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Navigating Cultural Transition: Experiences of International Students at a Midwestern University

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ABSTRACT: *International students make a remarkable contribution to U.S. higher education, but face considerable obstacles during cultural transition. This qualitative study investigated the cultural adaptation experiences of 15 international students at a midwestern university, led by Berry's acculturation theory. Data from semistructured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that students navigated significant academic and linguistic challenges and adapted a twofold social network, primarily relying on conational peers before seeking cross-cultural connections. While centralized services were valuable, personalized faculty mentorship and peer relationships were the most effective supports, facilitating a shift toward a bicultural identity. The study concludes that successful integration requires a "whole-of-university" approach, implying a need for enhanced peer mentoring and faculty development to foster more inclusive and supportive campus environments.*

Keywords: Acculturation, Cultural transition, Institutional support, International students, Qualitative research

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid globalization of higher education highlights the significant contribution of international students in enriching academic and cultural environments. Although these students significantly enhance cross-cultural communication, language learning, and cultural exchange, they often encounter substantial challenges as they adjust to new social, cultural, and educational environments (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wu et al., 2025). Problems such as social isolation, language difficulties, and unfamiliar academic standards complicate their adaptation (Berry, 2005; Lee & Çiftçi, 2014). Such challenges mirror broader issues in U.S. higher education, where institutional support for international students often lacks the structure of dedicated integration programs, adversely affecting their sense of belonging and academic achievement (Glass et al., 2015; Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the cultural adaptation experiences of 15 international students from diverse geographic regions at a midwestern university, focusing on their challenges, perceptions of institutional support, and coping strategies. We discuss the findings in the context of Berry's (2005) acculturation theory to explore their cultural transitions and processes in the American higher education context. The findings aim to inform policies and practices that enhance inclusivity and support international student services. The guiding research questions are as follows: How do international students navigate the challenges of cultural transition at a midwestern university? Furthermore, how do institutional resources and social dynamics at the host university facilitate their adaptation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A complex interplay of cultural, academic, and institutional factors shapes the experiences of international students in U.S. higher education. Navigating these requires more than just academic readiness; students also undergo cultural transitions that impact their education and personal growth. Existing research highlights critical areas, including the development of intercultural skills, ongoing institutional support gaps, and the challenges of acculturation and academic adaptation. These aspects collectively offer a vital framework for understanding how international students encounter, manage, and respond to the opportunities and challenges they face during their studies.

Intercultural Competence in Higher Education. Intercultural competence (IC) is essential for the academic achievement and social integration of international students, while also helping them preserve their cultural identity (Berry, 2005). It comprises the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills required for effective and appropriate communication in intercultural environments, including an understanding of diverse worldviews and the ability to demonstrate behavioral adaptability (Deardorff, 2006; Schwarzenhal et al., 2020). This competence is cultivated through active observation, reflection, and participation, rather than in isolation (Tavares, 2021). Consequently, effective intercultural communication necessitates adjusting expressions, demonstrating empathy, and engaging in respectful dialog (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017; van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2022). A critical element of this competence for academic success is contextual awareness, as international students' understanding of the host institution's academic culture is a fundamental aspect of a successful transition (Trimpe, 2022). Although global competence is framed as multidimensional, research emphasizes that students need to develop intercultural communication skills for purposeful development (Silva et al., 2026; Yang et al., 2026).

Nevertheless, a substantial gap persists between the acknowledged importance of intercultural competence and its practical incorporation into curricula. Numerous institutions fail to provide relevant, structured opportunities for developing these skills (Calikoglu et al., 2022), despite widespread recognition that interculturality naturally arises from cross-border interactions (Liu et al., 2022). Recent research continues to underscore the pivotal role of intercultural competence in language acquisition and international education (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023), with scholars emphasizing virtual exchange programs and deliberately designing collaborative learning initiatives as practical strategies to advance it.

The Centrality of Social Networks and Friendship Patterns

A fundamental component of cultivating intercultural competence is establishing social networks. Empirical research consistently indicates that the friendship patterns among international students predominantly fall into two primary groups. At the outset, they depend on conational networks—individuals from the same country—for essential emotional and practical support, which helps mitigate early culture shock and loneliness (Hendrickson et al., 2011). However, while these homogeneous networks offer a secure environment, they may also limit opportunities for deeper cultural immersion and language acquisition. Building cross-national friendships, particularly with host-national students, is strongly correlated with increased perceived social support, enhanced language proficiency, and a greater sense of belonging (Gareis, 2012; Glass et al., 2015). Nonetheless, establishing such friendships often presents challenges, frequently hindered by perceived cultural differences, a shortage of organized interaction opportunities, and conflicting schedules among both domestic and international students (Zhou & Yin, 2024). These obstacles can be exacerbated for students of color, who might additionally encounter interpersonal difficulties

rooted in racial tensions and discrimination, adversely affecting their sense of connection (Briscoe et al., 2022).

Collaborative Learning as a Catalyst

Within the academic sphere, collaborative learning is viewed as a key means to foster both cross-national friendships and intercultural competence (IC). Defined as a shared intellectual effort (de Hei et al., 2016), collaborative learning boosts intercultural skills through positive interdependence and supportive interaction (Berry, 2019; de Hei et al., 2016). However, the success of these groups depends on careful design. As de Hei et al. (2016) emphasize, ensuring that all members contribute equally is essential; without proper facilitation, international students risk being marginalized and having their viewpoints undervalued, which can reinforce existing social divides rather than bridging them.

The effectiveness of acculturation strategies is greatly affected by the type of social support available. A study of 642 students at Chinese universities found that support from family, host-national (i.e., Chinese) friends, and teachers significantly improved academic adjustment. In contrast, support from non-Chinese (i.e., international) friends had no significant impact (Liu et al., 2022). This finding underscores the significant role of various social networks in intercultural adaptation, indicating that close engagement with the host culture is particularly beneficial for academic success. Furthermore, the quality of relational support provided by faculty and staff is crucial. Positive educator behaviors act as buffers against transitional stress, whereas dismissive interactions intensify feelings of invisibility and marginalization (Sharma, 2026).

Institutional Support Gaps

Despite the importance of intercultural competence, institutions often lack comprehensive, coherent support systems, as evidenced by inadequate faculty training, limited resources, and poorly designed curricula. This causes a disconnect between the talk of internationalization and the actual experiences of students and faculty. Many faculty members, even experts in their fields, struggle to provide culturally responsive education (Calikoglu et al., 2022) or facilitate meaningful intercultural exchanges in their classrooms (Lee & Çiftçi, 2014; Sanderson, 2008). They often feel unprepared and unsupported in addressing the wide range of academic and cultural differences faced by international students (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Tavares, 2021). As a result, students frequently report insufficient transition support and ongoing assistance, revealing a primary institutional deficiency (Glass et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2025). A systematic review of 325 studies (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023) highlights the importance of adopting a mixed-methods approach to evaluating intercultural development. This highlights the urgent need for intercultural training in various professional settings, including higher education. Research grounded in Schlossberg's marginality and mattering theory shows that faculty and staff play

a major role in international students' transitions. Sharma (2026) emphasizes that faculty validation is significant for building students' confidence and reducing stress, highlighting the importance of everyday support. Research using the demand-control-support model shows that institutional structures impede international students' self-direction. This imbalance generates "iso-strain," increasing stress and contributing to a fragmented sense of belonging (Yang et al., 2026; Paik & Braxton, 2026).

From Orientation to Holistic Integration

A major institutional shortcoming is the tendency to focus on one-time orientation programs rather than providing ongoing, comprehensive support. While orientations are helpful for initial logistics, they often fail to address the long-term process of cultural adjustment, which unfolds throughout a student's academic journey (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Additionally, institutions often emphasize disciplinary content over embedded intercultural learning, depriving students of valuable opportunities for guided reflection on their cross-cultural experiences (Deardorff, 2011; Gregersen-Hermans, 2017). This lack of structured integration, combined with language barriers, often leads students to form culturally similar groups for projects and social activities, which can exacerbate feelings of isolation and hinder intercultural learning (Lee & Çiftçi, 2014; Zhou & Yin, 2024). Sharma (2026) argues that student transition is a long-term process that extends beyond the initial phase. As institutional support often declines after orientation, institutions need to provide consistent resources rather than placing the responsibility on students.

Models for Effective Support

Addressing these extensive problems necessitates strategies that encompass comprehensive faculty development, structured peer mentorship programs, and intentionally designed curricula (Tavares, 2021). Practical, evidence-based solutions include redesigning group activities to emphasize the collaborative process rather than the final product, and implementing reflective assessments that motivate students to reflect on their intercultural development (de Hei et al., 2016; Gregersen-Hermans, 2017). Given that international students frequently experience social isolation and difficulty forming connections with domestic students, hindering their sense of belonging (Cena et al., 2021), effective models often employ a "whole-of-university" strategy. In this framework, the responsibility for supporting international students is distributed across academic departments, student affairs, and dedicated international offices, thereby fostering a more integrated and responsive support network. Expanding upon Schlossberg's transition theory, Sharma (2026) introduces a "4 S" framework comprising situational, self, support, and strategy factors to enhance institutional support. The framework encompasses prearrival guidance, accessible mental health services, mentorship programs, and faculty cultural competency training, all aimed at alleviating marginalization. According to Yang et al. (2026), culturally informed

support is salient in enhancing student agency through global competence. Faculty-led, culturally sensitive interventions can espouse structural barriers by prompting institutions to adopt more inclusive and integrative approaches.

Acculturation and Academic Adjustment

The process of adjusting to a new academic and cultural system is deeply influenced by acculturation strategies, which play a key role in shaping the educational and psychological outcomes of student sojourners. Berry's (2005) influential model describes four main strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Extensive research indicates that the integration strategy — maintaining one's heritage culture while actively participating in the host culture — consistently correlates with improved psychological well-being and academic adjustment (Berry, 2019; van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2022). On the other hand, marginalization, which involves losing connection to both cultures, is associated with the poorest outcomes, such as loneliness and academic challenges (Berry, 2005).

Understanding Acculturation: Process, Dynamics, and Psychological Dimensions

Recent research has refined our understanding of acculturation, portraying it not as a fixed choice but as a dynamic and ongoing process. Students constantly adjust their strategies to optimize social and academic resources in response to changing situations (Wu et al., 2025). For example, reflective journals show that students who initially experience “academic shock” may initially use separation strategies but later adopt integration strategies as they gain confidence and connect with local support systems. These findings support Berry's (2019) assertion that integration builds resilience by enabling individuals to access dual cultural resources. This view emphasizes the role of institutions in promoting academic success by fostering meaningful interactions between international and host-country students through mentorship programs and culturally responsive teaching (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017; Liu et al., 2022).

Supporting the acculturation process is the real experience of acculturative stress, which refers to the psychological strain of adjusting to a new culture (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). This stress may result in anxiety, sadness, feelings of alienation, and physical complaints. Language barriers, perceived discrimination, and homesickness often cause it. The level of acculturative stress varies and is influenced by factors such as personality, previous travel experience, and, in particular, the quality of institutional and social support (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Understanding this psychological aspect is essential for a complete understanding of the international student experience.

The Intersection of Language, Identity, and Power

Beyond the practical difficulties posed by language barriers lies a more complex layer involving identity, power, and linguistic legitimacy. International

students who are nonnative English speakers (NNES) often face a struggle for “linguistic justice” and a sense of belonging in academic environments. Research indicates that even students with strong formal English skills can face a form of “linguistic othering,” where their accents, communication styles, or rhetorical choices are subtly or overtly disapproved of, affecting their confidence and participation in academic settings (Tavares, 2021; Zhou & Yin, 2024).

This struggle is deeply connected to identity. Tavares (2021) argues that for many international students, academic communication is not just a skill but a space of “identity negotiation.” They must constantly balance the challenge of expressing their complex intellectual selves with conforming to the often-unstated rhetorical norms of Western academia. This can cause feelings of inauthenticity and intellectual marginalization, as students feel their “academic voice” is not truly their own. The pressure to perform in a specific linguistic style can silence valuable viewpoints and reinforce a deficit view of multilingual students, portraying them as “lacking” rather than as “knowing other” languages and discourses (Zhou & Yin, 2024).

The concept of “translanguaging” - the dynamic and flexible use of a person’s entire linguistic repertoire - has been introduced as a transformative teaching approach to address these challenges. Instead of viewing languages as separate, confined systems, translanguaging recognizes the cognitive and communicative benefits of utilizing all one’s language resources for learning (Zhou & Yin, 2024). However, its application in monolingually-focused university environments remains limited. The ongoing presence of “accent bias” and the favoring of native-speaker standards in classroom interactions continue to create a “linguistic hierarchy” that can weaken the confidence and academic integration of NNES students (Tavares, 2021). Understanding these complex intersections of language, identity, and power is therefore essential for moving beyond a simple view of language as just a tool and for recognizing it as a key site of personal agency and social struggle in the international student experience.

The Digital Dimension: Technology, Social Media, and Transnationalism

The experience of modern international students is profoundly shaped by digital technology, a factor that fundamentally changes traditional models of acculturation. Today’s students navigate a “digital ecosystem” that enables them to stay continuously connected to their home countries while also forming new relationships in the host country (Zhou & Yin, 2024). A key role of this ecosystem is to maintain “digital homeliness,” in which platforms such as WeChat and WhatsApp serve as essential channels for emotional support and for safeguarding cultural identity (Zhou & Yin, 2024). These private, conational networks act as vital buffers against loneliness and culture shock. However, this constant connectivity creates a complex duality. While it provides support, it can also, as Zhou and Yin (2024) point out, slow the host country’s cultural and linguistic learning by creating a “digital bubble” that reduces the need for immersive local interaction.

At the same time, students use public social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook to explore their new environment. This involves “digital prospecting”, gathering information about the host culture, observing social norms, and carefully managing their online self-presentation to connect with new peers and keep in touch with family at home (Zhou & Yin, 2024). This carefully curated online identity can become a significant source of stress, as students feel pressure to portray a successful, happy “study abroad” experience that may differ from their offline realities (Wu et al., 2025).

Furthermore, technology helps build “transnational identities.” Students can engage in their home country’s political life, maintain academic collaborations across time zones, and consume media from different cultures, challenging the traditional “assimilation” model of the past (Zhou & Yin, 2024). This is especially evident in the emergence of “online ethnic enclaves” on global platforms, which provide spaces for cultural preservation and resistance to assimilation pressures (Zhou & Yin, 2024). For higher education institutions, this digital layer is no longer just an extra; it requires rethinking support services to include digital literacy and online community building, along with a pedagogical shift toward using technology to create more inclusive, globally connected classrooms. Ignoring this aspect means missing the primary environment in which modern international students build a sense of belonging, manage their well-being, and navigate cross-cultural experiences.

The cultural transition of international students in higher education is a complex phenomenon that can be best understood through the lens of acculturation theory, which highlights the psychological, social, and behavioral adjustments individuals make as they adapt to a new cultural environment (Berry, 2005). In this process, developing intercultural competence becomes essential, as it enables students to bridge cultural differences and foster meaningful academic and social interactions, often through structured collaborative learning and diverse social networks. At the same time, institutional settings often reveal significant gaps in support systems, from faculty preparedness to comprehensive student programs, leaving students to manage complex challenges with limited resources. These factors directly influence the patterns and outcomes of acculturation and academic adjustment, as students strive to adapt to a new cultural system while maintaining their academic success and well-being. Together, these interconnected aspects provide a solid foundation for understanding how international students at a Midwestern university experience and respond to the challenges of cultural transition.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Berry’s (2005) acculturation theory to examine how international students navigate cultural transitions while preserving their original identity. The theory identifies four adaptation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Evidence consistently shows that integration is the most effective approach for both academic and social adjustment, as it enables students to access support from diverse cultural networks while preserving their

heritage (Liu et al., 2022; Berry, 2019). In contrast, marginalization often leads to adverse outcomes, including isolation and academic difficulties (Berry, 2005). The theory also emphasizes the importance of institutional support, including language training, mentorship, and peer interactions, in facilitating successful integration, as Liu et al. (2022) found in their research on students at Chinese universities.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study employs an exploratory qualitative approach and utilizes thematic analysis to examine the cultural transition experiences of fifteen international students at a midwestern university. A purposive sampling method (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was used to select a diverse group of current international students. Data collection continued until saturation was reached or no new substantial themes emerged. The final sample consisted of 15 students (8 females and 7 males) from 11 different countries, including Ghana, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, South Korea, Turkey, China, India, Kenya, and Mauritius. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 34 years. Detailed demographic information for each participant is listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographics (N = 15)

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Gender	Program Level	Field of Study	Length of Stay (Years)
Kofi	Ghana	M	Undergraduate	Legal Studies	1.5
Aisha	Nigeria	F	Graduate	Educational Psychology	1.5
Chiamaka	Nigeria	F	Graduate	Organizational Communication	2
Thomas	Burkina Faso	M	Graduate	Mathematics	1
Ashani	Sri Lanka	F	Graduate	Journalism and Communication	1
Sameer	Pakistan	M	Graduate	Computer Science	3
Hana	South Korea	F	Undergraduate	Business	1
Min-Jun	South Korea	M	Undergraduate	Architecture	2
Elif	Turkey	F	Graduate	Urban Planning	1.5
Wei	China	M	Graduate	Higher Education	3.5
Jia	China	F	Undergraduate	English	1.2
Rohan	India	M	Undergraduate	Biology	1
Anika	India	F	Graduate	Public Health	3
Mumbi	Kenya	F	Graduate	Higher Education	3
Liam	Mauritius	M	Graduate	Mathematics	2

Note. M = male, F = female.

They were enrolled in both undergraduate (n = 5) and graduate (n = 10) programs across various fields, and had completed at least one academic year at the university.

Researchers Positionality

As researchers, we acknowledge our positionality and its influence on this study. Both authors are current or former international students who have personally navigated the complexities of cultural and academic transition in the United States. The first author, a female and current international doctoral student, has direct experience with the challenges of cultural integration and is deeply invested in the experiences and well-being of international students in higher education. The second author is a female Associate Professor whose research is motivated by her own experiences adapting as an international student and scholar. Our insider status provided a nuanced understanding of the phenomena under investigation and helped build trust and rapport with participants. However, we practiced continuous reflexivity through journaling and peer debriefing to bracket our own experiences and ensure that the participants' authentic voices remained central to the analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers held formal training and experience in data collection and co-facilitated the interview process and analysis. Semistructured interviews were used for data collection, consisting of open-ended questions aimed at exploring participants' experiences with cultural transition, institutional support, and coping strategies (e.g., "What were the most significant challenges you faced during your initial weeks?" and "How have your relationships with other students influenced your adjustment?"). Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes, was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim, in accordance with ethical protocols that included confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation.

Participants provided informed consent after receiving detailed explanations of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw. Confidentiality was protected by using pseudonyms, and researcher reflexivity was practiced through reflective journaling. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, which provided a systematic, iterative framework for engaging deeply with the data and enhancing the study's overall trustworthiness. The process began with careful familiarization with the data, during which all 15 interview transcripts were read multiple times to ensure an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives. This prolonged engagement with the data enhances credibility, as it allows for a nuanced and accurate representation of participants' experiences.

The coding process incorporated both deductive codes, informed by Berry's Acculturation Theory (2005), and inductive codes that emerged directly from participant narratives. This combination strengthens credibility and confirmability by grounding the analysis in both established theoretical constructs and

participants' lived experiences, reducing the likelihood of imposing a singular interpretive lens. NVivo software was used to systematically organize and manage the data, supporting dependability by ensuring a transparent and consistent coding process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To further enhance rigor, the research team engaged in collaborative review of codes and iterative discussions to refine categories and develop overarching themes. This analytic dialog contributed to dependability by promoting consistency in interpretation and to confirmability by allowing multiple perspectives to interrogate emerging findings. The reflexive nature of the approach also required researchers to remain aware of their own assumptions and positionalities throughout the analysis, thereby strengthening reflexivity and minimizing potential bias.

The themes were developed in alignment with the theoretical framework and research questions, ensuring coherence between the data, analysis, and study purpose (Booth et al., 2014). Collectively, these methodological choices enhance the study's trustworthiness through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity (Tong, 2007).

Significance of the Study

The study advances the understanding of international students' cultural adaptation in the U.S. higher education system. It highlights how students from diverse backgrounds face challenges, employ coping strategies, and utilize campus resources during their academic and social transitions. Based on Berry's (2005) acculturation theory, the findings offer insights into the process of adjusting to new cultures and reveal the complex interplay among language, culture, and identity that influences students' adaptation.

The study contributes to discussions on transnational identities, networks, and communities by examining how international students foster a sense of belonging and integration in new environments. It emphasizes the importance of institutional inclusivity and responsiveness in aiding students' academic achievement and well-being. Our research into intercultural communication and global competence reveals implications that extend beyond individual students, impacting institutional policy and practice. The results are valuable for administrators, faculty, and student support services seeking to develop environments that encourage cross-cultural understanding and equitable participation. Ultimately, the study not only advances research on international student adaptation but also offers guidance for strategies that strengthen higher education's role in a more interconnected world.

RESULTS

The findings of this study illuminate how international students navigate the complexities of cultural transition while identifying the institutional and social factors that facilitate their adaptation within a midwestern university context. Guided by the two research questions: "How do students experience and respond to cultural challenges?" and "How do institutional resources and social dynamics

support their adjustment?”, the analysis reveals a multifaceted process of adaptation aligned with Berry’s acculturation theory. Across the data, participants described navigating academic expectations, language nuances, and evolving cultural identities, while simultaneously drawing on a range of organizational resources and social relationships to support their transition.

The findings highlight that cultural adjustment is not solely an individual process but is significantly shaped by access to institutional support and the quality of social integration opportunities. Organizational resources, such as academic advising, faculty mentorship, the Writing Center, and the Library, emerged as critical structures that facilitated academic navigation and reduced uncertainty. At the same time, social dynamics, particularly peer networks, played a central role in fostering a sense of belonging and cultural learning. Together, these formal and informal supports served as complementary mechanisms that enabled students to move from an initial reliance on culturally familiar networks to broader cross-cultural engagement. The five themes that follow (academic challenges, language barriers, institutional support, social integration, and cultural identity development), collectively illustrate how students negotiate their experiences and progressively construct pathways toward successful cultural adaptation.

Academic challenges: Navigating a new pedagogical culture

A significant challenge faced by most participants (14 out of 15) was adjusting to U.S. academic norms. Students from Africa and Asia often described a large gap between their previous, lecture-based educational systems and the participatory, discussion-focused approach common at U.S. universities. A student from Ghana noted, “Back home, we do not call professors by their name; it is customary to address them as Sir, Professor, or Madam... Here, addressing them by their first name was, for me, quite shocking.” This informality was often linked to a broader expectation of critical engagement. A South Korean student said, “I realized I needed to be more extroverted and approach people to make friends or participate in group projects,” highlighting the connection between academic participation and social adjustment. Graduate students, in particular, noted the fast pace and heavy assignment workload compared to their home countries.

Language Barriers: Beyond Fluency to Cultural Nuance

Although all participants were proficient in English, 12 of 15 reported that language was a significant barrier that went beyond the classroom. The difficulty included understanding academic jargon, keeping up with fast-paced lectures, and comprehending colloquialisms and cultural references. One Pakistani PhD student noted that even with strong English skills, “understanding academic jargon and expectations here was challenging. The way things are phrased in assignments or lectures sometimes makes it hard to grasp what exactly is required.” This language barrier directly affected social integration, as students

felt less confident in initiating conversations with domestic peers, potentially limiting their social networks.

Institutional Support: A Complex Spectrum of Resources

Perceptions of institutional support varied considerably, highlighting a complex landscape. The International Office for International Programs was often seen as a helpful first point of contact, especially for organizing social events and providing immigration advice. However, several students suggested that its resources could be improved. The most consistently valued supports included the Library, the Writing Center, and, notably, individual faculty mentors and academic advisors who provided personalized guidance. As one student from Turkey said, “The academic advisors and faculty were the most helpful. They often asked me if I was on track. They helped me choose suitable classes since I was an international student.” On the other hand, a common criticism was the lack of prearrival information on practical issues, such as the actual cost of living and the fact that some university apartments were unfurnished.

Social Integration: The Central Role of Peer Networks

Social integration proved to be the most important factor for successful adjustment, as all fifteen participants highlighted. The students’ formation of social networks usually followed a two-step pattern. First, students relied heavily on conational or pancultural groups (for example, the Ghanaian Student Association and other African students) for practical and emotional support. One Nigerian student vividly described this, saying he would have become “an introvert overnight” without connecting with other Black students. These groups offered vital resources—from airport pickups to cookware—fostering a strong sense of belonging.

As they settled in, many students actively sought cross-cultural connections with both domestic and international students. A South Korean student described how joining a fraternity was transformative: “My fraternity brothers took care of me and mingled with me well... through that, I improved my English.” These relationships were essential for learning unspoken cultural norms and feeling truly integrated into the campus community.

Cultural Identity: Evolution Toward Biculturalism

The experience of studying abroad led to a noticeable shift in cultural identity for most participants. Instead of replacing their heritage identity, students described a process of expanding toward a bicultural identity. They became more open-minded and adaptable, learning to navigate both their home culture and American norms. A student from Sri Lanka reflected, “I have become more open-minded. I have learned that people come from different backgrounds, and everyone should be accepted as they are.” This change was sometimes noticed by family back home, with one Burkina Faso student sharing that his parents

commented he had “changed.” This evolution aligns with Berry’s concept of integration, in which students maintain their original culture while acquiring skills in the new one.

DISCUSSION

This study, based on a robust sample of 15 international students, offers a nuanced understanding of cultural transition that closely aligns with and expands upon Berry’s (2005) Acculturation Theory. See Table 2 below. The results show that the integration strategy was the most common and successful approach, as evidenced by the dual-layer social networks students built. Relying on conational peers initially provided a safe foundation, which then boosted confidence for broader cross-cultural engagement, a dynamic process similar to the findings of Wu et al. (2025) on adaptive acculturation strategies. The reported academic and linguistic challenges support prior research (Lee & Çiftçi, 2014). However, our data also show that these are not just initial obstacles but ongoing efforts that influence classroom attitude and social confidence. Although the study did not conduct an in-depth exploration of the possible contextual influences of a midwestern campus, we recognize that it may have shaped access to resources and the nature of social interactions if compared to other geographical environments. The important role of peer support in reducing isolation aligns with Gareis (2012), and our results highlight that a mix of similar and diverse social connections creates the most effective support system. The different views on institutional assistance highlight an important point: while centralized international offices are essential, the most effective support often comes from close, personalized relationships with faculty and advisors. This demonstrates that a “whole-of-university” approach, which integrates central services with trained, culturally competent faculty and staff across various departments, is essential for providing adequate support.

Table 2: Acculturation strategies based on cultural orientation (Adapted from Berry, 2005). Value and Maintain Native Culture

Engage with the host culture	Yes	No
Yes	Integration (12 students)	Assimilation (1 student)
No	Separation (2 students initially)	Marginalization (0 students)

Note. Table adapted from Berry’s (2005) acculturation framework (N = 15).

Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the research was conducted at a single Midwestern university,

which may limit the transferability of the results to other institutional contexts, particularly those in urban, coastal, or more internationally diverse settings. The regional, cultural, and institutional characteristics of a midwestern campus may shape both the availability of resources and the nature of social interactions in ways that differ from other higher education environments. Second, the study relied on one-time interviews, which captured participants' experiences at a specific moment in their adjustment process. The absence of follow-up or longitudinal interviews limits the ability to examine how students' perceptions, coping strategies, and identities evolve over time. Finally, the single-site design limits the study's comparative potential; incorporating multiple institutions could have enabled cross-contextual analysis of how varying institutional structures and supports influence cultural adaptation.

Future research would benefit from multisite and longitudinal designs to deepen the understanding of international students' adaptation trajectories across diverse institutional contexts. Theoretically, while this study was grounded in Berry's Acculturation Theory, future work could expand by integrating complementary frameworks such as sociocultural theory, sense of belonging, or ecological systems theory to more fully capture the dynamic interplay between individual agency and institutional environments. Additionally, emerging perspectives on transnationalism and identity negotiation may offer valuable insights into how international students construct and sustain bicultural or multicultural identities over time.

Implications for Practice

The study's findings helped draw a series of implications for practice for higher education institutions interested in hosting international students.

1. **Enhanced Pre-Arrival Communication:** Offer thorough, precise information on academic culture, living expenses, and housing details to effectively set expectations.
2. **Establish and fund structured peer-mentorship programs** that connect new students with experienced mentors, both international and domestic, to provide immediate practical support and cross-cultural engagement from the beginning.
3. **Faculty and Advisor Development:** Provide training for faculty and academic advisors on the unique educational and sociocultural challenges international faculty, and students face to help them serve as effective first responders.
4. **Support for Cultural Student Associations:** Recognize, fund, and collaborate with country-specific student groups, as they provide invaluable, highly effective peer-led support.

CONCLUSION

The study, based on insights from fifteen international students, moves beyond individual stories to identify common patterns and subtle differences in the cultural adaptation process at a mid-sized university in the United States. It shows that a successful transition is a complex journey that involves navigating academic, linguistic, and social challenges, ultimately helping students develop a resilient, bicultural identity. The findings highlight that institutional support needs to be diverse, leveraging peer networks and ensuring support is woven throughout the entire academic community. Although focusing on a single institution limits the extent to which the results can be applied, the study provides a detailed framework that could be adapted and tested at similar schools. Future research should examine long-term trends and assess the effectiveness of different targeted support strategies across various university settings.

Beyond its immediate findings, this study contributes to broader discussions on transnational identities, intercultural communication, and global competence in higher education. The research emphasizes the importance of creating institutional environments that value and leverage these diverse perspectives as strengths. In doing so, the study not only guides policies and practices to enhance student services but also deepens the understanding of how universities can cultivate inclusive academic communities that prepare all students, both domestic and international.

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- Some sections, with minimal or no editing**
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- Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- Entire work, with extensive editing

This article incorporates minimal content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools. The ways in which AI tools were employed were transition flow and grammar check. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare that this is an original research study and report no competing interests or financial or otherwise, relationships that might be perceived as influencing the authors' objectivity.

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