Empirical Article

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**Hidden Struggles: Increasing International Graduate Students' Sense of Belonging**

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**Abstract**

*Although international graduate students make valuable contributions to American society, they often encounter significant difficulties. Further research is crucial to help universities better understand and accommodate international graduate students. We initiated a mixed-method participatory action research cycle, starting with a needs assessment that utilized social constructivist and culturally relevant teaching approaches. Our goal is to contribute to international higher education by examining the experiences of international graduate students at a Midwestern University, including their sense of belonging and the factors that promote their success. Our findings reveal that their challenges include language barriers, unfamiliar U.S. social norms, academic expectations, and legal obstacles; international graduate students benefit from a supportive university community with culturally aware professors and peers, which foster a sense of belonging.*

**Keywords:** international graduate students, sense of belonging

**Introduction**

International students enhance the United States (U.S.) in myriad ways, from scientific advancement to cultural contributions and athletic accomplishments. They stimulate the economy, positively affecting the labor market. Over 415,000 jobs exist to support international students (Raimondo, 2021), and they contributed $44.7 billion to the U.S. economy in 2018 alone (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019). In 2022, 1,362,157 active international students enrolled in U.S. universities (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE], 2022), and they accounted for 4.7 % of the total U.S. higher education population in 2022 (IIE, 2023).

This demographic includes international graduate students (IGS) who bring their unique career and academic experiences from abroad. However, research indicates that IGS encounter various challenges (Skromanis et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2018), which affect their sense of belonging and success in U.S. universities. Studies are needed to explore whether universities are meeting IGS’ needs and how IGS find a sense of belonging as they navigate the transition from their home countries to the U.S.

Through a participatory action research framework (PAR), our research team assessed the needs of IGS while working toward a better understanding of how IGS find a sense of belonging in U.S. higher education. The ultimate purpose of this research is to encourage reflection and improve the services and support for IGS at a large urban Midwestern University (MWU).

**Purpose**

Learning is insufficient without action, and we aimed to enact social justice through a PAR framework. By partnering with IGS and engaging stakeholders who work with IGS, we sought to learn more about current systems of support that may increase the sense of belonging and reflect on improvements to the IGS experience at every stage of their MWU journey. As a first step, we defined the current and specific needs of IGS through surveys, interviews, and focus group interviews and explored ways to meet their needs better. The research examines what would mediate an enhanced sense of belonging at MWU for IGS. The following questions guided the research: What are the experiences of IGS as they transition from their home countries to MWU? How do they find a sense of belonging? What support will ensure IGS’ success and give them a sense of belonging?

**Context**

At MWU, institutional support is available for this population, including International Student and Scholar Services, dedicated student clubs (such as the IGS Organization – which only serves international graduate students), and community cultural organizations (such as local temples and churches). However, it became clear to the research team that IGS at MWU experience challenges, and their experiences are consistent with the international student experience described in the existing literature. Anecdotal evidence and earlier studies (Skromanis et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2018; O’Meara et al., 2017) have confirmed the need for further research and actions to improve institutional support for IGS. To meet the IGS' demands and help them overcome the challenges, and to understand their unique experiences, this study, through a PAR framework, examines how IGS experience a sense of belonging or lack thereof.

**Literature Review**

   Despite varying degrees of institutional support, research suggests that IGS experience challenges, unlike their domestic counterparts, including but not limited to adjusting to language barriers, differences in academic systems, cultural conflicts, racial discrimination, social isolation, and emotional concerns (Skromanis et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2018). These stressors can potentially inhibit an international graduate student’s “sense of belonging” (O’Meara et al., 2017, p. 1). The above stressors can negatively affect their mental and physical wellbeing and create barriers to academic success in U.S. institutions of higher learning, thus limiting their potential future global and domestic economic contributions (Hyun et al., 2007; O’Meara et al., 2017). Previous research elucidates that many universities are not providing the international student population with sufficient support and necessary resources to overcome the challenges to thrive (Hyun et al., 2007; Skromanis et al., 2018).

Glass (2018) focuses on the international student's sense of belonging and points out that an international student’s identity and sense of self may be called into question when asked by domestic peers and university staff, “Where are you from?” often meaning “why are you here?” (Glass, 2018, p. 27). This recurring question, in turn, can affect the creation and maintenance of meaningful relationships and the development of social capital. It is a fine line that international students walk in wishing to keep their home cultures while also seeking acceptance within U.S. campus life. In discussing belonging and power, Glass (2018) examines how neo-racism discrimination based upon cultural differences can negatively affect an international student’s sense of belonging. Similarly, Aggarwal and Ciftci (2020) examine the experience of South Asian international students and the impact that colorblind racial ideology and “racism-related stress” (p. 2265) has on their sense of belonging.

Another important consideration when examining the experiences of IGS in higher education is the need for more support provided by trained faculty, staff, and administration. Guo (2016) sees advisors as crucial to supporting international students who must navigate an entirely new educational system while learning to speak a new language and adjusting to new customs. Guo (2016) writes that, as a result, international students may experience feelings of insecurity, frustration, or defeat. It is crucial that academic advisors are aware of issues facing international students and are trained appropriately to support IGS and mitigate the unique challenges they face. Similarly, Johnson et al. (2018) advocated for the need to “develop programs to meet the psychological and cultural adjustment concerns of international students....” after finding that international students were experiencing difficulties “adjusting to language barriers, different academic systems, cultural conflicts, racial discrimination, social isolation, and emotional concerns” (p.1866).

The acculturative stress (Aggarwal & Ciftci, 2020) prevalent among international students can manifest through a diminished sense of belonging, language barriers, culture shock, financial issues, blatant or covert discrimination, and myriad other obstacles. These complications produce real consequences that can negatively affect an international student’s academic career, self-esteem, and mental and physical health. Often, international students shoulder these challenges themselves without the support of university faculty (Aggarwal & Ciftci, 2020; Glass, 2018; Guo, 2016; Johnson et al., 2018; Yao, 2016).

The literature review found limited PAR studies on IGS "belonging." Two previous relevant research on belonging in an educational context employing participatory action research reveal both benefits and limitations. Researchers elevate and honor the voices of student participants in identifying the core problem, divulging their lived experiences, and partnering on recommendations to address entrenched, disenfranchising institutional practices; however, studies acknowledge that fostering agency in student participants does not necessarily broaden their spheres of influence to create change in educational institutions that are largely bureaucratic and slow to alter hegemonic practices (Johnson, 2016; Stack & Wang, 2018).

Although most of the literature reviewed concerned international students as one demographic, we see IGS as a distinct part of that population showing similar characteristics and bringing their own specific assets and needs, which could include additional academic and work experience and familial duties. The literature demonstrates a pattern of IGS challenges that hinder their overall sense of belonging while enrolled at U.S. universities. IGS in higher education is an often-overlooked segment that requires more comprehensive support. To view their needs as identical to those of domestic graduate students is problematic because of their specific circumstances. The current study attempts to contribute to the gaps in this literature, focusing on IGS.

**Theoretical Framework**

  This participatory action research study is guided by aspects from the theories of social constructivism (Davis et al., 2017) and culturally responsive teaching (CRT) (Gay, 2018) to explore issues affecting IGS’ experiences at MWU. Social constructivism, as it applies to an educational context, posits that learning is socially mediated: “Students learn primarily through interactions with their peers, teachers, and parents, whereas teachers stimulate and facilitate conversation through harnessing the natural flow of conversation in the classroom” (Davis et al., 2017, p. 67). Successful teaching and learning practices, therefore, depend upon interactions between professors and students. The instructor’s role is crucial in nurturing students’ sense of belonging in the classroom and ultimate mastery of academic and social skills.

CRT (Gay, 2018) provides a lens through which to address inequities in the classroom. CRT acknowledges the precarious nature of the "racial and ethnic climate in the United States and the world [as] more ominous" with "increased vulnerability of minoritized racial and ethnic groups endanger[ing] the attainment of educational equity for victimized groups” (Gay, 2018, p. xi). The moral imperative of CRT exists in its central paradigmatic shift away from a deficit view to a difference as an asset model in addressing the unique needs of an increasingly diverse student population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 62). The forming of the research questions for the current study, the selection of research design and methods, and the data collection, analysis, and interpretation are guided by this conceptual framework.

**Methodology**

Through a PAR model with a mixed-method explanatory sequential design, our research team situated this study in the PAR cycle at the needs assessment stage (see Figures 1 and 2). We assessed the needs of IGS while working toward a better understanding of how these students find a sense of belonging in the U.S. With recommendations from the needs assessment, the future steps of the PAR cycle will consist of developing interventions, implementing, and evaluating the interventions, and monitoring IGS input, and continuous improvement.

The intent of a PAR design is “to involve participants in all phases of the design of the study, and to […] bring change in the community” (Creswell, 2014, p. 66). We sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of international graduate students as they transition from their home countries to MWU?

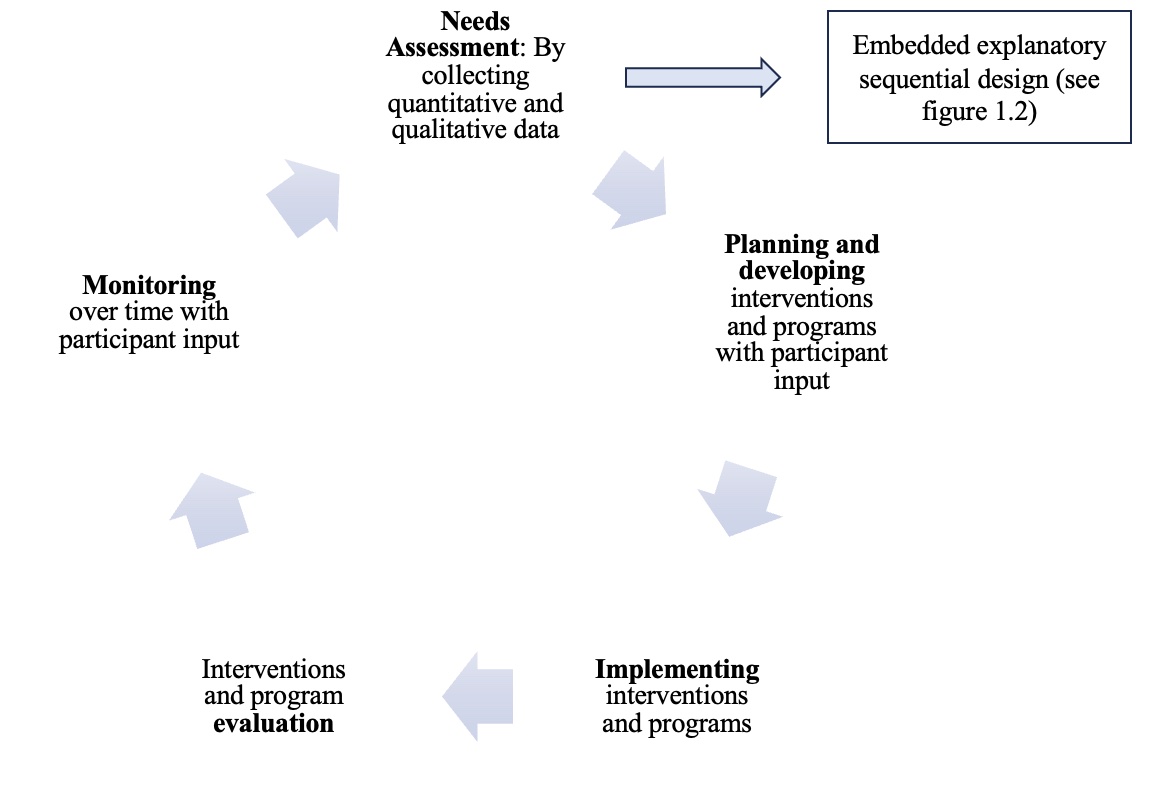
2. How do they find a sense of belonging?

3. What support will ensure international graduate students' success and give them a sense of belonging?

As the overarching concept, participatory action frameworks "involve participants in the research, bringing about change to address inequities and helping underrepresented groups and populations” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 68). PAR is research conducted with people and ‘for’ people, not ‘on’ people (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019). PAR honors the lived experiences of IGS, who, despite increased globalization prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, faced both the threat and the implementation of restrictive visa policies during the Trump administration (Schnell, 2020). The study involved IGS, faculty, and MWU staff as participants and partners.

**Figure 1**

*PAR Framework with Embedded Explanatory Sequential Design*



**Figure 2**

*Explanatory Sequential Design*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Phase 1** |  | **Phase 2** |  | **Phase 3** |
| -Clarify issues and problem diagnosis;  -Quantitative questionnaire data collection and analysis |  | -Explain questionnaire results and find issue specifics;  -Interviews/focus group data analysis with participant input |  | -Suggest interventions to improve the experience of participants;  -Detail how interviews/ focus groups supported questionnaire results;  - Use participant feedback to create recommendations |

The explanatory sequential design meant that methods were integrated with the transition from quantitative to qualitative strands, as results from the first strand “helped to form the follow-up questions” (Creswell, 2014, p. 54) in the second strand. In the first phase, an initial questionnaire was administered through Qualtrics for IGS to assess their sense of belonging within the university and satisfaction level with institutional support. In the second phase, we gained in-depth knowledge through interviews and focus groups with the participants about their experiences. In the third phase, we generated recommendations about improving institutional support. These recommendations would then form the basis for the following stages of study in the iteration of a PAR cycle (see Figures 1 and 2).

Due to the state mandated COVID protocols during the data collection phase, the focus groups/interviews took place online. Although face-to-face interactions are conducive to building relational trust with participants, the team found that collecting data online also led to relational trust with participants. Zoom allows voices, tones, and emotions in conversations to come through and recorded written activities on Google Jamboard allowed the same. The team also practiced CRT in data collection, kept an appreciative open mind, checked their personal biases, and analyzed the data with empathy and cultural understanding.

**Participants**

Prior to identifying participants, we conducted a Stakeholder Rainbow Analysis (SRA), a PAR tool to determine “who needs to be involved in deliberations, decision making or actions to achieve project goals” (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019, p. 247). From the results of the SRA, we identified university personnel (instructors, advisers, administrators, and office staff) and IGS who are highly “influential” and highly “affected” as the key stakeholders in this study. The SRA template that was used is in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Rainbow Stakeholder Analysis Template*

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(Chevalier & Buckles, 2019, p. 75)

To gain a preliminary understanding of the IGS experience at MWU, we designed a six-question instrument on a 5-point Likert scale, the Needs-Assessment Questionnaire (see the statements below).

**S1.** The University’s International Student and Scholars Services provide adequate resources and comprehensive support for IGS.

**S2.** The University provides a welcoming and inclusive environment for IGS.

**S3.** The University provides IGS with sufficient opportunities for research and collaborative work with faculty and peers.

**S4.** The University offers meaningful extracurricular activities and dedicated events geared to IGS.

**S5.** As an IGS, navigating the campus culture and forging meaningful connections with other graduate students and faculty at the University can be a challenge.

**S6**. I feel included and supported by the University community.

The questionnaire was given to IGS recruited through Facebook and WhatsApp groups for the IGS organization. We also used word of mouth via text, email, and in-person chats with our IGS peers. To be considered for the study, participants met the following criteria: international students enrolled at MWU in a graduate program during the 2020-2021 school year. Since “respondents volunteered to be included in the study or were recommended by others [it represented] a non-random sample with snowballing” (Creswell, 2014, p. 90). We included those individuals with knowledge and experience of the phenomena and asked them to recommend others who might also be able to provide insight.

There were ten respondents for the initial questionnaire; all were IGS ranging from eighteen to forty-five years old and hailing from Africa, Asia, and Europe. Some have lived in the U.S. for a decade, and others only a matter of months. Those students willing to continue the study following the questionnaire (n=3) were recruited to take part in a focus group. The participant sampling for focus groups and interviews was purposeful as we wanted a “sample of participants who [could] best help us understand” (Creswell, 2014, p.88) the issues related to the IGS experience and be able to create recommendations that could increase their sense of belonging. Since the study’s goal was primarily a needs assessment distributed to develop recommendations, we also included MWU university personnel participants who were contacted directly via email; we used a snowball approach. The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured, with questions guided by the results of the questionnaire. The PAR technique of Free Listing/Pile Sorting was employed to encourage and lead participants in discussion and brainstorming in the focus groups. Free listing “invites people to generate a list of elements in the domain,” which needs to be “combined with pile sorting to organize ideas into fewer categories [as] focus for group discussion” (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019, p. 115).

**Data Analysis**

Descriptive analysis was performed on the questionnaire data. The results helped the research team develop individual and focus group interview guides. Later, the results of the focus groups and interviews were transcribed and thematically coded by each researcher and used to answer the research questions. Inter-rater reliability was then used to develop the consistent themes of the qualitative data (based on a greater than 60 % agreement rate).

Following the PAR framework, the themes were shared with the participants to confirm, edit, or expand upon ideas from their original input. While the student participants actively confirmed the researcher’s perceived themes, faculty and staff did not provide fulsome feedback (but did affirm the research team’s perspectives). The themes confirmed the quantitative data collected with the questionnaire, demonstrating the importance of data triangulation. Both data sets were integrated to assess how MWU could better serve its IGS population and develop recommendations for the institution.

**Positionality and Validity**

Current international and domestic graduate students and faculty and staff involved in this study have had experience as international students or allies working with international students. Further, the research team included one current IGS, one former IGS, one former international faculty member, and two domestic students. The team brings insider views and has been aware of potential biases in their experience that may affect the study. Several measures were taken to guarantee the credibility and trustworthiness of the results. First, the team members reflected at each step through debriefing, self-checking on potential biases, discussing their interpretations, and conducting inter-rater reliability. Secondly, the PAR approach also allowed the team to involve university personnel and students as participants, to listen to them, and to receive their feedback through member checking, which is a “technique for exploring the credibility of results [in which] results are returned to participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences” (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1802). The team sought an ethical balance given our insider/outsider positionality with current IGS as participants; the team was well-positioned to lead the research with caution, hope, and empathy.

**Results**

In this section, we will first discuss the results from the six-statement Needs-Assessment Questionnaire and then the qualitative data from the interviews and focus groups.

Ten students completed the questionnaire in the 2021-2022 academic year. The results provided a snapshot of how IGS perceived the culture of MWU. Each response item on the Likert scale was given a value, with 1 being “strongly agree” and 5 being “strongly disagree." The results from a few sample questions are below. S2's results indicate that 60% of the respondents strongly agreed that the institution provides a welcoming and inclusive environment for IGS. The results of S4 show that 50% of participants agreed that the University offers meaningful extracurricular activities and dedicated events geared to IGS. The final statement demonstrates that 40% of the participants strongly agreed that there is a level of inclusion and support for IGS.

The data, however, could have been more positive. 50% of respondents strongly agreed that it could be challenging navigating the campus culture and forging meaningful connections with other graduate students (S5), and 30% of respondents somewhat disagreed with the statement “I feel included and supported by the MWU community” (S6).

As noted in **Table 1** below, on average, respondents felt supported by the culture at MWU (1.89 for S1 and 1.60 for S2). They felt it was possible to make meaningful connections with other community members (2.1 for S3). The data generated from the questionnaire provided us with a basis for probing deeper to explore how MWU’s culture responds to the needs of IGS for S4 (2.40), S5 (1.60), and S6 (2.30), respectively.

**Table 1**

Results of Questionnaire (Strongly agree 1, Strongly disagree 5)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Statements (S) 1-6 | Average Score | Standard Deviation | Strongly and Somewhat Agree | Somewhat Disagree and Strongly Disagree |
| S1. Adequate resources and comprehensive support | 1.89 | 0.92 | 60% | 0% |
| S2. A welcoming and inclusive environment | 1.60 | 0.84 | 80% | 0% |
| S3. Opportunity to collaborate on research with faculty and peers | 2.1 | 1.26 | 60% | 20% |
| S4. Meaningful extracurricular activities/events | 2.40 | 0.84 | 60% | 10% |
| S5. It is hard to navigate campus culture and forge connections | 1.60 | 0.69 | 90% | 0% |
| S6.  Inclusive and supportive university community | 2.30 | 1.33 | 60% | 30% |

**Interview and Focus Group**

The data analyzed below stemmed from student and personnel perspectives during the verbal and written discussions, including activities completed on Google Jamboard. Themes emerged from those conversations, all guided by the overarching research questions (RQs).

**RQ1. What are the experiences of IGS as they transition from their home countries to MWU?**

While IGS, who took part in the focus group, acknowledged the welcoming and supportive environment at the University, they identified hindrances that affect their sense of belonging and touched on broader challenges that come with moving to a new country. Cultural incongruity was demonstrated in language barriers, American paradigms of friendship building, and differences in societal norms. One student used the following metaphor: “We walk on the left, but here you walk on the right side.” Students agreed, “With American friends, it is hard to build deep relationships” and “Tension is always there whether they accept you or not.” In discussing cultural differences, one person noted, “I find a lot of ‘don’ts’ [sic] in this society such that sometimes you don’t even know what to do.” Those feelings occur outside of the school setting, with one student recounting an experience trying to encourage voter turnout and being harassed by a stranger saying, “You are not a citizen, no right to vote and calling other people to vote.” The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the sense of social isolation as students noted fewer opportunities for connection. Faculty also noted that “the pandemic made it so much worse.” The pandemic may have made pre-existing legal and visa policy restrictions trickier for some. Participants spoke of institutionalized barriers: “Not direct discrimination, but visa limitation is a hurdle.” One professor gave a lengthy account of issues experienced by a post-doctoral student who had been “hired full time, [but] had to resign” because of legal and University policy challenges.

Finally, advising issues were raised in terms of academic and career support. One student stated, “I wish at the beginning someone told me that I should not take political science because of my visa status.” When moving to the U.S., the student did not realize she would not have the same work or paid internship opportunities as domestic peers. Adjusting to new norms around academic integrity and classroom participation led to some confusion. For one student, “At home, knowledge is communal. Here, you need to cite everything. Here, I cannot say anything myself. I am required to cite someone.” Another participant shared, “I think in the U.S., students are taught to speak up, while abroad, you don’t really challenge authority.” That said, speaking up does not necessarily translate into diversity of thought. A student pointed out, “The education system is so good and learner-centered, though sometimes the class environment does not allow open positive critiquing. Some people feel offended if you try to challenge them, and yet it is from challenging that learning takes place.” The discussion touched on philosophical and classroom norm differences, which this student’s insightful comment captured about the speed of discourse: “You guys are so quick and good at conversation, and interjecting or jumping into conversation in class is hard. By the time I am ready to speak, it is over. I am so slow.”

Personnel also pointed out ongoing issues as students adjust to new academic expectations, particularly classroom participation and academic integrity. In the absence of training for IGS, inadvertent academic infractions can occur. A personnel participant suggested that instead, “(W)e can look at it from (a) restorative justice, rather than zero-tolerance policy on academic integrity.”

**RQ2. How do international students find a sense of belonging?**

When directly asked during the focus group whether they felt a sense of belonging, one student loudly replied, “The answer is yes. That is why I am still around.” During the faculty and staff focus group, participants indicated that they perceive belonging stemming from social networks with cohort peers and professors and included the importance of mentoring relationships with faculty, the department cohort, and other international students. Students emphasized that belonging could stem from culture/lifestyle, openness, adaptation, having their own space, and work and hobbies both within and outside school.

Student participants mostly perceive the university campus environment and structures as welcoming and supportive. They cited accommodating professors, supportive peers within their cohorts, and a lack of discrimination within the University. One student stated that in “a class setting, automatically you cannot fail to meet people who embrace you. You feel at home.” With consideration for the University, one participant acknowledged that it “is very welcoming and the environment makes you feel at home.” Another confirmed that “I feel comfortable in the system.”

In terms of support from professors, students, and personnel discussed ways faculty can provide social and academic aid. One student described a “parental” relationship with professors, while another replied, “I think professors being described as ‘parental’ is subjective. Some go beyond, but not all.” This highlighted the tension between different individual experiences and served as a reminder that generalizations should not be made in this type of qualitative study.

In the personnel focus group and interviews, participants highlighted shared life experiences to develop interpersonal connections between professors and students, which they believed fostered belonging. One international faculty member indicated the importance of creating social settings for including international students: “So I usually invite students …over to our home for Thanksgiving… for them to have some traditional American Thanksgiving meal because my husband is American.” They also indicated that there can be a shared understanding between international faculty and students from similar backgrounds: “We develop a very close relationship, and because we share the same Asian background.” Four of the personnel described their own experience as international students, which enhanced their sense of empathy for IGS.

Students discussed the importance of developing interpersonal connections with their peers regarding social belonging. The cohort model helped foster a sense of belonging as students moved through the program with familiar faces. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic affected student sense of belonging. “From that beginning for me, there was a sense of belonging that I am building a community, which was, of course, interrupted by Covid.” Student participants also spoke of the importance of affinity groups in developing social bonds like relationships with other international students. One participant described their social life in their previous institution: “I had good belonging in college. Many international students as friends.” Commenting on their current experience at MWU: “Pretty early on, I started making foreign friends again. I think there is some sort of attraction to that.”

**RQ3. What support will ensure IGS’s success and give them a sense of belonging?**

Students and personnel shared feedback about critical support areas for IGS at MWU. Both students and personnel spoke of the need for more training for faculty and staff to be more culturally responsive to IGS, including overcoming a deficiency orientation or conflating all international student groups as one. One participant noted: “People assume IGS don’t know a lot of things, but that is not true.” As an example of stereotyping, one student shared their experience of having “two undergraduate degrees in English already but was put in the same basket as Chinese students who are still learning English.” It was interesting that one student responded, “I think I have also had the experience of people setting higher expectations for international students because they perceive Americans as not as hard-working.”

Students and personnel spoke of the difficulties adjusting to new academic integrity standards. One participant explicitly stated that academic integrity training should be provided for all IGS. “The question here is about ownership of knowledge. The emphasis in this society is that of citing other people all the time, even when dealing with common sayings. The contradiction is that people are encouraged to be creative, but when you bring out a new concept in the name of creativity, you are asked to cite it.” From the personnel perspective, one participant noted, “For the support [training], I never got anything related to that [supporting international students].”

Personnel also discussed the importance of resources like The Writing Center, but the support needed to be more nuanced. “Usually, students expect the Writing Center to edit your papers, but the Writing Center has a philosophy that they do not give you grammar correction.” In some cases, students may need more assistance with academic writing, with or without additional English language support. However, the current services offered by the University need to be improved.

Staffing issues at the University were discussed as a hindrance for IGS. More dedicated personnel to support this demographic could be beneficial. For instance, Career Center staff who are familiar with their visas/legal limitations; academic advisers who are trained to build awareness about challenges that exist for pursuing certain degrees/fields here as a non-citizen; and consistent, supportive staff in the International Student and Scholar Service Office (where there had been considerable turnover in the 2021-2022 academic year). Of note, this was an area where personnel spoke highly of the institutional support system, while students had more concerns and suggestions.

Finally, social support was raised in numerous ways as an essential determinant of a sense of belonging and an area for improvement. Peer mentorship was raised as an essential strategy that the University could organize and promote. One faculty member shared, “So, the mentor-mentee system I’ve found very helpful, and to make some friends, and in those cases, they may share the same experiences living in a different country.” One student participant also spoke about the University’s role in setting social belonging. “I think the University has not yet played enough role in setting systems to support massive co-curricular events or interclass competitions… All these play a vital role in bringing together students.”

Although supporting affinity groups like network-building between IGS is crucial, the lack of deeper friendships with American students emerged in discussions. To facilitate an enhanced sense of belonging within MWU and the broader U.S. context, the University could build bridges to facilitate domestic and international student connections. As one personnel participant described, “There were two kinds of, in my purview, networking groups at play. So, the internal departmental community and the greater connection with graduate students across the University via the graduate school.” The University can enhance networking across the campus.

**Discussion**

When filtered through the lens of social constructivism and CRT, the study's results show robust peer-to-peer support from cohort members but missed opportunities for fostering a greater sense of belonging for the (IGS) population. Support gaps exist on the classroom instructor and programmatic systems levels. In terms of the need for more formalized, intentionally embedded benchmarks for measuring the success of the IGS transition from home countries to enrollment in MWU, the data reveal the necessity for administrative implementation of embedded, scaffolded structures to support their differentiated needs. Previous studies noted similar findings about the experiences of international students (Glass, 2018; Skromanis et al., 2018) and IGS specifically (Hyun et al., 2007).

In keeping with the tenets of PAR (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019), the IGS and the administrators with responsibilities for IGS were best positioned to identify through their lived experiences the ways the University succeeds in or falls short of fulfilling its promise to address and improve IGS’ sense of belonging. PAR "promotes pluralism and creativity in discovering the world and improving it" (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019, p. 3). As such, the participatory method served the research team and the overarching research framework for conducting the interviews, focus groups, and subsequent data analysis. PAR invites research participants to envision “novel ways of assessing and addressing issues."

As far as the data reveals, participants fulfilled that promise of speaking truth to systems and structures that currently diminish or enhance their sense of belonging (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019, p. 3). The research team recognizes that the limited use of PAR tools during the interviews and focus groups was caused by COVID-19 restrictions for in-person meetings. COVID-19 also limited face-to-face interactions to Zoom meetings, which worked well, but face-to-face interactions could become more conducive to relationship building.

Social constructivism argues that "social worlds develop out of individuals' interactions with their culture and society” (Lynch, 2022, para.1). Applied to an educational context, the ability of IGS to access academic classroom discourse and subsequently embed themselves with classroom culture creates the conditions for a greater sense of belonging or increased isolation. Comments from focus group participants demonstrate a barrier to full inclusion in the socially mediated classroom environment, as a participant shared his frustration in being an English language learner and interjecting in class discussions with native speakers of English. Social constructivism posits that every classroom discussion presents an opportunity for the emergence of greater connection or the potential for rejection (Lynch, 2022). Participants’ comments evince challenges to full inclusion and belonging brought on by language barriers and differences in academic expectations between their native educational experiences and the American university context. One good example is the student’s comments on the nature of knowledge and whether it belongs to the community or individual. Without the full and active participation of the learner, the social constructivist model asserts that the circumstances for robust classroom discourse and enhanced learning are lost (Lynch, 2022).

CRT promotes the possibility of enhancing classroom instruction by employing “multiethnic cultural frames of reference” (Gay, 2018, p. xxvvii) to improve the “academic, social, psychological, emotional” experiences of diverse student populations (Gay, 2018, p. xxi). Drawing upon IGS’ funds of knowledge, CRT invites professors to shift their deficit view toward an asset model that acknowledges the strengths IGS contribute to the classroom. Comments from personnel and IGS participants demonstrate that classroom instruction often fails to play to students’ ways of knowing and engaging in academic work. When a student with two degrees in English was recommended to take English language training, it shows a need for more comprehensive training for university administration and professors in culturally responsive best practices. Another participant stated, "Surely international students have some experiences that would integrate the learning process, though sometimes the systems' perception is like these students are unable to fit the standards." Data from the transcribed interviews and focus groups indicate the need to implement CRT practices across MWU. As multiple participants mentioned, sometimes the language barrier is not about fluency in English but rather U.S. approaches to communication. This confirmed the need for a university to consider cultural transitions as they support incoming IGS (Johnson et al., 2018). Professional development for staff and professors is critical to realizing this goal.

A PAR Force Field Analysis (F&FA) (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019) summarizes the study succinctly and indicates the existing forces at MWU that are for (contributing to) change (sense of belonging) and forces against (hindering) IGS’ sense of belonging. Through the F&FA (see **Table 2** below), the team generated constructive - “changes needed” (recommendations) for MWU to increase IGS’ sense of belonging. Forces supporting IGS's sense of belonging include a supportive university environment, advisers, professors, and peers with cultural awareness, and infrastructures for networking in research, career, and life across the campus. Hindrances may include cultural incongruities, social isolation, and a lack of culturally responsive advising, instruction, and connections. Thus, specific changes may include professional development (P.D.) on leading, teaching, and serving for the success of IGS and funds to sustain supporting services and extracurricular activities.

**Table 2**

*Force Field Analysis*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Forces FOR Changes | Changes Needed | Forces AGAINST Changes |
| -Welcoming and supportive University  -Interpersonal relationships with peers  -Social networking with professors  -Instructors' support and empathy in the academic context  -CRT\* competent support: e.g., writing center, student services, advising  -Cohort model program  -Consistent support staff and administration at student-supporting offices  -Extracurricular activities across campus | -Professional development (P.D.) on global awareness and culturally responsive teaching and/or advising for administration, staff, faculty, and students; and P.D. for leading, teaching, and serving for success.  -Funds to sustain and staff student service offices and centers.  -Resources to support extracurricular activities, networking, and formalized mentorship programs targeting international graduate students. | -Cultural incongruities, e.g., language barriers  -Difficulty developing domestic friendships  -Social isolation (COVID-19 exacerbated it)  -Advisers: lack of training for IGS  -Less CRT competent instructors and services  -Lack of extracurricular activities across the campus  -High turnover of staff for student services |
| \* CRT: culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018). | |  |

**Implications and Conclusion**

Several recommendations for university administrators, faculty, and staff stemmed from the study. To begin with, "expand on what international students can do" by paying more attention to international students and their needs, including the provision of career resources focused on IGS (who may already have years of experience in other countries), post-graduate resources, including academic research mentoring, mental health and healthcare support, and enhanced organizational supports through the International Student and Scholar Services and networks at universities. Students, staff, and faculty consistently highlighted the importance of social support. It is crucial that the University takes heed and fosters more opportunities (primarily in-person) for domestic and international students to meet, as well as chances for IGS to develop their affinity communities with faculty who were their allies. These bonds were mentioned as a source of strength.

As a segment of the university student body, IGS should be treated in culturally responsive ways for their success on the U.S. campus. Through this study, the team advocates for IGS by inviting MWU to create a more supportive infrastructure. As such, here is a list of succinct recommendations stemming from the study:

* Additional university provided P.D. for faculty and staff on CRT with an understanding of international backgrounds.
* Targeted supports like expanded services at the Writing Center and Career Center.
* Maintain sustainable staff members for the service sectors for international students.
* More onboarding training for IGS, such as academic integrity, technology use, and ways to seek out leadership roles.
* University-mediated social supports, network-building like peer mentorship, research mentorship, and planned social activities.
* University leadership recognizes and acknowledges ways to make the programs more accessible in the post-pandemic era.

While MWU makes genuine efforts to supply adequate support for its IGS, there is room for improvement and for a more supportive infrastructure within the University that fosters more global and cultural awareness. We hope that such a comprehensive, supportive infrastructure would provide the framework necessary to empower IGS to advocate for themselves and gain a strong sense of belonging, which is crucial for success in the university setting.

There are also limitations to this study. Despite snowball sampling, the response rate from the IGS for the questionnaire was lower than expected. The study began in the middle of the pandemic, restricting the team from meeting in person with potential participants regularly for PAR sessions. Also, the focus groups were smaller than the six-person minimum recommended by Padgett (2017). The high turnover of staff serving international students at MWU during the pandemic also hindered the continued involvement of specialized staff participants in the study. Nevertheless, we found the data from this PAR study rich and informative, allowing us to make recommendations for promising actions to support IGS at MWU based on the preliminary results.

Higher education institutions understand the benefits of bringing international talent to their universities and the U.S. (Aggarwal & Ciftci, 2020; Redden, 2022). It should then be a priority to have inclusive policies and foster a campus culture that nurtures and supports this segment of students. Universities that boast social justice as one of their central tenants should fulfill their obligations to all students by supplying comprehensive support no matter their citizenship or national origins.

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