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Acculturation of International Doctoral Students: Perspectives from Students, Staff, and the Institution

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ABSTRACT: *This qualitative case study examines international doctoral students' acculturation from the perspectives of students, a midwestern U.S. university, and university staff members. Fourteen students completed a survey and participated in an interview. Using social categories and the experiential domain in Núñez's (2014) multilevel model of intersectionality, students, grouped by acculturation strategies and cultural background, described distinct acculturative stressors and coping strategies. Additionally, five university staff members were interviewed about their perceptions of international doctoral students' acculturation and the services they provided. Observations of two orientation sessions organized by the university were also conducted. Data were analyzed through the organizational, intersubjective, and experiential domains of Núñez's (2014) model and revealed effective support and structural gaps in services provided by staff and the university, which remain underexplored in prior research. This study adapts Núñez's (2014) model and offers implications for researchers and educators to provide tailored and responsive support for international students.*

Keywords: acculturative stressors, coping strategies, institutional support, international doctoral students in the U.S., university staff members

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. has remained the leading destination for international students (ISs) over the past decade (Bai, 2016). In the 2023–2024 academic year, it hosted 1,126,690 ISs from more than 200 regions, representing more than half of the global total (IIE: Institute of International Education, 2024b). Of these students, 44.6% were enrolled in graduate programs, followed by 30.4% in undergraduate programs, 3.4% in nondegree programs, and 21.5% in optional practical training (IIE, 2024a). These data highlight the significant presence of international graduate students (IGSs). Notably, IIE (2024a) reported a significant rise in IGS enrollment in recent years. During both 2001/2002–2011/2012 and 2020/2021–2023/2024, IGSs outnumbered ISs pursuing other degrees, indicating that the overall growth in international student enrollment has been driven primarily by the expansion of graduate-level enrollment.

Recent federal immigration policies, such as visa bans and processing disruptions, however, have introduced significant risks. For instance, NAFSA: Association of International Educators and JB International (2025) projected a 30–40% decline in new international student enrollment in fall 2025. In addition, the termination of federal funding for U.S. higher education institutions has had a particularly strong impact on IGSs, particularly international doctoral students who depend heavily on research support. Although the data for this study were collected prior to these policy shifts and funding cuts, it is important to recognize how such changes may intensify the cultural adaptation challenges faced by international doctoral students. Accordingly, universities should provide support to help these students cope with uncertainty and adjust to the changing environment.

This study examines international doctoral students' acculturation experiences in the U.S. Acculturation is a critical focus because prior research has shown its close connection to students' academic success and well-being. For example, Koo et al.'s (2021) study revealed that successful acculturation has been associated with reduced acculturative stress and homesickness, as well as increased English proficiency, social connectedness, and satisfaction with college life. Moní et al. (2018) found that students adopting an integration acculturation strategy were more likely to hold positive attitudes toward school and to score higher on measures of school effort and educational values.

Despite a substantial body of literature on IGSs' acculturation, few studies have examined the experiences of international doctoral students as a distinct group rather than combining them with master's students under the broader category of graduate students. Moreover, the coping strategies of international doctoral students and the roles of universities and staff in supporting them remain underexplored. This qualitative case study addresses these gaps by analyzing international doctoral students' acculturative stressors and coping strategies while also examining institutional and staff support. The findings provide insights for universities, faculty, and staff on fostering a more inclusive environment for international doctoral students and can help prospective ISs prepare for their transitions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Acculturation and the Acculturation Process

Acculturation has been interpreted as a process through which individuals undergo changes in values, attitudes, and behaviors because of interactions between two distinct cultures (Tafoya, 2011). It has been widely studied among immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and ISs (Yakushko, 2010). This study examines the acculturation experiences of international doctoral students in the U.S.

Acculturation was initially seen as a unidimensional process, where adopting the host culture meant losing one's heritage culture (Gordon, 1964). Berry (1980) later challenged this view, stating that heritage-culture maintenance and host-culture adoption are independent. He identified four acculturation strategies: integration (adopting the host culture while maintaining the heritage culture), assimilation (adopting the host culture while rejecting the heritage culture), separation (retaining the heritage culture while rejecting the host culture), and marginalization (rejecting both cultures).

Research has shown that acculturation can have both positive and negative outcomes (Rai et al., 2021). While it may promote adaptation and personal growth, it can also lead to stress, alienation, or insecurity. These challenges, often termed acculturative stressors, contribute to acculturative stress during cross-cultural adaptation.

Acculturative Stress and Stressors

Acculturative stress refers to the negative psychological and physical effects individuals may experience during acculturation, such as anxiety, social isolation, homesickness, and cultural identity confusion (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Research has suggested that individual factors, such as age, gender, family status, educational background, and language proficiency, could predict acculturative stress (Castillo et al., 2012; Lueck & Wilson, 2011). For example, the study by Lueck and Wilson (2011) found that increased social support, higher education and cognitive ability, strong family cohesion, and greater English proficiency were correlated with decreased acculturative stress.

Compared to acculturative stress, the concept of acculturative stressors lacks a clear definition. Berry et al. (1987) emphasized that individuals experience acculturation differently, leading to various stressors. Studies have examined IGSs' common acculturative stressors, including unfamiliar teaching methods, navigating faculty relationships, and participating in class due to language barriers and fast-paced speech (Gao & Wesely, 2024; Hellsten & Prescott, 2004). IGSs often encounter discrimination and prejudice (Oduwaye et al., 2023). Studies have shown that experiences, ranging from racially motivated assaults (Brown & Jones, 2013) to cultural bias based on language, appearance, and cultural practices (Ge et al., 2019), can lead to emotional distress and hinder students' adaptation and academic progress. Some IGSs also struggle with financial challenges, including high tuition fees, expensive housing, and limited access to well-paying jobs (Calder et al., 2016). Many rely on financial support from family, friends, or institutional aid (McFadden & Seedorff, 2017).

Most studies on acculturation have focused on students' self-reports, giving little attention to staff perspectives. This study fills that gap by examining how staff view international doctoral students' acculturation experiences.

Coping and Coping Strategies

Coping strategies are used to manage acculturative stressors. Coping refers to ongoing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage internal or external demands perceived as exceeding one's resources (Folkman et al., 1986). Since individuals appraise stress differently, their coping responses vary (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984b). Scholars broadly categorize coping strategies into two categories: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Endler & Parker, 1990).

Problem-Focused Coping

Problem-focused coping involves actively addressing stressors by changing the person–environment relationship (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984b). Common strategies include seeking social support from family, cultural communities, and host-country friendships to share personal thoughts, foster belonging, and support adjustment (Taylor, 2011). Faculty and staff also play an important role. Research has shown that faculty and staff can identify students' needs, connect them with campus resources, and provide essential support (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014; Peters & Anderson, 2021; Wu et al., 2015). However, the support is uneven. Some faculty members are reluctant to adapt instruction for linguistically diverse learners (Haan et al., 2017), and institutional challenges such as staff shortages and limited funding further constrain efforts (Nilsson et al., 2004; Ross et al., 2020). This study examines how staff and the institution support the acculturation of international doctoral students.

Emotion-Focused Coping

Emotion-focused coping aims to regulate emotional distress to promote adjustment and reduce stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984b; Sánchez-Ruiz et al., 2010). A common strategy is emotional regulation, which involves managing impulses, reframing negative situations, and using positive thinking or distraction (Carver et al., 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984b). For some IGSs, religious belief functions as a form of emotional regulation. Wei et al. (2012) found that personal faith and religious beliefs provided stability and support, helping students navigate identity shifts and challenges abroad. Their study also showed that among Christian students in the U.S., strong attachment to God was associated with greater life satisfaction and psychological well-being. Building on this work, the present study investigates how international doctoral students use emotion regulation to cope with stressors.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts Núñez's (2014) multilevel model of intersectionality, a framework used in higher education research to analyze how multiple identities and systems of power influence individual experiences (Renn & Reason, 2013). While widely applied to student populations, its use with ISs remains limited. The model includes three levels. The first level, social categories, positions individuals within societal hierarchies (Anthias, 2013). Núñez's (2014) study found that social categories for Latinos in the U.S., including im/migrant status, ethnicity, citizenship, race, and gender, influenced their access to postsecondary opportunities. Drawing on Jones and McEwen's (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI) and student participants' narratives of self-understanding and positioning in U.S. higher education, this study identifies acculturation strategies and cultural background as key social categories shaping international doctoral students' experiences.

The second level, *multiple arenas of influence*, encompasses four domains. The *organizational domain* examines how organizational or institutional structures and policies shape life opportunities; the *representational domain* examines how media and public discourses shape perceptions of groups of people and influence their experiences; the *intersubjective domain* focuses on interactions between individuals and members of groups, highlighting the power dynamics within these interactions; and the *experiential domain* analyzes how students interpret their experiences, abilities, and access to opportunities within the campus climate. The third, historicity, situates these categories and domains within broader temporal and spatial contexts. This study focuses on social categories and three domains (e.g., organizational, intersubjective, and experiential) because they emerged most prominently from participants' narratives. The representational domain and the historicity level were not examined, as the data did not reveal strong patterns in these areas.

Several studies have employed Núñez's (2014) model. Hora et al. (2022) used the model to explore Latinx students' access to internships at a Texas border university. They found that individual factors (e.g., gender, race, and socioeconomic status), institutional support, and broader structural forces (e.g., housing costs and internship pay) limited students' access to career-enhancing opportunities. George Mwangi et al. (2019) used the model to examine African IGSs' academic and social transitions in the U.S. Interviews with students, faculty, and administrators revealed challenges, including stereotypes from peers and professors, inadequate institutional systems, a gap between internationalization rhetoric and actual support, and cultural disconnects between students and campus norms. The study also found different views on institutional responsibility. Specifically, administrators emphasized international student services, while students expected broader institutional support.

METHOD

Setting and Participants

This study, approved by the University of Iowa IRB, was conducted at a midwestern U.S. university using an embedded single case study design (Yin, 2018). The design was appropriate for examining international doctoral students' acculturation through three embedded units: (1) students' self-perceptions of acculturation, (2) staff perceptions and support, and (3) institutional structures and services. As the researcher, I played a central role in data collection and analysis, aiming to produce rich, descriptive accounts of participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using purposive and convenience sampling, I recruited 14 international doctoral students and five staff members.

To recruit students, I contacted 12 staff members overseeing departmental or college listservs and asked them to distribute survey and recruitment information. The survey was used to gather demographic data and screen participants. Eligible participants were full-time IGSs who had studied in the U.S. for at least six months. Demographic information for student participants is presented in Table 1. All participant names were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Student Participants

Participant	Country of Origin	Area of Study
Chuma	Zimbabwe	Epidemiology
Anaya	India	Human Toxicology
Haoran	China	Teaching and Learning
Jiayi	China	Teaching and Learning
Yihan	China	Psychological and Quantitative Foundations
Aditi	India	Counselor Education
Yuxi	China	Business Management
Mayukh	Bangladesh	Electrical and Computer Engineering
Aleksandr	Russia	Mechanical Engineering
KamAl	Iran	Biomedical Engineering
Carlos	Colombia	Anthropology
Ha-eun	South Korea	Communication Sciences and Disorders
Majid	Iran	Sociology
Muchen	China	Physics and Astronomy

Of the 51 valid survey responses received, most were from doctoral students. To maintain consistency, only doctoral students were selected for interviews. Fourteen students were interviewed and selected based on their college or department and the order

of their survey submission. Data saturation was determined to have been reached when no new themes or patterns emerged (Francis et al., 2010). Staff participants were selected based on their roles in supporting IGSs. I identified them through networks and referrals from colleagues. All five staff members agreed to participate, including individuals from student support services and administrative roles across multiple colleges. Table 2 summarizes their professional affiliations and responsibilities. This study was guided by three research questions: (1) How did international doctoral students describe their acculturative stressors? (2) What coping strategies did these students use to address acculturative stressors? (3) What roles did the university and staff play in supporting these students' acculturation?

Table 2: Demographic Information of Staff Participants

Participant	Affiliations and Responsibilities
Jason	Part-time international student support at College of Education
Julia	Full-time administration support at College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Eva	Full-time administration support at College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Kevin	Full-time administration support for ISs at International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS)
Rachel	Part-time administration support for ISs at ISSS

Positionality

As an international doctoral student in the U.S., I brought an insider's perspective to interviews with students, which helped me develop meaningful interview questions, elicit authentic responses, and enrich data analysis through nuanced interpretation of cultural cues. To minimize subjective bias, I maintained reflexivity by journaling evolving assumptions and emotions. I also engaged in peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), sharing portions of interview data with experienced qualitative researchers to obtain alternative perspectives and ensure interpretations remained grounded in the data. When interviewing staff, I acknowledged how my student status might affect interactions, especially regarding their views on international students' acculturation and support services. To address this, I clarified my research role and emphasized my goal to gather diverse perspectives. During interviews, I engaged staff with an inquisitive and respectful approach to understand their views on student experiences and institutional support.

Data Collection

To collect interview data, I conducted one-on-one, semistructured interviews with 14 international doctoral students and five staff members. Students participated in interviews, either via Zoom or in person, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. Staff interviews were conducted in person on campus, lasting 60-90 minutes each. All interviews were audio–recorded and transcribed verbatim. Student interviews were conducted prior to staff

interviews. During staff interviews, I asked questions about staff members' understanding of IGS acculturative stressors and the support they provided to help students manage these challenges. I also shared preliminary findings from student interviews to prompt reflection on students' acculturative stressors and support strategies.

To collect observational data, I attended two orientation sessions organized by International Programs for IGSs. The first was a two-hour session on F-1 and F-2 visa regulations, which also introduced services such as advising hours and employment opportunities. The second was a one-hour session on cultural adjustment and family resources, which invited current IGSs to discuss U.S. culture, academic and daily life, adaptation strategies, available resources, and practical advice for newcomers. To maintain nonintrusiveness, I observed quietly from the side and took notes without disrupting the sessions.

Data Analysis

I initially analyzed interview transcripts using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), systematically categorizing the raw data to identify key concepts and patterns. Each participant's responses were then examined in depth to gain a nuanced understanding of their perspectives. In the analysis, stressors were identified as acculturative when participants linked them to adapting to the cultural, academic, and social environment of the U.S., rather than to general stress associated with doctoral study alone. Núñez's (2014) multilevel model of intersectionality informed the interpretation of the data. In particular, the model guided attention to the social categories and domains most relevant to international doctoral students' acculturation experiences. Guided by Núñez's (2014) concept of social categories, students were grouped based on their self-reported interest and involvement in integrating into American culture, as reflected in their interview responses. More specifically, the grouping was developed through analysis of how participants described their willingness to engage with American culture, build relationships, and participate in the cultural environment around them. Their interview data were organized into categories such as (1) expectations before arriving in the U.S., (2) challenges in daily and academic life, and (3) strategies for addressing these challenges. After coding individual interviews, I compared responses across groups to identify shared experiences and key differences. For example, students more engaged in cultural integration employed similar strategies for managing acculturative stressors but also used different strategies from those less engaged in the integration process.

The observational data, consisting of handwritten notes, represented a small portion of the study and were analyzed after the interview data. During analysis, I carefully reviewed the notes to identify connections with the interview findings. For example, interviews with administrative staff revealed efforts to build connections among IGSs. Observations confirmed that International Programs facilitated these connections by inviting current IGSs to orientation sessions to share their experiences. Relevant observational notes were highlighted and integrated into the interview analysis alongside corresponding data.

To enhance the validity and trustworthiness of this study, I conducted member checking (Varpio et al., 2017) by sharing transcripts and preliminary interpretations with staff and students, most of whom provided clarifications or corrections, strengthening the study's credibility.

FINDINGS

Students' acculturative stressors were examined using Núñez's (2014) model of social categories and experiential domain. Social categories included students' acculturation strategies and cultural background. For analysis, students were categorized into two groups: those who found themselves interested in integrating into American culture (i.e., Aditi, Aleksandr, Anaya, Carlos, Chuma, Majid, Mayukh, Muchen, and Yuxi) and those who found themselves showing little interest in or being less actively involved in cultural integration (i.e., Ha-eun, Haoran, Jiayi, KamAl, and Yihan). The experiential domain was then used to explore how different groups interpreted their acculturative stressors in daily and academic life.

Student Participants' Acculturative Stressors in Daily Life

Students who found themselves interested in integrating into American culture frequently reported stressors such as stereotypes and misunderstandings and feelings of isolation. However, these stressors were less frequently mentioned by students in the other group.

Challenges in Stereotypes and Misunderstandings

This stressor emerged in two ways: participants felt offended by American cultural stereotypes and, at times, unintentionally offended other ISs due to limited intercultural competence. For example, Chuma from Zimbabwe was uncomfortable when American classmates questioned his English-sounding name and assumed that Africans frequently interact with wild animals. Similarly, Anaya from India recalled being asked whether people in India lived in "holes," which she found ignorant and biased. These comments reflect monolithic views of Africa's cultural and linguistic diversity and India's socioeconomic complexity. Aditi shared that her experiences were often met with skepticism, which implies a power imbalance in whose knowledge is validated. She explained, "I always had to justify why I was saying it. There was always doubt because my experiences didn't align with theirs." This left Aditi feeling disengaged. On the other hand, Aleksandr, working in a religiously diverse lab, noted that his lack of cultural awareness sometimes caused misunderstandings, as his humor was sometimes perceived as offensive. His reflection, "I try to avoid comments that might offend anyone," shows developing awareness of cultural boundaries. These examples underscore that intercultural misunderstandings are mutual. Addressing them requires institutions to provide intercultural training and foster inclusive spaces for dialog and cultural exchange.

Feelings of Isolation

This stressor was largely attributed to difficulties in forming close connections with Americans, which participants described as socially and emotionally isolating. Anaya noted that despite her efforts to participate in lab conversations, her peers often continued talking among themselves, creating a subtle yet persistent barrier to inclusion. This

suggests a social exclusion that goes beyond language or cultural misunderstanding and points toward behaviors that unintentionally marginalize ISs. Similarly, Mayukh observed that "some Americans may not be used to having international friends," pointing to broader unfamiliarity with international peers. In response, many students turn to their cultural communities for support. While these groups offer familiarity and emotional comfort, they are not always sufficient. KamAl explained, "We have a community of Iranians in the U.S., but not everyone is the same. They might not understand what you're going through." Thus, although cultural communities offer some support, they often fall short of providing the deeper cross-cultural integration students seek.

The analysis showed that students pursuing cultural integration often faced increased stereotyping, miscommunication, and isolation, suggesting that cross-cultural engagement may create social vulnerabilities. In contrast, less engaged students focused on meeting basic needs, with challenges primarily related to food and finances.

Challenges in Adjusting to Food and Financial Concerns

Individuals may develop different eating habits from childhood, which can lead to challenges when adapting to new food environments. Some students struggled with food options in the U.S., particularly the taste and nutritional quality. KamAl, Ha-eun, and Yihan found that American food is difficult to adjust to, describing it as "salty and greasy." Since they were not used to it and wanted a healthier diet, they began cooking for themselves. Additionally, financial stress emerged as a core concern, particularly among students less engaged in cultural integration. For them, high living costs and limited funding created ongoing uncertainty that not only affected their basic needs but also constrained their academic focus and social participation. Jiayi and Haoran, for example, described how financial instability disrupted their ability to fully engage with campus life. These findings highlight how material constraints intersect with cultural adjustment, showing that meeting basic needs often comes before building a sense of belonging for students who are less engaged with American culture.

Student Participants' Acculturative Stressors in Academic Life

Although the two groups encountered distinct acculturative stressors in daily life depending on their level of engagement with the new environment, they reported similar challenges in academic settings. This may be because academic engagement is perceived as nonnegotiable due to its direct link to graduation requirements, while daily life adaptation, although equally significant, is approached more flexibly. Shared academic stressors included difficulties participating in classroom discussions and adapting to academic expectations and practices.

Difficulties Participating in Classroom Discussions

Some students struggled to participate in classroom discussions due to two main factors: unfamiliarity with U.S. history and education systems and differences in teaching methods. First, Haoran and Jiayi found it difficult to contribute to discussions on topics

that were rooted in U.S. or Latin American contexts. Haoran shared that "some classes focused on topics such as race and decolonization within the U.S. context," which were rarely discussed in his country. Without prior exposure to these discourses, he struggled to form opinions or engage with his peers. Similarly, Jiayi noted that in a course on postcolonial theory, much of the discussion centered on Latin America, another region she had little knowledge of, making it difficult to connect with the material. These examples illustrate that the classroom often assumes a shared set of historical and cultural references that ISs may not have access to, which can silence students.

Challenges in Adapting to Academic Expectations and Practices

Some students struggled to adapt to different academic expectations and practices. Aleksandr, an engineering student, explained, "In Russia, professors help students understand the practical applications of theory by providing numerous examples to demonstrate how to solve problems. However, in the U.S., professors expect students to first understand theories and then apply them independently." He found this shift challenging, as U.S. courses demanded a higher level of synthesis and self-directed learning. It required him to move away from the dominant approach in his previous education and instead engage in intellectual practices he was neither trained nor prepared for.

In the humanities and social sciences, differences were similarly pronounced. U.S. academic culture emphasizes extensive reading, critical engagement with diverse perspectives, and active classroom participation. Carlos and Aditi struggled to adjust to these new reading expectations. Carlos explained:

> In the U.S., professors assign an overwhelming amount of reading without expecting you to engage deeply with all of it. You're expected to skim the material and grasp the main arguments. That would never happen in Colombia, where the focus is on deeper analysis of a smaller selection of texts. I struggled a lot at the beginning because I was used to reading word by word, trying to understand every sentence and argument.

Carlos's experience highlights distinct academic cultures: the U.S. system values breadth and efficiency, while his prior education emphasized depth and precision. Over time, Carlos learned to distinguish between core and supplementary readings, manage heavy workloads, and participate more confidently. His struggle underscores that academic success in the U.S. is tied not only to content knowledge but also to navigating expected learning practices.

Coping Strategies for Acculturative Stressors

To address acculturative stressors, students adopted different coping strategies. Guided by the social categories and experiential domain in Núñez's (2014) model, the analysis explored how the two groups interpreted their coping strategies.

Coping Strategies for Acculturative Stressors in Daily Life

Students who found themselves actively seeking culture integration encountered stereotypes and skepticism. In response, they frequently employed problem-focused strategies, reflecting both emotional resilience and strategic navigation in challenging environments. For example, Anaya's connection with peers facing similar stereotypes provided validation and a sense of community that mitigated isolation. She shared, "We sometimes talk about the problems [stereotypes]. It's helpful to know that someone understands your experiences because they've gone through something similar." This shows how social networks can be a valuable support, helping students reduce isolation and sustain engagement in academic and social life. Similarly, Aditi found support from her partner, whom she described as an "unpaid therapist." Having lived in the U.S. for many years, he encouraged Aditi to develop self-advocacy skills and stand up for herself during difficult moments.

Students in this group also adopted emotion-focused strategies, such as regulating their emotions through positive thinking and acceptance. Anaya, for instance, initially attempted to build friendships with American lab mates but struggled to make meaningful connections. She then turned to emotional regulation and explained, "I reassured myself that I made the choice to come from a completely different culture... It's not my lab mates' responsibility to become friends with me... We're all adults." This reframing allowed Anaya to emotionally detach from unmet expectations and focus on what she could control. It illustrates how an international doctoral student may negotiate the reality of limited cross-cultural social integration by adjusting internal expectations rather than continuing to invest energy in relationships that may not materialize–a response that can be seen as a form of resilience.

When analyzing the coping strategies of students who found themselves showing little interest in cultural integration, a common pattern was the tendency to withdraw after initial efforts proved unsuccessful. For example, Ha-eun attempted to connect with an American student who had previously worked in South Korea. After one brief and unfulfilling conversation over coffee, she "gave up that relationship," believing further effort would be unproductive, especially since she intended to return home after graduation. Her limited motivation to engage socially may have reduced her willingness to persist in cross-cultural relationship-building. Similarly, when facing financial stress, several students expressed resignation rather than seeking support. Haoran shared, "I tried applying for on-campus jobs, but it didn't change anything... I can just go with the flow and maybe leave without money." His words reflected a passive acceptance of his situation and a reluctance to pursue alternative options. This disengaged approach may have been reinforced by his detachment from American culture, which could have limited his awareness of or access to support systems. Overall, these examples highlight that low levels of cultural integration can intersect with passive coping strategies, potentially exacerbating students' academic and personal challenges.

Coping Strategies for Acculturative Stressors in Academic Life

Both groups adopted problem-focused coping strategies to manage academic challenges, such as independent problem solving, seeking faculty guidance, and using campus resources. Aleksandr bridged the theory-practice gap through self-directed learning and supplementary resources. Yihan preferred to work independently before approaching her advisor, believing it strengthened her critical thinking. Yuxi transitioned from passively absorbing others' ideas to actively developing her own through engaging with course readings and participating in class discussions. She explained, "Instead of just listening to my classmates' discussions, I now actively explore these questions independently." She now critically analyzes readings and formulates her own questions.

Some students emphasized the role of faculty in their adjustment. Aleksandr highlighted the importance of understanding professors' expectations, explaining, "Professors have specific expectations about where their students are supposed to succeed and how they need to do certain tasks." To stay on track, he prioritizes discussing these expectations with professors early on. Similarly, Carlos described how his advisor helped him adapt to U.S. academic reading practices by offering concrete strategies, such as "highlighting key points, taking notes, and using bibliographies." The advisor's clear explanation of expectations helped him better understand how to meet them. Jiayi, who initially struggled in a postcolonialism course, also received support from her professor. She shared, "The professor provided me with relevant papers to help me understand course materials better from my background. Knowing she understood my concerns gave me the sense that I wasn't facing this challenge alone." The faculty made visible expectations and offered personalized support, helping students meet academic demands and contributing to their confidence in unfamiliar institutional environments.

However, not all students felt comfortable seeking direct support from professors. Haoran and Anaya hesitated, fearing they would appear lazy or burdensome. Instead, they turned to campus resources. Haoran joined a support group for IGSs, where he shared his challenges and received peer support. Anaya, on the other hand, utilized the university's counseling services, which helped her regain confidence. Before using counseling services, Anaya hesitated due to the stigma around mental health in her home country. She changed her mind after hearing peers speak positively about their own counseling experiences. Looking back, Anaya wished she had sought help earlier, recognizing that overcoming cultural stigma was a key part of her adaptation process.

The University and Staff Roles in Supporting Students' Acculturative Stressors

This section examines how the university and staff support students' acculturation through Núñez's (2014) organizational, intersubjective, and experiential domains.

The University Role

Students had mixed experiences with university-provided resources. Although many resources were available, students emphasized the need for better coordination and

communication among offices. Scattered information and limited interoffice collaboration often made support difficult to access. As examples of the experiential domain in Núñez's (2014) model, KamAl, an Engineering student, noted the time-consuming process of navigating different offices for visa and academic concerns. Similarly, Mayukh and Haoran, from the Colleges of Engineering and Education, shared that as new arrivals, they often struggled to locate targeted resources and had to engage in back-and-forth communication with different offices to resolve issues.

However, students from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences reported more positive experiences. Staff in this college actively coordinated with colleagues and kept each other informed. As examples of the intersubjective domain in Núñez's (2024) model, Eva, a full-time administrative staff member, explained that they maintain communication with colleagues by copying each other in emails or saying, 'This was students' question, and this was the information I gave them. If I missed anything, please add to it." Her team also planned to display posters introducing staff and their roles to help students identify the right contacts for support. Additionally, several colleges developed tailored resources to help the next generation of international doctoral students. Yuxi, a student in business, received a peer-created guide with practical advice on housing, transportation, and administrative matters. Similarly, Julia, a staff member, described how her college organized an ICON site with self-paced modules on local resources, helping students transition more easily.

Despite these efforts, some resources were underutilized due to limited promotion. Anaya mentioned that while legal housing support, such as help negotiating with landlords, was available, students were often unaware of it. She noted that the university "needs to advertise them more and makes students aware of what's available." Mayukh expressed concern about unclear communication around student rights and legal regulations, which heightened his anxiety about maintaining visa status. Additionally, Carlos highlighted the lack of information on spiritual and religious services, suggesting that such guidance be included in an orientation to support students' resilience and cultural adaptation. The experiences of Anaya, Mayukh, and Carlos demonstrated that the University's current approach to organizing and promoting resources might not address students' practical, legal, and emotional needs.

Using Núñez's (2014) model, this subsection shows that while the university provides resources (organizational domain), students' experiences (experiential domain) and staff perspectives (intersubjective domain) reveal inconsistencies in accessibility and communication. Some colleges offer well-structured, collaborative support, but many students face fragmented information and insufficient promotion, limiting the effectiveness of university services.

The Staff Role

This subsection uses Núñez's (2014) intersubjective and experiential domains to examine staff support by comparing staff explanations of the support they offered with students' reported experiences. For example, Jason, a part-time staff member, facilitated support groups and one-on-one sessions to help international doctoral students adapt to the U.S. education system. He noticed that "International students often read everything in

detail. They end up unprepared for class because they've read so much but haven't synthesized the material into key points for discussion." This insight echoes the experiences of two students, Carlos and Aditi, who struggled to adapt their reading practices. Jason offered guidance drawing from his own experience and encouraged group members to support peers facing similar challenges.

Some staff and students emphasized the importance of building connections with fellow ISs. Two students, Chuma and Anaya, shared that graduate students in their programs actively supported newcomers by answering questions, giving campus tours, and introducing resources. Anaya found this support especially helpful during her transition. Staff also encouraged peer connections. Current IGSs were invited to some colleges and orientations hosted by International Programs to share their experiences and answer questions. At International Programs, Rachel promoted a peer mentorship program that paired new IGSs with peers who had recently faced similar challenges, offering guidance based on first-hand experience.

Similarly, Kevin, a full-time administrative supporting IS, designed orientation sessions to include peer-led support. He grouped incoming students and assigned current IGSs as leaders to share experiences about academics and daily life in the U.S., covering topics such as transportation, insurance, and counseling. Kevin also invited current IGSs as guest speakers to discuss their challenges and strategies during orientation sessions. Observational data showed that these speakers addressed issues such as difficulty forming relationships and feelings of loneliness due to the U.S.'s individualistic culture. They offered advice such as "seek out new social networks," "get involved in the community," and "socialize as much as you can during orientation or other events." Many new students continued to engage with these speakers after the sessions.

Students stressed the importance of faculty and staff understanding their cultural, religious, and lifestyle backgrounds. Aditi, for example, noted that while students are often encouraged to adapt to U.S. culture, faculty and staff also need to understand students' backgrounds to provide meaningful support. In response to this need, Kevin led intercultural training programs to help faculty and staff support ISs' adjustment, build intercultural competence, and navigate immigration issues. Although these programs were later discontinued due to policy changes, Kevin noted they had been effective in improving support for ISs.

This subsection uses Núñez's (2014) model to compare staff explanations of the support they provided (intersubjective domain) with students' experiences of those services (experiential domain). The analysis identified various forms of support, such as individualized support, peer mentorship, student connections, and orientation sessions. Importantly, previously offered intercultural training for faculty and staff reflected staff awareness of students' needs and aimed to address them.

DISCUSSION

Student Participants' Acculturative Stressors and Coping Strategies

This study examines international doctoral students' acculturative stressors. Using the social categories and experiential domain of Núñez's (2014) model, the analysis identified

two groups: students who found themselves interested in integrating into American culture and those who were less engaged and faced different daily life stressors. While stressors such as stereotypes, misunderstandings, feelings of isolation, and food and financial concerns have been noted in previous research (Calder et al., 2016), few studies have distinguished students by cultural engagement to show how these stressors vary. Interestingly, despite these differences in everyday experiences, both groups reported similar academic challenges (Altbach & Knight, 2007). This pattern may be because academic engagement is nonnegotiable due to its direct impact on graduation, whereas adaptation to daily life, although important, is often approached more flexibly.

This study also explores students' coping strategies through the experiential domain of Núñez's (2014) model. To manage daily life stressors, students who found themselves interested in American culture integration used problem-coping strategies. Consistent with scholarly definitions that describe this approach as taking direct action to overcome challenges (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984b), these students reported seeking support from friends or partners and developing self-advocacy. Some also used emotion-focused coping, which aligns with research showing that strong emotional regulation skills enhance stress management (Sánchez-Ruiz et al., 2010). In contrast, students in the other group were less proactive. When their efforts failed, they often disengaged or passively accepted their circumstances. Despite these differences in coping with daily life challenges, both groups approached academic stressors similarly. They primarily used problem-focused strategies, such as independent problem-solving, seeking help from professors, and utilizing campus resources. This aligns with previous research highlighting the effectiveness of such strategies (Taylor, 2011; Wu et al., 2015).

The University and Staff Roles in Supporting Students' Acculturative Stressors

In addition to analyzing students' interpretations of their acculturative stressors and coping strategies, this study uses Núñez's (2014) model to explore how institutional support structures influence students' acculturation experiences. Specifically, it considers both students' engagement with university resources and staff perspectives on how those resources are organized and delivered. Although Núñez's model distinguishes between experiential and organizational domains, this study highlights the dynamic interplay between them. Students' lived experiences (experiential) revealed structural gaps in service provision (organizational), while the design and coordination of institutional support (organizational) directly influenced how students navigated daily and academic challenges (experiential). This reciprocal relationship challenges the model's original assumption that domains operate independently, suggesting an integrated framework for understanding how institutional environments mediate acculturation.

By comparing staff perspectives with students' reported experiences, this study underscores the influential role of staff in shaping international doctoral students' acculturation. Within Núñez's (2014) model, the analysis highlights the intersubjective domain, specifically staff intentions, attitudes, and practices, as a key mediator of students' experiential realities. Importantly, the study challenges the model's assumption that domains function independently by revealing a reciprocal relationship: staff efforts (intersubjective) influenced students' adaptation experiences (experiential), while student

needs and feedback (experiential) informed staff practices, including intercultural engagement initiatives (intersubjective). This dynamic interaction suggests a more fluid and responsive relationship between the intersubjective and experiential domains than originally proposed.

CONCLUSION

With the growing number of IGSs in the U.S., this study uses Núñez's (2014) multilevel model of intersectionality to analyze international doctoral students' acculturative stressors and coping strategies. As institutional awareness of international student support has increased, this study also analyzes the role of the university and its staff in influencing students' acculturation experiences. The findings carry implications for how educators and researchers can better support international doctoral students during their acculturation process in the U.S.

The analysis underscores how limited intercultural competency can negatively affect student interactions. Students described experiencing both intentional and unintentional comments that conveyed hostile or derogatory messages. Although intercultural training programs had previously been offered, recent reductions in DEI-related offices and initiatives have limited resources. In response, universities could integrate discussions of cultural sensitivity and inclusive communication into existing structures, such as orientation programs, academic advising, and peer mentoring, so that respectful interactions are consistently reinforced. Even decentralized or small-scale efforts can help reduce the risk of unintentional harm.

Students in this study also demonstrated resilience in navigating their academic and social challenges but emphasized the need for broader institutional support. Effective preparation and sustained assistance require a coordinated campus-wide effort rather than relying on a single office. For example, universities could establish cross-unit collaboration among international student services, academic departments, counseling centers, and graduate schools to provide structured support across students' adjustment processes. Such support might include orientation sessions tailored to doctoral students, regular follow-up meetings during the semester, discussion groups focused on academic and social adjustment, and clearer referral systems for mental health and academic support. Institutions could also systematically gather feedback from international doctoral students through surveys, focus groups, or routine program reviews and use these data to revise services, address gaps, and sustain effective support practices.

For researchers, this study adapts Núñez's (2014) model by showing how the experiential, intersubjective, and organizational domains are interrelated. Future work could further investigate these interactions across institutions with diverse demographics and cultural contexts. The study also had limitations: the number of staff participants was small, no faculty members were included, and data collection consisted of only two interviews per student and two observations of orientation sessions. These constraints may have limited the ability to capture the complexity and evolving nature of cross-cultural adaptation. Because acculturation is an ongoing process, students at different stages may face distinct challenges. Future research could therefore include larger and more diverse samples of staff and faculty, extend the duration of data collection, and examine students

at multiple points in their academic journeys to provide a more comprehensive picture of international doctoral students' experiences.

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