 2013; Myers et al., 2023), while qualitative studies have hardly addressed IGSs' perceived change in belonging across time and stages of study (Findlay et al., 2025; Paik & Braxon, 2026). One important exception is Jwa and Berdanier's (2024) longitudinal conference study, which collected data from engineering IGSs repeatedly throughout their first year and found that students' perceived advisor relationships, support networks, and belonging all fluctuated across academic semesters and breaks. Similarly, Cheng et al. (2025) found that, while conational relationships provided essential support for IGSs during their initial adjustment, cross-cultural peer relationships became increasingly important as students progressed through their programs. These findings suggest that different sources of belonging may carry different salience and value as IGSs' academic and social life develop. More qualitative research is needed to examine how IGSs make sense of these changing relational experiences and how they shape their belonging throughout graduate education.

Taken together, existing literature documents important outcomes of belonging but is less effective in capturing how IGSs experience partial, conditional, and evolving belonging across academic and non-academic spaces. Guided by this perspective, the present study explores belonging as a lived, relational, and context-dependent phenomenon shaped by institutional practices, interpersonal relationships, and sociocultural conditions. It addresses the following questions: (a) how do IGSs make sense of belonging in U.S. higher education; (b) what relational, contextual, and institutional conditions shape their experiences of belonging; and (c) how do these experiences relate to psychological safety, engagement, and

well-being. A theoretical framework that views belonging as dynamic, relational, and contextually produced is essential to guide this inquiry.

Theoretical Framework

This study employed Strayhorn's (2019) sense of belonging framework as the primary theoretical lens to interpret the lived experiences of IGSs in U.S. higher education. Strayhorn (2019) conceptualized sense of belonging as encompassing cognitive (e.g., recognition of membership), affective (e.g., emotional connectedness and safety), and behavioral (e.g., willingness to engage) dimensions. The framework outlined seven core elements of sense of belonging: (a) it is a basic human need; (b) it is fundamental to motivation and behavior; (c) it is heightened in certain contexts and times; (d) it varies by social identities and their intersections; (e) it must be renewed continuously as conditions change; (f) it involves mattering and feeling valued; and (g) positive belonging yields adaptive outcomes while thwarted belonging leads to maladaptive ones such as isolation, stress, or withdrawal (Strayhorn, 2019).

This framework is particularly suitable as the interpretive lens for the present phenomenological study for several reasons. First, it conceptualizes belonging as dynamic, context-dependent, and relational rather than static or universal, aligning with the need to examine how IGSs make sense of inclusion, exclusion, and ambiguity across diverse institutional spaces, relationships, and time points. Second, Strayhorn emphasizes the role of social identities (including cultural, linguistic, and minority status) in shaping belonging experiences, providing tools to explore the identity negotiation, acculturative challenges, and cross-cultural tensions salient for international students. Third, the framework highlights psychological safety as central to belonging and emphasizes how diminished belonging may shape students' stress, engagement, and relational experiences, which resonates with post-COVID concerns, such as xenophobia, immigration uncertainties, and relational barriers among IGSs (Mohamad & Manning, 2024; Tang et al., 2025b; van Kessel et al., 2025). Finally, by focusing on institutional responsibility and relational validation rather than individual assimilation, Strayhorn's model supports a phenomenological approach that centers participants' subjective meaning-making while offering implications for transformative practices, such as faculty mentorship, inclusive spaces, and cross-cultural support, that promote well-being and engagement in higher education and counseling contexts (Antonio & Baek, 2022; Dennen et al., 2024). Through this lens, this study can illuminate the nuanced, evolving ways IGSs experience belonging in cross-cultural graduate settings, addressing gaps in non-academic, emotional, and relational dimensions while contributing to theory and practice.

Methodology

This study examines how IGSs make sense of belonging, partial belonging, and non-belonging within institutional spaces of a U.S. university. Such experiences are often ambiguous, situational, and internally negotiated rather than clearly defined, requiring attention to how meaning is constructed through lived experiences. A phenomenological inquiry design was therefore employed to capture participants' subjective interpretations of inclusion, uncertainty, and exclusion as they unfolded across institutional contexts. Phenomenology emphasizes understanding how individuals experience and interpret phenomena as they are lived, making it well suited for examining meaning-making processes related to belonging (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Finlay, 2019).

Participants and Recruitment

Purposeful sampling strategies were used to recruit 15 IGSs enrolled at a large, research-intensive university in the United States, consistent with recommended sample sizes for phenomenological research (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Participants included both master's and doctoral students, with one participant (6.7%) enrolled in a doctoral program and 14 (93.3%) enrolled in master's programs. Participants' length of residence in the United States ranged from one month to eight years, providing varied institutional exposure. All participants were originally from Asian countries. Fourteen participants (93.3%) reported English as an additional language and one (6.7%) identified English as a native language. Eleven participants (73.3%) identified as female and four (26.7%) as male. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 36 years. Table 1 presents detailed demographic information for all participants.

Recruitment occurred through departmental listservs and peer referral. Recruitment emails described the study purpose, eligibility criteria, and participation procedures. Eligibility required participants to be at least 18 years old, enrolled in a master's or doctoral program in a university school of education (SOE), and holding an international student visa (F-1 or J-1). Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to recruitment and all participants provided informed consent. Participation was entirely voluntary. Individuals who referred potential participants were not informed whether those individuals chose to participate, and no identifying information was shared with referrers. Recruitment through listservs emphasized that participation or non-participation would not influence students' academic standing or relationships with faculty.

Table 1*Demographic Information of Participants (N = 15)*

Participant ID	Gender	Degree Program	Age	Primary Language Background	Time in the U.S.
P1	Female	Master's	22	Mandarin	< 1 year
P2	Female	Master's	24	Mandarin	1–5 years
P3	Female	Master's	24	Mandarin	< 1 year
P4	Female	Doctoral	36	Mandarin	1–5 years
P5	Female	Master's	23	Mandarin & Cantonese	1–5 years
P6	Male	Master's	22	Mandarin	< 1 year
P7	Female	Master's	24	Hindi, Marwari, Gujarati	< 1 year
P8	Female	Master's	23	Vietnamese	6–10 years
P9	Female	Master's	22	Mandarin	< 1 year
P10	Male	Master's	23	Mandarin	< 1 year
P11	Male	Master's	32	Indonesian (Javanese)	< 1 year
P12	Female	Master's	28	Mandarin	1–5 years
P13	Female	Master's	23	Mandarin	< 1 year
P14	Female	Master's	23	Mandarin	< 1 year
P15	Male	Master's	25	Arabic & English	1–5 years

Data Collection

Data collection included a demographic questionnaire and individual semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2024, and May 2025, using a secure, university-approved videoconferencing platform. The third author conducted the interviews. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

The interview protocol focused on participants' interpretations of institutional experiences related to belonging, partial belonging, and non-belonging. Questions invited reflection on academic, social, and institutional interactions that shaped participants' sense of place within the university. Sample questions included: "How would you describe your sense of belonging within the university school of education?" and "How have institutional policies or practices influenced your sense of belonging?"

Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on password-protected university servers accessible only to the research team. All identifying information

was removed during transcription and replaced with participant codes. Although no participant reported significant distress during interviews, participants were informed that they could pause or discontinue the interview at any time and were provided with information regarding university counseling and student support services if needed. Because English was an additional language for many participants, quotations are presented in this paper verbatim, with grammatical and linguistic features of their original speech retained to preserve the authenticity of their experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed phenomenological analytic procedures emphasizing participants' meaning-making processes (Moustakas, 1994). Transcripts were read multiple times to support immersion in the data, and initial exploratory notes were made to capture first impressions, descriptive observations, and preliminary interpretations. Horizontalization was used during initial analysis to identify significant statements related to experiences of belonging, with each statement treated as analytically meaningful.

Through iterative cycles of comparison and refinement, significant statements were clustered into meaning units reflecting both textural elements (what was experienced) and structural elements (how experiences were interpreted within institutional contexts). Researchers engaged in reflexive journaling and held regular discussions to monitor personal assumptions and maintain focus on participants' perspectives. The first author and the third author independently reviewed transcripts and coding decisions, resolving discrepancies through consensus meetings. Memos were written throughout to document analytic decisions and evolving interpretations.

Meaning units were synthesized into subthemes and themes that captured shared patterns and variation across participants' narratives, supporting a cross-case understanding of how IGSs interpreted belonging-related experiences. Convergences and divergences among participants were considered during theme development to represent both common experiences and individual variations. Several theme labels intentionally reflected participants' own expressions (i.e., *in vivo* wording) to preserve the phenomenological emphasis on participants' lived meanings rather than imposing researcher-generated terminology. While the theoretical framework informed the analytic process by serving as a sensitizing lens that guided attention to relational, spatial, and cultural dimensions of belonging, it did not function as *a priori* categories or impose predetermined structures on the data. Instead, themes were inductively derived from participants' lived experiences and continuously revisited and refined throughout the analytic process to ensure accuracy, depth, and rigor in interpretation (Nowell et al., 2017). Finally, textural and structural descriptions were integrated to construct an essential description of the phenomenon, capturing the shared essence of

international graduate students' lived experiences of belonging while preserving contextual variation across participants.

Researcher Reflexivity

The research team entered the research process in an ongoing conversation with our own experiences of international graduate education. Throughout design, interviewing, and analysis, we engaged in deliberate self-questioning to monitor how our histories, expectations, and institutional locations might contour what we noticed, emphasized, or left unspoken.

The first author drew on her lived experience as a former international graduate student and her current role as a counselor educator to remain attuned to cross-cultural meaning-making, power differentials, and institutional constraints shaping participants' narratives. This attentiveness was paired with sustained reflexive journaling and analytic memoing to examine how her interpretive lens intersected with participants' experiences. The second author, who also has lived experience as an international student and is now a counselor educator, occupied a dialogic and critical role in the analytic process. By independently reviewing codes, thematic structures, and narrative interpretations, she challenged assumptions and strengthened analytic transparency and confirmability. The third author, a current international master's student, contributed an immediacy to the research team's reflexive dialogue, offering insight into relational dynamics, moments of resonance, and patterns of engagement that might otherwise be normalized or overlooked. The fourth author, a current international doctoral student in counselor education, contributed to the literature review. By integrating previous theory and research on belongingness and international student experiences, she highlighted the need for more qualitative study on IGSs' sense of belonging. Together, reflexivity operated as a collective commitment to bracketing certainty, sustaining analytic tension, and continually returning to participants' meanings as the primary source of knowledge.

Trustworthiness Strategies

Several strategies were employed to enhance rigor and trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2020). These included independent coding followed by consensus discussions, prolonged engagement with the data, and the use of thick description. Peer debriefing was conducted throughout the analytic process, during which the second author independently reviewed coding decisions and thematic development and engaged in critical discussions with the research team to strengthen analytic credibility and reflexivity. An audit trail was maintained throughout the project. Member checking was used to confirm interpretive accuracy, and direct participant quotations grounded findings in participants' lived experiences, supporting credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Results

To protect confidentiality while maintaining clarity, participants are identified throughout the results using alphanumeric codes (P1, P2, etc.).

Core Experiences of Belonging

Participants described belonging not as a single, uniform experience but as one that unfolded through progressively deeper layers. Belonging began with a basic sense of comfort and safety that allowed participants to remain present; it then extended into sustained peer relationships, deepened into feeling personally valued by faculty and the institution, and ultimately culminated in finding others who shared similar values, purposes, and visions of who they might become.

Comfort and Psychological Safety

At the most foundational level, participants described belonging as a sense of comfort and safety that allowed them to be present and engaged. This experience was less about close relationships and more about feeling accepted in the environment. P1 described this experience, saying,

The first thing I can think about is like being comfortable... it's kind of sense of belonging that I'm part of the group, and it's like the time that I wish I can stay in, and then I can kind of connect... fully enjoyed, in present in the group... I feel like I'm part of it.

P2 described being surrounded by familiar, welcoming others, “Physically being in there and like, surrounded by people I know and people I can talk to... and, like, everyone is really nice in our cohort. I guess I just feel safe.” P4 similarly emphasized safety and inclusion, saying, “I feel the environment is safe enough, inclusive enough for me to share any kind of thoughts.” These accounts suggest that belonging begins with a basic sense of acceptance characterized by feeling safe, welcomed, and able to participate freely.

Sustained Peer Relationships

Belonging grew when friendships lasted beyond class and daily tasks. It was not just about sitting next to someone in class; it was about keeping in touch, doing things together, and really feeling connected over time. P5 noted that “We interact in class but after we go home and everything's gone,” describing how interactions that remained confined to the classroom could feel temporary and disconnected from participants' lives outside the program. P12 described a

semester-long group experience “got my group into a very cohesive little unit. We became very good friends with each other, and that relationship continued after that class finished.” P6 also emphasized “forming meaningful relationships with my peers,” often through shared activities such as “lunch or dinner with my friends.” These ongoing friendships made participants feel supported and like they truly belonged in their community.

Being Valued, Respected, and Needed

Belonging further deepened when participants felt personally recognized and valued by faculty and their institution. This layer of belonging extended beyond connection to a sense of being seen as an individual whose presence mattered. P9 shared that: “They address me specifically... I feel they saw me.” She further noted that faculty care extended beyond the classroom, saying, “They are not just solely for class, but also they care about us after class, and they pop up all the time.”

Feeling respected emerged when participants sensed that their unique circumstances were acknowledged. P14 reflected on this institutional message, stating, “They tell us that we need to address every student's needs at school.” Beyond feeling seen and respected, some participants described a deeper dimension of belonging: feeling needed by the community. P9 noted, “I feel I can contribute to my community... it's about the sense of achievement.” For her, belonging was not merely about receiving support but also recognizing that her contributions mattered.

Finding Like-minded People

At the deepest level, belonging emerged through resonance in values, beliefs, and purposes when participants found others who shared similar missions or understanding the world. P9 described this resonance with peers, stating, “We might share some similar mission of beliefs, values or philosophy.” For P8, shared background and interests provided the foundation for connection, saying, “I feel more confident where I see other people that have the same interests and have probably the same background... So, I really feel belonged.” P6 similarly observed a shared ethos in his discipline, stating, “We are psychology major students and all psychology major students are very nice.”

With faculty, this resonance extended beyond shared interests to identity and future orientation. P9 reflected, “I like them. I think they share a lot of similarities with me. And I found, oh, maybe I can be someone like them later. I feel they motivate me a lot.” Seeing aspects of herself reflected in faculty and imagining a possible future self through them, created a profound sense of

belonging that went beyond comfort, connection, or recognition, anchoring belonging in shared values and identity alignment.

Contexts for Partial Belonging

Belonging was not experienced uniformly across contexts. Participants often described belonging as partial and bounded, shaped by social boundaries, physical spaces, and time. The following sub-themes represent distinct contextual conditions that constrained participants' sense of belonging.

Belonging in the Small Group

Belonging was unevenly distributed across levels of community. Participants often felt strong belonging within small, close-knit groups but little connection to the larger institutional community. P15 observed, "I think a lot of students feel like they belong to their group of friends. I don't think that they feel like they belong to an SOE larger community." This pattern was echoed in participants' experiences. P4 noted feeling "very closely engaged in small groups" but not belonging to "the big group of SOE." P12 similarly described a "tight little community of counseling students" while feeling little connection to the school of education. She attributed this partly to structural factors, particularly the lack of cross-program interaction, saying, "We don't necessarily have a lot of opportunities to interact with... educational... or PhD students. We don't have classes together. We rarely have activities together."

Spatial Experiences of Belonging

Participants described physical space as a powerful context shaping psychological belonging. P12, relocated from the main campus to a temporary site due to building renovations, described a tangible loss, saying,

When we used to be at the old building, we had a lot more opportunities to engage with each other because we had that space to hang out. And now most of us feel like we're in somebody else's place.... So, we don't normally hang out after class because we need to be mindful of other people's presence.

First-year students, lacking a point of comparison, still expressed limited ownership. P1 noted, "That building is still not for us... We are kind of being thrown there, just kind of isolated." At the same time, the same space could foster closeness within small groups. P13 described the environment as "very chill," noting that "it really gathers us in, like, a very private place." Still, she acknowledged the trade-off as

this proximity came at the cost of “isolation from making friends... from other majors.”

Belonging Takes Time

Belonging was not automatic but constructed gradually over time. P15 reflected, “I don't feel like there was an inherent... just because you're an SOE student here, you belong to the SOE.” For many, the first semester represented a challenging adjustment. P7 described this time as difficult “in terms of my mental health, my physical health, and just overall comfortability with life.... It was just my adjustment period.” P14 acknowledged her belonging was “not very high... because it's my 1st year, and I still need to get to know people more.”

With time, belonging could grow. P8 described “a really growing sense of belonging already,” while P2 reflected, “It's definitely getting better, since everyone's getting close with each other.” For students in shorter programs, time itself functioned as a constraint. P3 noted, “I don't feel a belonging to SOE. Yeah, because also my program just a one-year program,” suggesting that one year may be insufficient to develop a fuller sense of institutional belonging.

Negotiating Language, Culture, and Identity

Participants described navigating a complex terrain of language, culture, and identity. Using a non-native language signaled “otherness,” constrained self-expression, and required ongoing negotiation between staying true to oneself and fitting in. The following subthemes capture three interconnected but distinct aspects: External cues signaling foreignness, internal experiences of identity adaptation, and strategies participants used to navigate these challenges.

Being Marked as “the Foreigner”

Language and culture functioned as constant reminders of otherness, triggering awareness of being foreign. P10 explained,

Sometimes, I still find that using English to communicate is not as fluent as using our mother tongue. So, this would occasionally remind me that I am in a foreign country with a group of foreign people speaking a foreign language.

Beyond fluency, cultural uncertainty compounded this sense of difference. P4 noted, “I really don't know how to do the small talks.... If it's in Chinese context, I will be more comfortable because I already know the social norms.” P10 similarly described “the thinking patterns difference” as a barrier. This uncertainty bred

anxiety about judgment. P2 worried that “some of them might think that what I said is stupid” and that she might be “wasting people's time.” Such vigilance was exhausting. As P11 put it simply, “I just feel tired.”

Not Feeling Like My Natural Self

Participants described an internal sense of distance from their “natural self” when using English. Rather than simply communicating in another language, they experienced a subtle compression of identity, feeling less expressive, less spontaneous, and less fully themselves. This experience was not framed as a choice but as a felt shift in who they could be in English-speaking contexts. P2 described, “When I'm with my Chinese friends... I get to be more like me. But when I speak English, especially with natives... I'm a different person.... I might show less of my own character.” P10 echoed this feeling and highlighted the contrast between home and host environments, saying, “If we are at home, we don't need to pretend.... It's not my natural self.”

Identity Management Strategies

Participants developed strategies to navigate tension between staying true to themselves and adapting to a new linguistic and cultural environment by actively managing their visibility. Some chose to dress up, adjusting their language, behavior, and self-presentation to fit in. P2 described code-switching, explaining, “Speaking in my first language doesn't really cost so much energy... if my friends aren't there, I can socialize in English with others.” She also adapted based on observation, saying, “leaning more towards what I observed people do in English culture.” P10 similarly dressed up and monitored himself, noting, “I added a lot of decoration dressings on my true self, so that people around me can adapt... I would be like extra careful and think a bit more before I speak.”

At times, participants withdrew instead of adapting, choosing to stay invisible when the cost of engagement felt too high. P2 admitted, “I sometimes stay quiet, especially when many people are listening.” P10 described becoming invisible, noting, “I would avoid any unnecessary conversations... sometimes I would just, like, I'm an invisible man.” Through these strategies, dressing up to integrate or withdrawing to protect themselves, participants actively negotiated their presence in the community while managing the risks of exposure, miscommunication, or social judgment. These actions reflected belonging as both an internal and performative process, where identity is continuously adapted to context.

Diversity Paradox and Belonging Tensions

Belonging was shaped not only by relationships but also by who those relationships were with. Participants described tensions at both ends of the diversity spectrum, with either too few co-nationals or too many, and each presenting distinct barriers. While all subthemes touched on partial belonging, each highlighted a distinct mechanism: Minority status, majority composition, or cross-cultural interaction.

Feeling Like the Only One

When co-national peers were scarce, international students faced isolation tied to their minority status. P12, one of only two international students in her cohort, described, "Most of my peers are not international students. And I am. So, some of those experiences can be different... that is a difficulty that many of my peers wouldn't understand." She highlighted experiences that lacked resonance, saying, "Many of my peers are not exactly sure about how hard it is to stay in the US and get a work visa afterwards. But that is something that's only faced by international students and not others." As a result, "That is something that feels harder to connect with others."

P7 illustrated similar dynamics, stating,

The context is different, and the kind of things people talk about here is very different from India... These differences sort of like take center stage when I'm hanging out with people. And that reduces like my ability to connect.

She added: "I've just not connected with anybody on a one-on-one level yet in my cohort" and "not super enmeshed with the people around me."

Surrounded by a Bubble

Choosing to stay with co-nationals was natural. P2 explained, "I feel like it's pretty normal for me to just turn to my friends... I do know them better and speak in my first language, which doesn't really cost so much energy." P3 echoed, "You will feel very safe with your hometown friends."

Yet, this comfort had trade-offs. P3 observed, "If you have your friend from the same country, you will just stop to make more new friends around from other country." Over time, this created what P2 called a "bubble," saying, "We're surrounding ourselves by a bubble, and kind of secluded from the rest of the students." She stressed, "It's not something we do by intention." Excessive homogeneity undermined the sense of entering a new community, as P3 noted,

Before I came to this program, I was thinking that my classmates were from

around the world. But all my classmates just Chinese. We always speak Mandarin to each other. So, I don't have a feeling about, like, I'm in a new community. I just feel like I'm going in China."

For P3, the familiarity that initially offered comfort also diminished the sense of entering a new cultural and educational environment. They experienced a continuation of the social world she had left behind. The "bubble," therefore, reflected the tension between seeking safety and connection and trying to participate in a broader community. What felt easy and secure could simultaneously limit opportunities to develop relationships beyond the co-national group.

Still Feeling on the Outside

Experiences of belonging could not be explained solely by the number of co-national peers present. Participants described feeling disconnected even in contexts where many students shared their nationality, suggesting that proximity and similarity did not automatically translate into belonging. Co-national presence sometimes intensified feelings of emotional distance, highlighting that belonging depended less on who was around and more on how participants were recognized and engaged within the broader community. P9 captured this paradox by saying, "I hope to have a sense of belonging, although there are lots of Chinese students as me in this context, but still I feel lonely." P2 observed that interactions limited to co-nationals could reinforce isolation, noting, "If only my Chinese friends say hi to me... that will actually make me feel a little more excluded, not excluded, but like secluded." Conversely, cross-cultural interactions expanded belonging: "When I'm interacting more with students that are not from China, I do feel more belong to the school in general.... They recognize me as one of a part of the school instead of just like Chinese students."

Discussion

This study examined how IGSs experience belonging across academic, social, and institutional contexts. Participants described belonging as layered, conditional, and relational, beginning with basic comfort and safety, extending to relational connections with peers, recognition by faculty, and alignment with like-minded mentors. These experiences align with prior research suggesting that belonging is associated with psychological well-being, engagement, and relational functioning, whereas partial or thwarted belonging may contribute to increased stress, isolation, and reduced participation (Maslow, 1943; Ploskonka & Servaty-Seib, 2015; Strayhorn, 2019; van Kessel et al., 2025; Versteeg et al., 2022). However, the present findings extend existing literature by providing a nuanced understanding of how belonging develops progressively, unfolds across contexts, and is influenced by language, culture, and identity negotiation. Collectively, these

findings build upon emerging qualitative work conceptualizing belonging as conditional (e.g., Paik & Braxton, 2026) by demonstrating that conditional belonging is not merely produced by institutional conditions but also lived as a fluctuating, relational, and phenomenological experience across time, space, and social relationships.

Layered Development of Belonging

Participants' descriptions of belonging revealed a progressive layering process, beginning with comfort and psychological safety, expanding through sustained peer relationships, and deepening via recognition from faculty and alignment with mentors who shared their values and visions. This layered progression aligns with Strayhorn's (2019) assertion that belonging is dynamic rather than static and extends prior work by highlighting the relational and identity-based dimensions particularly salient for graduate students. Unlike undergraduates, who may rely primarily on peer networks for belonging, IGSs in this study emphasized connections that supported both professional identity and future trajectories. Rather than representing sequential stages that every student progresses through, these layers reflect qualitatively different relational experiences that could emerge, recede, or coexist depending on institutional contexts and interpersonal interactions. This finding further support recent conceptualizations of belonging as dynamic and context-dependent.

Uneven Geography of Belonging

Our findings complement those of Paik and Braxton (2026), who describe international graduate students' belonging as contingent upon institutional conditions such as advisor support, funding, and disciplinary environments. Whereas their findings identified the institutional conditions under which belonging is facilitated or constrained, the present study extends this work by illustrating how such conditionality is phenomenologically experienced as partial, uneven, and context-dependent belonging that shifts across interpersonal, spatial, and temporal contexts. In this study, strong connection within small, tight-knit groups often coexisted with weak identification with the larger institutional community, illustrating that belonging is unevenly distributed across contexts. Physical space played a critical role, as relocation to less central or shared facilities hindered spontaneous interactions and limited participants' sense of ownership and visibility. Similarly, program duration affected belonging development; participants in shorter programs reported more limited opportunities to establish relationships and integrate into institutional culture. These findings suggest that institutional belonging cannot be understood solely through interpersonal relationships. Physical environments, organizational structures, and program design actively shape opportunities for interaction, indicating that belonging is co-produced

through both relational and environmental conditions (Mohamad & Manning, 2024; Rickert, 2025).

Emotional Labor of Linguistic and Cultural Adaptation

Language and culture emerged as persistent mediators of belonging, influencing both self-expression and relational engagement. Using English as a non-native language constrained participants' communication, often prompting strategic silence, careful self-presentation, or selective engagement, consistent with Mohamad and Manning (2024), Cheng et al. (2025), and Tang et al. (2026). While Paik and Braxton (2026) emphasize the pressure associated with language proficiency and constantly proving oneself, participants in the present study further described the subjective experience of this pressure as feeling disconnected from their "natural self," suggesting that linguistic adaptation involves not only communicative competence but also identity negotiation. Strategies, such as "dressing up" or selectively withdrawing, illustrate active negotiation of visibility and authenticity, reflecting belonging as a performative, context-dependent process. These insights advance the literature by emphasizing the intertwined nature of language, identity, and psychological safety in shaping graduate students' relational experiences (Cheng et al., 2025; Mohamad & Manning, 2024; Tang et al., 2025a; Tang et al., 2026).

Compositional Dynamics of Belonging

Participants described belonging as shaped not only by relationships but also by the composition of their peers. Similar to Paik and Braxton (2026), participants relied heavily on co-national communities as important sources of emotional safety. However, our findings further suggested that these communities simultaneously supported and constrained belonging. Rather than functioning as either protective or isolating, co-national relationships became one context in which belonging remained partial and negotiated. Minority status generated isolation and experiences that peers could not easily understand, whereas excessive homogeneity produced a sense of seclusion from the broader institutional community (Findlay et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2022; Antonio & Baek, 2022). Cross-cultural interactions were critical in expanding belonging, yet participants noted that simple proximity to diverse peers did not automatically produce inclusion. This paradox extended prior findings on social integration, demonstrating that both minority and majority dynamics interact to shape conditional belonging (Mohamad & Manning, 2024; Rickert, 2025). Our findings suggested that optimal belonging may require a balance between co-national ties, which provide cultural grounding and safety, and cross-cultural interactions, which foster recognition within the broader community.

The findings of the present study highlight that belonging for IGSs is a complex, context-dependent process shaped by relational, spatial, and cultural factors. Belonging unfolds progressively and is influenced by interactions with peers, faculty, and institutional structures, as well as the emotional effort involved in navigating language and cultural adaptation. The study revealed how structural and compositional conditions, such as physical spaces, program duration, and peer diversity, interact with relational and identity-based factors to support or constrain inclusion. These insights extend prior research by emphasizing that fostering belonging requires attention not only to academic integration but also to relational, temporal, and cultural dynamics unique to IGSs.

Limitations and Future Research

As is common in qualitative research, transferability of findings is limited by the study's focus on 15 IGSs at a single U.S. research university. Interviews were conducted in English, which may have constrained participants' ability to fully convey subtle or emotional aspects of belonging. While participants were all from Asian countries, their cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds varied widely and findings may not generalize to other regions or intersectional identities such as gender, socioeconomic status, or visa type.

Future research could examine belonging longitudinally and across multiple institutions, explore interventions that support partial or conditional belonging, and investigate how language, identity negotiation, and minority status interact with well-being and retention outcomes. Such work would provide actionable insights to inform inclusive practices and promote psychological safety and engagement among diverse international graduate student populations.

Implications for Practice and Campus Health

Institutions should actively foster inclusive, relationally supportive environments for IGSs by intentionally creating structured opportunities for cross-program interaction, designing shared physical spaces that facilitate informal peer engagement, and supporting culturally responsive faculty practices that validate students' linguistic and cultural identities. Campus health and counseling services can support IGSs by validating experiences of partial belonging, addressing identity-related stressors, and normalizing strategies for navigating cross-cultural adaptation. Structured mentorship programs, faculty training, and culturally sustaining interventions informed by multilingual supervision research (Tang & Grothaus, 2023) can equip faculty and staff to recognize linguistic and cultural diversity, foster mutual learning, and promote inclusive engagement, which enhance both psychological well-being and academic success. Promoting inclusive engagement, peer networks, and faculty mentorship aligns with the broader goals of health promotion and student flourishing in higher education.

Conclusion

Rather than representing a stable psychological state, belonging emerged as an ongoing relational process that fluctuated across institutional spaces, relationships, and stages of graduate education. Understanding this dynamic nature of belonging provides a more nuanced foundation for supporting international graduate students in increasingly diverse higher education contexts. Future research could explore diverse settings and longitudinal experiences to better understand how belonging evolves over time.

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AI Use Statement

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