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The Global Belonging Support Framework: Enhancing Equity and Access for International Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how international graduate students experience institutional support, access, and a sense of belonging within U.S. higher education. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews with students, alumni, and faculty/staff at a single private research university. Thematic coding and visual analyses (word cloud and quote frequency) revealed three systemic equity barriers: institutional opacity (“Through the Maze”), cultural misalignment (“Lost in Translation”), and fragmented career–immigration guidance (“Dreams on Pause”). In response, we propose the Global Belonging Support Framework (GBSF)—a practice-oriented model comprising four key pillars: proactive advising, peer mentorship and digital community, culturally responsive training, and integrated support for career development and immigration needs. While the study is limited in generalizability, it contributes to the literature by reframing support as a structural challenge rather than an individual adjustment issue. The GBSF offers a transferable design lens for equity-focused reform across higher education contexts.

Keywords: international graduate students, institutional equity, belonging, grounded theory, student support, immigration, higher education

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, international students have played an increasingly vital role in the academic, cultural, and financial fabric of higher education institutions in the United States (Oduwaye et al., 2023; Cornell University, 2025). Despite this significance, international graduate students remain a largely overlooked group within research on student support and belonging (Tran et al., 2022). Much of the literature focuses on undergraduate experiences or generalizes across international student populations, which risks erasing the distinct challenges that graduate students encounter (Glass et al., 2015; Mohamad & Manning, 2024).

Historically, studies on international students have framed support gaps through individual adjustment narratives, emphasizing language acquisition, cultural transition, or academic preparedness. While these are important factors, this framing can obscure the ways in which institutional systems (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022; Jiang & Kim, 2019), policies, and practices contribute to exclusionary experiences. This study responds to recent calls to reframe international student support as a structural and relational issue rather than as a matter of individual deficits (Weiner & Ghazarian, 2024).

Informed by Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory, this study examines the lived experiences of international graduate students, alumni, and institutional staff at a private research university in the United States. Through a combination of thematic coding, participant narratives, and visual mapping, we explored how participants navigated institutional resources and developed a sense of belonging within an unfamiliar academic environment. The resulting Global Belonging Support Framework (GBSF) emerged from these findings as a student-informed model that identifies key barriers and opportunities for practice-based reform.

This framework does not aim to offer a generalizable theory. Instead, like Caligiuri et al. (2020), it provides an exploratory and context-specific contribution grounded in the institutional setting and population studied. By shifting attention from cultural adaptation to system-level design, this research aims to inform more equitable practices in graduate student services and contribute to the broader discourse on access and inclusion in international education.

Research Question

How do institutional support gaps shape international graduate students' sense of belonging, and what student-informed framework can address these systemic challenges?

To further guide the inquiry, we also examine the following questions:

- (1) What institutional structures most significantly influence international graduate students' access to support and resources?

- (2) How do international graduate students navigate barriers related to career preparation and immigration policies?
- (3) In what ways can a student-informed framework help institutions become more responsive and equitable in their support of this population?

LITERATURE REVIEW

International students often enter U.S. graduate programs with aspirations that are not only academic but also professional and migratory. However, the structures that support their belonging and success are frequently designed with domestic student norms in mind. As Glass et al. (2015) noted, there is a “support perception gap” between what institutions believe they offer and what international students experience. Systemic barriers, including limited career services, complex immigration policies, and insufficient cultural responsiveness further exacerbate this misalignment. These barriers are rarely addressed as interconnected, institutional design flaws.

The literature has often framed international student success through a lens of personal adjustment, focusing on cultural transition, language acquisition, or homesickness (Gribble et al., 2015; Sawir et al., 2008). While relevant, this perspective places the burden of integration on students rather than interrogating how systems perpetuate exclusion (NAFSA, 2025). Scholars such as Gravett and Ajjawi (2022) argue for an alternative paradigm, one that views belonging not as an internal feeling but as a situated practice shaped by institutional actors, policies, and design.

Constructivist grounded theory, as developed by Charmaz (2006), provides a methodological lens through which researchers can coconstruct meaning from participants’ experiences while acknowledging researcher positionality. This framework is especially valuable when engaging marginalized voices, as it allows for the emergence of bottom-up, practice-informed models of institutional change. The use of grounded theory in international student research is gaining traction (Lee & Rice, 2023; Mohamad & Manning, 2024), particularly for its capacity to reveal nuanced challenges that are often flattened in large-scale quantitative surveys.

Recent studies have also highlighted how intersectional factors, such as race, gender, language proficiency, and socioeconomic status, interact with immigration status to further complicate students’ access to support (Teranishi et al., Lee & Kim, 2021). For example, an East Asian doctoral student in engineering may face different cultural expectations and communication challenges than a Latin American student in the humanities. By acknowledging these layered identities, institutions can design services that are not only culturally competent but also equity-oriented (Asempapa, 2019).

This study builds upon and contributes to a growing body of literature and critiques one-size-fits-all models of international student support. Instead, it foregrounds the narratives of international graduate students to propose a contextual and relational framework that seeks to inform institutional practices. The Global Belonging Support Framework (GBSF) is one such contribution, offering a student-informed approach to institutional responsiveness, which is grounded in empirical findings and situated within current theoretical conversations (Brunton & Jefferey, 2014).

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a constructivist grounded theory design (Charmaz, 2006) to explore how international graduate students experience institutional support, navigate systemic barriers, and construct a sense of belonging within a U.S. higher education context. This approach was selected to allow in-depth, context-specific exploration of a bounded group of international graduate students within a single private research university in the United States. While the single-site design limits generalizability, the goal of this study was not to establish a universal theory but to generate a student-informed framework grounded in the lived experiences of participants. Although the sample size was modest ($n = 10$), we achieved thematic sufficiency by the final interviews, with no new codes or concepts emerging, indicating that the core categories had stabilized. This aligns with Charmaz's (2006) emphasis on conceptual saturation and theoretical sufficiency in constructivist grounded theory, which prioritizes analytic depth over sample breadth. Visual tools, such as word clouds and quote frequency charts, were incorporated as supplemental aids to increase the accessibility of findings for practitioner audiences, not as substitutes for deep analytical work.

Participant Selection

The participants were recruited via purposive sampling to capture diverse perspectives across institutional roles. A total of 10 individuals participated: two current international graduate students, three recent alumni, and five student affairs professionals. The participants represented a range of academic disciplines, gender identities, and language backgrounds. All the student participants held F-1 immigration visas during the time of the interviews. The F-1 is a U.S. nonimmigrant visa category that permits international students to pursue full-time academic study at accredited institutions. It requires students to maintain valid enrollment status and comply with strict work and travel regulations throughout their stay.

Demographically, the student participants reflected a concentration of East Asian and Southeast Asian backgrounds, including China and Korea. Although not fully representative of the broader international student population in the U.S., this sample aligns with the most common sending countries at the study site. The positional alignment between researchers and participants contributed to rapport-building and deeper insider perspectives. Future research should expand to include international students from underrepresented regions of the world.

Although the modest sample size limits statistical generalizability, thematic saturation was approached after 10 interviews, with no new codes or insights emerging in the final few. This finding indicates that the core strategies had stabilized, providing sufficient depth and coherence for grounded theory development within the scope of a single-institution study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. Interview protocols were designed to elicit reflections on institutional navigation, campus belonging, and career and immigration advising experiences. The interviews were conducted in English, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. To address potential researcher bias, the team engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the data collection process and held weekly debriefs to triangulate perspectives.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed via constructivist grounded theory and incorporated the six-phase thematic analysis model outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

- (1) Familiarization with data
- (2) Generation of initial codes
- (3) Identification of themes
- (4) Reviews of themes
- (5) Definition and naming of themes
- (6) Production of the report

All coding was conducted through a three-stage process: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This iterative approach enabled the development of focused categories grounded in participants' narratives. Word clouds and quote frequency visuals were incorporated not as replacements for analytical rigor, but as supplementary interpretive tools to support practitioner engagement. These visualizations help illuminate language patterns and highlight disconnects across stakeholder groups, adding an accessible dimension to the comparative perspectives of students, alumni, and institutional staff. This integration reflects recent calls in qualitative research for multimodal presentation of findings (Traboco et al., 2022) and aligns with Charmaz's (2006) emphasis on layered meaning-making in constructivist grounded theory. Their use was always secondary to—and in service of—the core thematic analysis.

Researcher Positionality

The research team comprised international scholars with backgrounds in educational counseling, international student services, and student development. Our shared experiences with global mobility and student support informed our empathetic lens, while conscious efforts were made to bracket assumptions and foreground participant voices. Reflexive memos were written after each interview to account for researcher biases and evolving perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

The study received an exemption determination from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) under non-human research guidelines. It focused on institutional practices and participant perspectives without engaging in interventions or collecting

sensitive, identifiable data that could impact participants' rights, welfare, or living conditions. The participants provided informed consent, and all the data were stored securely. Pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality, and participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study yielded three interconnected core themes that reflect the layered experiences of international graduate students as they navigated institutional structures, accessed support services, and developed a sense of belonging. These themes include (1) Through the Maze, (2) Lost in Translation, and (3) Dreams on Pause. Each theme contains subthemes that illustrate key tensions between student experiences and institutional assumptions. Guided by constructivist grounded theory, this section interprets not only what participants shared but also explores why these experiences occurred, how stakeholder perspectives diverged, and what these divergences suggest for promoting equity in graduate education.

In addition to open and axial coding, keyword frequency data were integrated into the thematic analysis to identify patterns of emphasis and omission across groups. This layered approach enabled triangulation between participant narratives, stakeholder language use, and emerging conceptual categories.

Theme 1: Through the Maze—Institutional Navigation Challenges

1.1 Fragmented Support Pathways and Process Confusion

International graduate students consistently described the university's institutional systems as fragmented, confusing, and difficult to navigate (Cantwell, 2015). Core processes—including course registration, visa documentation, and academic advising—were perceived as siloed and lacking integration. The participants frequently encountered incomplete, conflicting, or outdated information and were often left to piece together next steps through informal peer networks, social media forums, or trial-and-error experiences.

“There was no one-stop place for international students. I had to guess the right steps by asking around. People were helpful, but no one seemed to know everything.” – Current Student X.

Such comments reflect an institutional landscape where clarity and consistency were lacking, particularly during time-sensitive or high-stakes situations, such as visa renewals or class enrollment periods. In these moments, students reported heightened stress and uncertainty, with alumni recalling how they “figured it out as they went,” often at the cost of missed deadlines or delayed academic progress.

In contrast, faculty and staff often emphasize the availability of support, citing resources that are technically present but rarely perceived as accessible or intuitive. As shown in Table 1, the terms “support” (n = 41) and “help” (n = 28) were frequently used by institutional representatives. However, only two mentions of “navigation” and one reference to “barriers” suggest a limited institutional awareness of usability or accessibility

challenges. Moreover, students and alumni focus their concerns on uncoordinated systems and ambiguous pathways.

This disconnect exemplifies what Glass et al. (2015) term the *support perception gap*—a phenomenon in which institutions conflate the existence of resources with their effectiveness. The reliance on individual initiatives to interpret or locate fragmented services exacerbated this gap, reinforcing a system in which international students bore the burden of accessing support that was neither centralized nor communicated.

Table 1: Frequency of Keyword Mentions by Participation Group (Theme 1)

Keyword	Faculty/Staff	Alumni	Current Students
Support	41	8	7
Help	28	25	10
Access	12	3	0
Navigation	2	0	2
Barriers	1	5	3
Adjustment	6	0	1

1.2 Passive Service Structures that Obscure Accountability

Another recurring concern centered on the institution’s reliance on passive service structures—models that placed the onus on international students to initiate contact, interpret vague online resources, or self-navigate bureaucratic processes persistently. Although often framed as flexible or empowering, these models implicitly assume that students already possess the institutional literacy and self-advocacy competencies necessary to decode complex systems and policies.

“Even though the professors are helpful and try to point us to things, they don’t always understand what international students need help with.” – Alumni C.

This quote underscores a fundamental disconnect: even when faculty intentions were supportive, the systems themselves remained opaque and difficult to access. International students were frequently expected to “figure it out” on their own, leading to missed opportunities, heightened stress, and an underutilization of essential support services.

In the absence of structured onboarding or articulated service pathways, the process of seeking help became individualized and informal (Le & Gardener, 2022). This lack of institutional scaffolding parallels what Charmaz (2006) describes as the invisible operation of social structures. When unacknowledged, they can reproduce systemic inequities by normalizing the assumption that students must adapt independently. Ultimately, passive support structures did not just obscure accountability—they actively diverted responsibility away from institutions and onto students, compounding the emotional and cognitive burdens that international students already carry.

Theme 2: Lost in Translation—The Absence of Proactive Support

2.1 Institutional Support as Reactive and Student-Initiated

Students across all participant groups—current students, alumni, and faculty—consistently reported that university support systems primarily responded to problems after they had arisen, rather than offering proactive solutions or timely interventions. Services such as academic advising, visa guidance, and mental health referrals were described as reactive and were often made available only after students had explicitly requested them or faced considerable obstacles.

“If we don’t say we’re international graduate students, they won’t even think to offer us help. We have to advocate for ourselves every time.” – Alumni C.

This comment illustrates the emotional burden placed on international students, who must consistently self-identify and self-advocate just to access basic institutional resources. Rather than being seen as part of a shared institutional responsibility, support became contingent on student initiative—a process that not only marginalized students unfamiliar with U.S. systems but also reinforced feelings of invisibility and isolation.

As shown in Table 2, this trend is underscored by keyword analysis. Faculty and staff frequently referenced “individualized” and “advising,” suggesting an emphasis on tailored support. However, these same terms are rarely used by students or alumni, who instead point to broader systemic gaps in community, equity, and proactive outreach. This contrast reflects a deeper misalignment: the institutions’ perception of what they provide versus what students experience.

Together, these findings suggest that institutional messaging around support is often performative or aspirational. In practice, the burden falls on students to initiate help-seeking in environments that remain opaque, fragmented, or unwelcoming—leaving proactive support as more of an ideal than a consistent reality.

Table 2: Frequency of Keyword Mentions by Participation Group (Theme 2)

Keyword	Faculty/Staff	Alumni	Current Students
Proactive	3	3	2
Advising	14	1	6
Community	10	17	1
Equity	7	1	0
Belonging	2	0	0
Individualized	14	1	0

2.2 Peer-Driven Safety Nets and Informal Mentorship

In the absence of consistent institutional outreach, students and alumni frequently turn to informal peer networks and organically form community-based support systems to bridge knowledge gaps. Alumni highlighted the value of these grassroots efforts, describing how students often stepped into support roles the institution failed to fill. As one

faculty member observed, “*It was all student-initiated. They saw a need and created groups to help each other*” (Professor B). This reliance on peer-generated support reflects both student resilience and a systemic gap in institutional responsibility.

Some students recalled moments of personalized care—“*After my one-on-one appointment, I felt like someone finally got it*” (Current Student Y)—but these experiences were rare and inconsistently delivered. As the same student noted, “*that kind of help didn’t happen often*,” underscoring the sporadic and unpredictable nature of institutional responsiveness.

These narratives reveal a persistent disconnect between institutional messaging and the realities of student experience. While universities may recognize the need for proactive engagement, in practice, support systems often place the burden of access on students themselves. This structural expectation of self-advocacy creates a reactive, rather than anticipatory, model of student care.

The institution’s reliance on informal, student-driven scaffolding mirrors what Koo et al. (2021) describe as compensatory survival strategies, in which students adopt makeshift solutions in response to systemic neglect. These strategies may temporarily fill institutional voids, but they also increase psychological strain and increase the risk of burnout and attrition among international students.

Theme 3: Dreams on Pause—Career and Immigration Barriers

3.1 Visa Sponsorship as a Gatekeeper

As illustrated in Table 3, a notable gap emerges between how faculty and staff, as well as international students, frame the conversation around career development. Faculty and staff overwhelmingly emphasized broad, aspirational terms such as “career” (62 mentions) and “opportunities” (16 mentions), suggesting a positive and growth-oriented institutional narrative. In contrast, students and alumni articulated their career concerns through the language of structural constraints: “visa” (alumni: 3; current students: 6), “sponsorship” (alumni: 17), and “barriers” (alumni: 5; current students: 3). The term “sponsorship,” in particular, was mentioned 17 times by alumni but only once by staff—underscoring a profound institutional silence around a pivotal gatekeeper to employment (NAFSA, 2025).

This disconnect reveals a deeper misalignment in priorities. For students, immigration status is not peripheral (NAFSA, 2025)—it is the defining factor shaping what career pathways are viable or even imaginable. Moreover, institutions focus on professional development in the abstract without addressing the visa-based limitations that contour every job application and internship opportunity. (Zhang & Goodson, 2011) Although the term “connections” was used 11 times by both faculty/staff, as well as alumni, without visa sponsorship, such connections often fail to translate into tangible career outcomes (NAFSA, 2025). These linguistic patterns reinforce a broader finding in this study: institutional narratives of support often remain at the surface level, failing to address the legal and structural barriers that students must confront in practice.

Table 3: Frequency of Keyword Mentions by Participation Group (Theme 3)

Keyword	Faculty/Staff	Alumni	Current Students
Career	62	0	2
Opportunities	16	6	0
Visa	8	3	6
Challenges	9	7	5
Sponsorship	1	17	1
Barriers	1	5	3
Connections	11	11	2

As one participant shared, *“If you mention needing sponsorship, the conversation ends. You won’t even get an interview”* (Alumni C). Another added, *“I’ve been rejected automatically just because I’m on a visa”* (Alumni A). These lived experiences reflect what Weiner and Ghazarian (2024) identify as structural exclusion, where international graduates are systematically marginalized in hiring owing to legal complexity and institutional unpreparedness.

3.2 Fragmented Career and Immigration Guidance

The participants expressed significant frustration with the lack of coordination between the school-based career support office and the university’s international student services. Delayed communication, conflicting guidance, and vague timelines contributed to heightened uncertainty regarding job applications, visa processing, and postgraduation employment eligibility.

“At undergrad, I got my CPT/OPT info right away. Here it's been months, and I still don’t know what’s going on.” – Current Student X.

“I’m not trained to advise on sponsorship. I just try to Google things and direct them to the office of international services” – Advisor D.

This disjointed approach underscores the institutional need for integrated, immigration-informed career planning. The proposed Global Belonging Support Framework (GBSF) emphasizes this as a critical area for reform.

Contradictions and Diverging Perspectives

Not all participants agreed on the necessity of expanded support. One faculty member described international students as “highly independent and capable,” implying that minimal intervention was sufficient. However, this perspective contradicted the experiences shared by most students and alumni, who characterized their independence not as a preference but as a survival strategy. This highlights a significant institutional misinterpretation—where resilience is misread as a lack of need—thereby justifying underinvestment in targeted support.

Integrated Interpretation

Taken together, the findings suggest that institutions may *appear* supportive of policy or intention but lack delivery mechanisms, coordination, and cultural responsiveness to meet the complex needs of international graduate students. This misalignment reflects what Charmaz (2006) defines as *institutional meaning mismatches*—disconnects between the logic of formal systems and the lived experiences of marginalized populations.

Without intentional design and proactive engagement, institutional structures risk reinforcing systemic inequities. (Yao, Garcia, & Collins, 2019) International students are left to navigate a fragmented and often opaque environment, which undermines their academic confidence, mental health, and professional development. These contradictions underscore the need for institutions to adopt student-informed frameworks that move beyond surface-level inclusion and actively restructure support systems to ensure equity and belonging.

While some themes in this study—such as advising gaps, cultural disconnection, or visa-related career barriers—have been documented in previous research (Hyden & Coryell, 2023), our contribution lies in the triangulated design, comparative discourse analysis, and coconstruction of an applied framework. By capturing divergent narratives from students, alumni, and staff, and mapping institutional silences through linguistic frequency patterns, we move beyond description toward system-level insights. The resulting framework is not a list of common challenges but a student-informed intervention model that reframes how institutions conceptualize support and equity for international graduate students.

DISCUSSION

This study reveals a fundamental disconnect between institutional perceptions of support and the lived experiences of international graduate students. While faculty and staff emphasized the availability of resources, students consistently reported that these supports were inaccessible, fragmented, or reactive. This gap was most pronounced in three key areas: institutional navigation, proactive advising, and immigration-informed career services. These findings suggest that what institutions define as support often fails to account for the cultural, structural, and linguistic barriers that shape how international students access and interpret assistance.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to grounded theory by centering international student narratives on the coconstruction of a new conceptual model: the Global Belonging Support Framework (GBSF). Extending Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory, the GBSF is rooted not merely in student recommendations but also in systematically coded empirical data, theory-informed interpretation, and multi-stakeholder triangulation. It draws from and contributes to existing theoretical constructs, including Glass et al.'s (2015) "support perception gap," Charmaz's (2006) concept of institutional meaning mismatch, and Gravett and Ajjawi's (2022) framing of belonging as situated and structurally shaped. This study also introduces a dual-layered analytic approach—merging

thematic coding with linguistic frequency analysis (e.g., word clouds and quote frequency)—to highlight not only the presence but also the absence of institutional discourse. These absences reveal blind spots in policy and practice, underscoring the need for frameworks that are responsive to student realities rather than institutional assumptions.

Additionally, this research challenges the traditional reliance on advising models grounded in student initiative and self-advocacy. Consistent with Koo et al. (2021), our findings illustrate how insufficient outreach structures contribute to stress, cultural exclusion, and diminished well-being. In this context, belonging is not an individual trait but an institutional outcome—constructed through intentional, anticipatory, and culturally responsive design. The GBSF encapsulates this shift by offering a theoretically grounded, system-level model for institutional reform, embedding support into the infrastructure rather than placing the burden on students to find it.

Comparison with Prior Studies

These findings align with prior research by Mohamada and Maning (2024), who emphasized that proactive integration, rather than reactive intervention, is critical to international student success. This study confirms their assertion by illustrating how delayed or passive institutional responses leave students unsupported until challenges become acute.

Similarly, Jiang and Kim documented how visa limitations structurally disadvantage international graduate students in the labor market. Building on their work, this study highlights how those barriers are intensified by institutional disconnection and the lack of coordinated advising between career services and immigration offices.

Unlike previous studies that primarily examined student adjustment, this research offers a systems-level perspective. By integrating insights from students, alumni, and institutional staff, it provides a more holistic understanding of the structural dimensions of access, belonging, and equity in graduate education.

The Global Belonging Support Framework (GBSF)

Drawing from the findings of this study, the Global Belonging Support Framework (GBSF) is proposed as a comprehensive model to reform institutional support structures for international graduate students. Grounded in participant narratives, the GBSF addresses systemic inequities and unmet needs (Kristiana et al., 2022) through four interconnected domains: (1) structured, proactive advising; (2) peer mentorship and digital community; (3) culturally competent training for staff and faculty; and (4) integrated career-immigration support services.

These pillars were distilled from recurring patterns of student feedback regarding institutional shortcomings in navigation, guidance, cultural understanding, and career preparation. To operationalize these pillars, Table 4 outlines specific strategies derived from participant feedback and grounded theory coding. For example, the pillar of structured, proactive advising proposes mandatory check-ins at key academic and immigration milestones, whereas the peer mentorship domain emphasizes building formal mentorship pipelines and moderated digital platforms.

To visually illustrate the cohesion and interdependence of these domains, Figure 1 presents the GBSF as a unified framework in which each pillar contributes to the overarching goal of fostering institutional belonging for international students. Rather than functioning in isolation, these four elements work synergistically to cultivate a campus ecosystem that affirms students' identities, proactively addresses their needs, and bridges structural gaps.

By implementing the GBSF, institutions can move beyond passive, fragmented services toward a more holistic and student-informed support model. These reforms collectively foster a deeper sense of institutional belonging and enable international students to thrive academically, socially, and professionally.

Table 4: Core Pillars of the Global Belonging Support Framework (GBSF)

Pillars	Recommendation #1	Recommendation #2
(1) Structured, Proactive Advising	Implement mandatory check-ins at critical academic and immigration points (e.g., semester start, OPT/CPT deadlines)	Offer targeted advising that affirms and centers international student identities (Martirosyan et al., 2019.)
(2) Peer Mentorship and Digital Community	Establish formal mentorship programs pairing incoming students with experienced international peers (Huang, 2023).	Facilitate moderated online platforms (e.g., Discord) for peer support, resource sharing, and community building (University of New South Wales, 2021; Craig & Kay, 2022)
(3) Culturally Competent Training for Staff and Faculty	Provide workshops on cross-cultural advising and visa-related issues in partnership with international office and NAFSA resources (NAFSA, 2025).	Develop ethical guidelines for addressing sponsorship and career-related discussions (Wan, 2025).
(4) Integrated Support for Career Development and Immigration Needs	Foster cross-departmental collaboration between Career Services and International Offices (Wan, 2025).	Design career workshops tailored to visa sponsorship, job search, strategies, and long-term career planning for international graduates (Xiong et al., 2025).



Figure 1. The Global Belonging Support Framework (GBSF)

Study Limitations

This study is limited by its small sample size ($n = 10$) and its focus on a single institution. While grounded theory prioritizes depth over breadth, these factors constrain the generalizability of findings. Therefore, the insights should be interpreted as exploratory and theory-generating rather than representative of all institutional contexts.

Additionally, while the use of word clouds and quote frequency analysis introduced a novel layer to theme identification, these tools lack contextual depth. They should be viewed as complementary rather than primary sources of interpretation.

The dual positionality of the researchers—as both international students and higher education practitioners—may introduce potential bias. However, this insider perspective also enabled debriefing to be employed throughout the analysis process, mitigating personal bias.

CONCLUSION

International graduate students make a significant contribution to the academic and cultural vitality of U.S. higher education (Hsieh & Watson, 2025); however, they continue to face systemic obstacles that hinder their success and sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019). This study reveals a misalignment between institutional assumptions of support and the lived realities of international graduate students, particularly with respect to academic advising, career readiness, and immigration services (Marijanovic et al., 2021).

The proposed Global Belonging Support Framework (GBSF) offers a student-informed, practical model for transforming fragmented and reactive services into proactive, equity-centered support systems. Grounded in participant narratives, the GBSF's four interconnected pillars—structured advising, peer mentorship, faculty and staff training, and integrated career and immigration support—are designed to be both scalable and implementable. While developed from a single institutional context, the GBSF offers a transferable framework that can be adapted by other institutions seeking to address similar support perception gaps.

This study does not claim to produce a generalizable theory but instead provides a grounded and context-specific contribution to the literature on international graduate student support. Its value lies in elevating student voice, revealing institutional blind spots, and offering a starting point for practitioner-led reform. Future research is necessary to examine how the GBSF performs across diverse institutional types and to refine its application in broader policy and practice contexts.

From a practical perspective, this study encourages institutions to prioritize support for international students as an essential infrastructure rather than a supplementary resource. Steps such as implementing scheduled check-ins, designing visa-specific career workshops, and fostering moderated peer communities can yield immediate benefits. These institutional efforts will not only enhance international student outcomes but also serve as visible commitments to inclusion and equity. While the framework centers international students as a group, future research should examine how intersecting identities such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status uniquely shape access to support and belonging.

Future Research Directions

Future studies should investigate the implementation and scalability of the Global Belonging Support Framework (GBSF) across various institutional contexts, including public universities, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges. Examining how different institutional types adapt to the framework can reveal contextual strengths and barriers to adoption. Future research may also compare the GBSF with existing student support models to examine how it complements or diverges from more established frameworks in the higher education literature.

Longitudinal studies are also necessary to assess the sustained impact of proactive versus reactive support strategies on the academic persistence, career advancement, and overall well-being of international students. Incorporating mixed-methods approaches would allow researchers to capture both the quantitative outcomes—such as GPA, employment rates, and retention—and the qualitative depth of students' lived experiences.

By grounding institutional reform in student voices and data-informed design, this line of inquiry not only expands the theoretical understanding of support and belonging but also offers a pathway for building more inclusive, equitable, and effective educational systems.

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