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Chapter 6

Rising to the Challenge: Case Study of International Student Acculturation

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study, part of a larger investigation of the international student (IS) experience at one U.S. university, focused on uncovering the cultural, social, academic, and linguistic acculturation practices of twenty ISs through focus groups and interviews. The findings show that ISs experience a myriad of complex challenges, from language barriers to new cultural norms, and that most of the practices they used to navigate their acculturation process were self-initiated rather than university-supported. The study highlights the agency of ISs in navigating their acculturation process and constitutes a call to action to higher education to strive to better meet the needs of this resourceful but neglected group of students.

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INTRODUCTION

U.S. Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) enroll over a million international students (ISs) yearly, representing approximately 6% of all college students (Institute of International Education, 2023). ISs contribute to the economic, cultural, and educational growth of the host country in many meaningful and tangible ways (Martirosyan et al., 2019; Ranabahu & Da Silva, 2024). Ideally, ISs would benefit equally from their experience studying in the United States and find it easy to acculturate to their new surroundings and academic environment. However, ISs, who are often members of minority cultural, ethnic/racial, or linguistic groups, tend to experience a variety of challenges, such as cultural differences, language barriers, employment difficulties, and homesickness, as they commence their studies in the United States (Huang et al., 2024; Mostafa & Lim, 2020; Pang & Wang, 2020). These challenges are also largely representative of the IS experience in other contexts around the world (e.g., the United Kingdom) (Astley, 2024; Gyasi-Gyamerah et al., 2024; Malaysia et al., 2025).

Acculturation, or the social and psychological process of adjustment between a migrant and a host culture, is an important and often complex process for ISs. Research has shown that English proficiency and social support are the most important factors affecting ISs' acculturation and overall success in the United States (Jackson et al., 2019). Yet many IHEs cannot sufficiently address these and other needs ISs have and to positively integrate them into campus life both academically and socially. Improving support for ISs is a process involving an interplay between the IHE's own practices and the larger educational policy context (Pinto et al., 2024), but this should not deter IHEs from the work, as failure to support ISs in their acculturation journey can lead students to have problems with their academics (Ammigan & Drexler, 2022; Elliot et al., 2016; Leong, 2015; Li et al., 2018; Xue & Singh, 2025), social adjustment (Astley, 2024; Leong, 2015; Xue & Singh, 2025), mental well-being (Dao et al., 2007; Gyasi-Gyamerah et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2019; Shek et al., 2024), and physical health (Yan, 2020). However, ISs are resourceful individuals who use many types of self-initiated practices to navigate these challenges and the process of acculturating into the host country and IHE (Luong et al., 2023; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Xue & Singh, 2025).

To understand how ISs navigate the acculturation process and how IHEs can help them, this study explored the practices of ISs at one U.S. IHE through interviews and focus groups, highlighting the students' perceptions of their acculturation situation, the institutional support provided, if any, and their own responses to the challenges they face. The aim of the study is to provide insights into how ISs agentively respond to and cope with situations arising from their status as they seek to acculturate into their new surroundings. The aim is also to provide recommendations for IHEs on

how to more effectively support and welcome ISs. This is a particularly important topic in the current political climate of the United States, where tightening visa policies and other measures have made it increasingly difficult for ISs to adapt, succeed, and fully participate in the academic and social life of their IHE (Startz, 2025). To explore this topic, this study sought to answer the questions, *What kinds of practices do ISs engage in to navigate their acculturation process? How, if at all, do ISs feel their host institution supports them in the acculturation process?*

ACCULTURATION THEORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ACCULTURATION PRACTICES

This study is framed by acculturation theory (Berry, 2006; Sam, 2006), which incorporates a number of sociocultural adaptation models based on research involving a variety of migrant populations, not just ISs (Sarmiento et al., 2019; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In these models, ISs are typically described as sojourners, or “individuals who travel abroad to attain a particular goal within a specified period of time” (Bochner, 2006, p. 181) and whose presence in the host country is more voluntary and temporary compared to many other migrants (Berry, 2006). Berry (2006) describes acculturation as “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (p. 698).

Further, according to Sam (2006), acculturation involves contact, reciprocal influence, and change. In other words, acculturation should be understood as a bidirectional process of mutual adaptation between the migrant and the host society; however, in most models, the focus is on psychological acculturation, or the individual's ability to navigate the acculturation process and its stressors (Sam, 2024; Sarmiento et al., 2019). This is particularly salient for IS, for whom support for the acculturation process is often lacking (Martirosyan et al., 2019), and whose impact on the host society may be limited, misunderstood, or even overlooked by institutional stakeholders and policymakers. Sarmiento et al. (2019) conclude that for the individual, the process of acculturation occurs on two levels, as the migrant responds to cultural, environmental, and social challenges present in the host society and accesses their repertoire of personal and social resources. Following these theorists, this study positions ISs in the acculturation process as agents who skillfully and purposefully adapt and leverage the resources at their disposal.

Aligned with this positioning, it is also important to note that recently, scholars have recommended reframing IS research by moving away from merely describing IS experiences (Deuchar, 2022; Jones, 2017). While experiences are a powerful unit of analysis that can be used to explain lived phenomena, they can also lead to

viewing ISs through an oversimplified, homogenizing lens that portrays them as passive recipients instead of revealing them as active agents in their own acculturation process with unique goals, challenges, and evolving identities (Deuchar, 2022; Jones, 2017). Deuchar (2022), therefore, recommends using the concept of *practices* rather than *experiences* when discussing how ISs navigate their time at their host institutions. Following this recommendation, this study focuses on the ISs' acculturation practices at one U.S. university, defining these as deliberate strategies and steps ISs seek out, create, and implement to increase their academic and labor success, social functioning, and/or mental and physical well-being on and off the host campus.

Factors in the Acculturation Process for International Students

Acculturation and acculturative stress, or the negative psychological impacts of acculturation, are significant aspects of the IS experience (Gao & Wesley, 2024). There are numerous factors ISs need to navigate in the process, which are well documented in the literature; examples include new employment culture, differences between home and host culture, differences in the learning environment and expectations, language barriers, and biases and stereotypes that may affect their confidence, feeling of belonging, and overall well-being (Brunsting et al., 2021; Hunter-Johnson, 2022; Leong, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Smolikevych et al., 2021; Young et al., 2013). Below, a brief overview of this research is given, focusing on the factors that emerged as the most salient in this study.

Language

English language proficiency remains one of the main challenges for ISs, even though in the United States, most ISs must pass a test of English to be accepted into the host IHEs. ISs perceive language as both an academic and a social barrier on campus (Huang et al., 2024; Hunter-Johnson, 2022), as well as off-campus, such as at restaurants and during everyday interactions with local community members (Gong et al., 2021). Lashari et al. (2023) observed that there was a strong relationship between language capacity and academic, psychological, and social adjustment among ISs and that it played an especially important part in developing relationships with peers and faculty. For example, Khan (2025) found that English skills and feeling comfortable to talk with domestic students at a U.S. university were strongly correlated. Language as a challenge presents itself not only at IHEs in

English-dominant contexts: a study by Gong et al. (2021) found similar challenges among New Zealander ISs using Chinese in China.

Research has also shown that ISs employ a wide array of strategies to overcome the challenges related to language learning (Benson et al., 2018; Wolf & Phung, 2019). These include using environmental print such as signage around town to learn more (Benson et al., 2018), seeking opportunities to speak with people, using dictionaries, asking local peers or faculty for help on language-related questions, and asking fellow ISs for clarification on things like assignment instructions (Wolf & Phung, 2019). IHEs should also support ISs in acquiring the type of language required for academics – in anglophone contexts, this is typically known as English for Academic Purposes (Fotouhi & Soleimani, 2021; Humphreys, 2022; Light et al., 2024; Rajendram & Shi, 2022), which is often taught in standalone courses but can also take the form of language tutoring. Indeed, Humphreys (2022, p. 1) urges IHEs to consider this support part of their “core business.” More broadly, higher education faculty should become familiar with linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogies to address not only language-related but also sociolinguistic and cultural challenges among ISs (Mahalingappa et al., 2021).

Employment

Coustere et al. (2024) note that the fact that ISs form a source of labor for their host IHEs is still relatively unexplored in the literature. Based on their research conducted in Canada, they argue that ISs are simultaneously positioned as a desirable, cheap source of labor with valuable international experience, and a source of competition in the job market, which many countries curb with strict labor and visa regulations (Crumley-Effinger, 2024). This positioning renders ISs as a particularly vulnerable group of university employees. Advisors play an important part in supporting doctoral-level ISs’ acculturation, by helping them adjust to their new roles working for the IHE. However, as Kong et al. (2023) note, differences in communication styles and cultures may lead ISs to lack psychological safety to seek support from their advisors. Cantwell and Lee (2010) further reveal that ISs, especially from non-Western countries, are often expected to work harder and longer hours as research or teaching assistants, while facing limited career advancement opportunities. These labor inequalities, paired with negative cultural stereotypes about ISs as employees, contribute to ISs’ precarious employment situations, making them a highly vulnerable workforce within the academic labor system.

According to research, ISs navigate employment-related stressors mainly by managing their expectations related to jobs they can obtain during their studies, both in quality and pay they take what they can get to earn money towards everyday expenses (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Pang et al., 2021). Some research also points

to ISs deliberately building up their own resilience and ability to speak up when legal issues around employment occur (Siczek, 2024). Park and Shimada (2022) further note that the COVID-19 pandemic increased all kinds of visa-related setbacks for ISs, who sought help for understanding and following the changing policies from their IHEs, usually in vain. Even during non-emergency times, ISs find it hard to understand employment and visa regulations and lack support from IHE career counselors (Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). This points to a need for IHEs to offer more support for ISs for navigating the job market both during and after their studies, the legal issues around the visa process, and the emotional aspects of visa-related stress (Lynch et al., 2024; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). For example, IHEs could design workshops to address particular skill gaps articulated by students themselves (Leslie & Wright, 2025).

Mental Health and Belongingness

Due to the many challenges related to language proficiency and employment, ISs may struggle simultaneously with feelings of homesickness (Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022) and feeling like they do not belong on the campus of their host IHE (Bjork et al., 2020; Chen & Zhou, 2019; Mohamad & Manning, 2024; Rivas et al., 2019). To increase IS belongingness, Zhang et al. (2022) stress the importance of leisure activities to help ISs overcome language barriers and foster social networks with local and international peers (see also Khan, 2025). Peer connections with fellow ISs or those from the same country are particularly important (Chavajay, 2013; Pho & Schartner, 2021; Rivas et al., 2019), but support from faculty has also been linked to better socioemotional well-being and less loneliness among ISs (Brunsting et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2024). For some ISs, adverse emotions are not limited to loneliness or a lack of belongingness; in the most serious cases, ISs may struggle with deteriorating mental health (Çimşir & Kaynakçı, 2024). Cultural intolerance and racist confrontations may exacerbate this (Zhang et al., 2024). Indeed, racism against ISs is on the rise in the United States, prompting increased attention to this matter (Kim, 2025).

Meade et al. (2022) describes how IHEs can act intentionally to create spaces of “home” (p. 37) for ISs, for example, by establishing yearly traditions that are co-organized with ISs. To address more serious challenges, Gong et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of IHEs offering counseling services for ISs struggling with their mental health. However, research shows that ISs tend to turn to less formal sources of mental health support in cases of homesickness, loneliness, and depression: they may engage in physical exercise, share their problems with fellow students, seek advice from religious texts, and other culturally and individually familiar coping mechanisms (Saravanan et al., 2019). IHEs should consider how their support for

belongingness and mental health could better align with these preferences (Jin & Acharya, 2022).

Study Design

This chapter presents the qualitative findings of a larger study on ISs' acculturation at a public research university in the Northeastern United States (Tigert & Fotouhi, 2022). Data included two focus groups and six interviews. Qualitative data can offer deeper insights into personal experiences and contexts (Hodgkin, 2008; Lim, 2025) that, in this study, shape ISs' individual acculturation practices. The study aimed to gain a deep understanding of IS practices within one context, the university in question. While focusing on one institution lessens the generalizability of the findings, a case study approach such as the one employed in this study affords the "capacity for understanding complexity in particular contexts" (Simons, 1996, p. 225).

The university enrolls about 18,000 students annually, including 900 ISs (5%), mostly from East, Southeast, and South Asia, as well as Central and South America. Initial recruitment of participants for the study was conducted through the International Students and Scholars Office, which sent out the call for participants through the IS email list, as well as by convenience sampling, personal contacts fitting the participant parameters. While this recruitment method resulted in certain limitations in the study, which are discussed later, it also ensured an adequate number of participants. The study was reviewed and approved by the institution's Internal Review Board, and the authors ensured the participants' anonymity by removing their names from transcripts and destroying the audio files collected upon finishing the transcriptions. Participants signed a consent form detailing the study and their rights. Most of the participants who consented to the study were Ph.D. students in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. This reflects the overall IS population of the institution, which draws ISs mainly for their doctoral programs in STEM, as is typical for most IHEs in the United States (Batalova, 2025). Participants had been in the United States for one semester to 6 years, with an average of 1 year (see Table 1).

The data include two 90-minute focus groups with a total of 14 participants and 30-minute individual interviews with six participants. Focus groups were held in person in spring 2022, and individual interviews took place via Zoom video calls in fall 2022. The participants in the focus groups were distinct from those involved in the interviews. Participants were incentivized for their contributions with a small amount of money on a grocery store gift card, which was approved as an incentive by the Institutional Review Board, and which was distributed by the first author using funds from the university's internal research seed grant the first author had

received. Participants were asked about their experiences navigating academic and social spaces, using English, and, where applicable, about their roles as research or teaching assistants within their respective academic departments.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Data Collection Event, Participant	Level of Study	Country of Origin	Major or Program
Focus group 1			
P1	M.S.	India	Business Analytics
P2	Ph.D.	India	Mechanical Engineering
P3		Turkey	Computer Engineering
P4			Mechanical Engineering
P5		China	Chemistry
P6			Business and Entrepreneurship
P7			Marketing
P8			Chemistry
Focus group 2			
P9	B.S.	Hong Kong	Computer Science
P10	Ph.D.	Iran	Electrical Engineering
P11		Indonesia/Pakistan	Civil Engineering
P12		Pakistan	Chemical Engineering
P13		Turkey	Chemical Engineering
P14		Chad	Chemical Engineering
Interviews			
P15	Ph.D.	Lebanon	Biomedical Engineering
P16		Turkey	Biomedical Engineering and Biotechnology
P17		Bangladesh	Pharmaceutical Sciences
P18		Iran	Electrical and Computer Engineering
P19			Electronics Engineering
P20			Plastics Engineering

To ensure coding integrity, a minimum of three researchers individually analyzed the transcripts of the interviews and focus groups, starting with an inductive, open coding method (Adu, 2019). Once open coding was completed, researchers jointly discussed the first stage and relabeled the initial codes with names that best captured

the essence of the data (Saldaña, 2014). Researchers then discussed how these codes could best be organized under parent codes. The parent codes were drawn from extant literature on IS practices, reviewed above. As the coding scheme was finalized, codes were further reorganized and renamed to better reflect the themes emerging from the data. Code frequencies were also calculated and examined (Rivas, 2012) for more evidence of the patterns and themes addressing the research questions (see Table 2). In the Findings section, the themes that emerged are shared, together with code frequencies and illustrative quotes from eight of the participants.

Table 2. Final Coding Scheme

Parent Code	Code Frequency	Child Code	Code Frequency
Language	88	Social English	53
		Academic English	35
Employment	50	RA-ship	14
		TA-ship	10
		Employment Policies	16
		Visa Issues	10
Mental health & belongingness	44	Othering	9
		Cultural Differences	13
		Isolation and Homesickness	22

Note: Code frequencies represent the number of coded segments and do not indicate the number of participants.

Author Positionality

Author 1 is a full-time faculty member at a non-U.S. IHE. She previously studied, lived, and worked in the United States as an immigrant student, English as a Second Language teacher, and teacher educator. She assisted her previous employer, the U.S. IHE that is the focus of this study, in research and policy work relating to the improvement of IS services on campus. Authors 2–4 are Ph.D. students in the institution's Research and Evaluation in Education program. Author 2 is a white, cisgender, female international student from Iran, whose research focuses on teacher education for multilingual learners in grades K-12. Her positionality is shaped by these intersections, providing a unique perspective on the challenges faced by international students. Author 3 is from Myanmar. As an international student, he has personally experienced the acculturation process, which enables him to deeply connect with and understand the challenges faced by international students. His academic journey, combined with his background, provided him with a unique perspective

to contribute to this study on international student acculturation. Author 4 is from the United States and has a research focus on international student experiences in higher education. She has experience studying and working abroad in North Africa and the Middle East. She brings more than ten years of professional experience as an immigration advisor to international students and scholars to her scholarly work. Collectively, the authors identify as advocates for ISs and educational researchers interested in uncovering ways IHEs can better support ISs.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study revealed a familiar array of challenges faced by ISs as they navigate their new lives at the IHE. These challenges were related to social and academic English proficiency, employment and advisor relationships, visa status, mental health, and belongingness. Support provided by the university was perceived as inadequate by the respondents. Instead, ISs reported employing a range of self-initiated practices to overcome challenges in the acculturation process, which highlights their resilience and resourcefulness. Each of the following subsections of the findings first illustrates the challenges faced by ISs, describes any university-provided solutions or support the ISs reported being available to them, and then discusses ISs' self-initiated practices for coping with the challenge.

Language

Consistent with previous literature on challenges navigated by ISs (e.g., Huang et al., 2024; Hunter-Johnson, 2022), participants in this study experienced the English language to be a barrier to both social adjustment and academic success. Although *social English* and *academic English* are somewhat artificial constructs with no clear borders, excerpts were coded with these child codes depending on the context for language use described by the ISs. That is, *social English* was applied to contexts like shopping or making friends, while *academic English* was applied to descriptions of university studies or research work. What follows is a discussion of ISs' process of navigating social and academic spaces where they needed to use English, which, for most participants, was an additional language.

Social English

Out of 88 excerpts coded with the parent code *language*, 53 had to do with what was categorized as *social English*, such as jokes, idioms, or slang; expressing emotions; and pronunciation. Jokes, idioms, and slang were the most frequently mentioned

challenges and were clearly tied to the bigger issue of the ISs and their domestic student peers not sharing the same cultural scripts. For example, one student noted:

When we get together with our friends, especially those from the U.S... they use other languages like social language, so we don't know that – we don't know some sayings, we don't know some jokes. So sometimes we don't understand. We're not laughing. (Focus group, Turkish Mechanical Engineering Ph.D. student P4).

As the student's comment illustrates, ISs mostly positioned their challenges with jokes to be related to their own unfamiliarity with the host culture; none of them expressed the need for domestic students to strive to understand them better, which highlights the power imbalance in the acculturation process ISs face.

Understanding idioms is another common challenge among ISs, as idioms often carry cultural meanings that are not directly translatable. One student described the confusion and embarrassment that idioms can cause, recounting an incident where he misunderstood the phrase “she’s a dime” (considering a woman very attractive) to mean the opposite:

I remember like my freshman year, my friend dated a girl and it's like “oh she's a dime,” and then I was like, “oh she's worthless?” ... I guess like a lot of idioms I didn't know for sure, it takes like getting used to. (Focus group, Hongkonger Computer Science undergraduate student P9).

ISs also mentioned facing pronunciation-related challenges, which made interacting with domestic students difficult at times:

I once had the situation at the rec[reation] center, asking somebody for a sanitary pad and she didn't get it... I almost gave up. But she said, “can you show it to me?” ... When I googled the picture... She said, “sanitary pad.” ... I was just thinking, did I just not say it right or pronounce it right that she didn't get it before? (Focus group, Indian Business Analytics M.S. student P1).

The challenge around pronunciation was categorized as being related to social English, as ISs expressed anxiety around it being linked mainly to social situations, such as casual conversations with domestic peers.

Given the myriad of challenges with using English in social situations experienced by the ISs, the interviews also touched on whether ISs could name support offered by the university for learning to navigate these. ISs identified only one: the Multicultural Office's buddy program, where newcomer ISs are partnered with a domestic student for leisure activities. Unfortunately, even this was not perceived a good support by the ISs:

I have two friends who were in that program, and both of them say that buddy that they were linked up with eventually just vanishes after two or three meetings that they're supposed to have. (Focus group, Iranian Electrical Engineering Ph.D. student P10).

This comment highlights the importance of follow-through by the university with any support they organize.

One common strategy among ISs to improve their social English was purposefully seeking out opportunities to socialize with the university's domestic students to improve their social English skills and acclimate to U.S. cultural norms. In particular, ISs mentioned attending the Philosophy Club, where meetings involved free-flowing conversation around a particular philosopher's text. Students also found events related to their major to be helpful spaces for social interaction:

[In] my department, they do a lot of women in tech, women in STEM, and leadership talks. I think these are great places to go to, to meet people... who have the same interests. (Focus group, Turkish Mechanical Engineering Ph.D. student P4).

Many ISs also described watching television and YouTube as a way to learn U.S. slang and understand cultural references. These media resources provided a window into everyday language and social practices, making it easier for ISs to connect with their peers.

Academic English

Out of 88 excerpts coded under the parent code *language*, 35 dealt with more academic contexts for English use, such as attending lectures, giving research presentations, and completing written assignments for class. ISs characterized many of the challenges as related to their comprehension skills in English, such as difficulties understanding lectures with diverse professor accents and speaking speeds. Other challenges had to do with students' own English language production, which formed a barrier for presenting academic work and using written language in specialized fields of study. For example, one student shared their experience with technical writing:

[In one of my classes] ... the quiz was in class and closed book... The first quiz was really hard for me to write down, because it was my first time to answer something technical in English, [and] I got the lower grade in the first quiz. (Iranian Plastics Engineering Ph.D. student P20).

These excerpts illustrate the multifaceted nature of the challenges ISs face in academic English contexts. The comprehension difficulties and the high expectations for written and spoken English proficiency underscore the need for targeted support to help ISs succeed academically.

When asked about formal avenues for improving their academic English, ISs were not able to identify any support, even though the university did have a Writing Center where peer tutors had been trained to work with students on their writing, and where at least one of the tutors' online profiles specifically stated they were familiar with working with ISs. Support provided by some professors, though not all, was uploading recorded lectures to their online classroom platform. Some ISs

took the initiative to listen to these to review complex material at their own pace, ensuring they fully understood the content. As one student mentioned:

I tended to watch recordings [of lectures] on the weekend, and I took notes. I realized I missed lots of things. Watching recordings or having my own voice recordings kind of helped me catch up on things I missed in class. (Interview, Iranian Electrical and Computer Engineering Ph.D. student P18).

As helpful as this support was, it was by no means systematically provided by all professors, nor was it required by the university.

Where students' self-initiated practices are concerned, the effective use of technology proved to be a significant support for many ISs looking to improve their English for academic purposes. Tools like Grammarly (an artificial intelligence-powered editing and revising application) helped them edit their written work and avoid common language errors:

Grammarly... shows you suggestions unlike autocorrect, where you just randomly press it and you don't know what [to fix], but this one will show suggestions as to how you can improve a particular sentence. (Focus group, Indian Business Analytics M.S. student P1).

Some ISs also sought constructive feedback from professors and fellow students to improve their academic English. This included asking for clarification during lectures, attending office hours, and participating in study groups. Receiving feedback on assignments and presentations allowed ISs to identify areas for improvement and develop their academic language skills more effectively.

Employment

Employment arose from the data as another salient theme, which aligns with previous research on the complexities involved with ISs being a source of labor for IHEs (Cantwell & Lee, 2010; Coustere et al., 2024). Since ISs' on-campus jobs are often their first encounter with the employment culture in the United States, these were also considered an important part of their acculturation process. A total of 50 excerpts were coded with the parent code *employment*, which included the child codes *research assistantship* for excerpts where ISs discussed working with advisors or in research labs, *teaching assistantship* for excerpts where ISs described their experiences working with mainly domestic undergraduate students, *employment policies* for excerpts dealing with the demands of student employment versus the lack of opportunities to work off campus, and *visa issues* for excerpts where ISs discussed their status as visa holders more generally.

Research Assistantship

A total of 18 excerpts were coded under the child code *research assistantship*. These reflected the uniquely challenging position of doctoral student ISs as visa-holding employees whose academic and professional experiences can be significantly influenced by their advisors. Several ISs expressed feelings of powerlessness and dependence on their advisors, especially when they encountered unhealthy working conditions in their assistantships. These students frequently reported that they felt compelled to endure unfavorable conditions, disrespectful treatment, or excessive workloads to maintain their assistantships. For example, one student shared an incident where communication difficulties with the advisor led to a breakdown in their working relationship:

The communication [with my advisor] wasn't going very well, and in some cases, when I was speaking, [he] just shouted at me and said, "speak in English," and it was from that time on I really couldn't communicate with him anymore. It was so difficult for me to even speak about my project. (Interview, Iranian Electrical and Computer Engineering Ph.D. Student P18).

Such encounters were especially risky for ISs, whose visas were dependent on continuous matriculation at the university, which could be threatened if advisors were not satisfied with their work. In the ISs' view, the university offered few supports in cases where they felt they were taken advantage of as labor. The student (P18) above described trying to ask for help from the program coordinator and even her residential advisor, but the answer she got was that her advisor was free to do as he pleased. The student used the word "powerless" to describe her feelings over the situation.

This student's case clearly illustrates the enormous pressure ISs are working under, with limited opportunities to advocate for themselves. In the absence of university support, ISs were left quite alone, dealing with issues stemming from their research assistantships. However, ISs did mention seeking support and advice from their fellow ISs in these matters and even actively positioned themselves as a source of peer support, recognizing that they could help incoming ISs with problems they had encountered themselves. In some cases, ISs also took the initiative to change advisors. For example, the above-mentioned student (P18) took this decisive but in many ways a risky step and reported being much more satisfied with her new advisor.

Teaching Assistantship

Many of the participants had worked as teaching assistants during their time at the university, either working with a full-time faculty member or teaching classes or labs as instructors on record. Ten excerpts were coded with the code *teaching*

assistantship. Similar problems, as with research assistantships, emerged. Some ISs were given proportionally too much work for their assistantship hours; for example, one student mentioned that merely grading undergraduate students' assignments for the course she was teaching could take up to 26 hours a week (for reference, an assistantship is contractually 20 hrs/week). However, most of the excerpts where ISs reported difficulties with teaching assistantships were related to communicating with domestic students, and the ensuing anxiety over teaching them. For example, the ISs felt pressure to know all the answers, even in cases when it was their first year in the program. As one student described her first semester as a teaching assistant:

It was really stressful... So, for instance, a student asked me as a TA for something in the class, and if I don't know the answer, I kind of feel like, "oh, I should have noticed. I should have explained it better." And that put me pressure. (Interview, Turkish Biomedical Engineering and Biotechnology Ph.D student P16).

As with research assistantships, ISs did not find that there was any university support to help them do their work better as teaching assistants. Instead, they again sought to implement their own practices for navigating the challenges of performing this role. For example, watching movies and chatting about them with the domestic students enrolled in their classes helped some ISs bond with their students.

Visa Issues

Ten excerpts were coded *visa issues*, denoting instances when ISs described the unique challenges related to obtaining, maintaining, and traveling with the student visa that allowed them to study and work at the university. Additional stressors and barriers to acculturation were related to the constraints created by the visa rules. For instance, one student described the impact of holding a single-entry visa:

A lot of people here in our research group between this semester [and the last], almost all of them go back to their home countries. The only person [who] stays here it's me because I can't go, you know, out of the United States... and I think it puts more pressure on me. (Interview, Iranian Plastics Engineering Ph.D. student P20).

Possessing a single-entry visa negatively affected the IS's ability to visit family and created a situation where he could not leave the host country even when his peers got to take that break from the stressors of being an IS.

Additionally, ISs felt the visa process was confusing and that the university was offering only limited support for navigating it:

The first semester I was in, I felt like I was threatened every single week because it's like you need to finish this document... [or] you get deported... I'm just like, I don't mind finishing all of the paperwork. But why wasn't this laid out in an organized way that I could just check off my list and make sure I'm on track,

instead of getting panicked at 10, you know. Like... “this is gonna expire. You need to act on it directly”. (Interview, Lebanese Biomedical Engineering Ph.D. student P15).

Indeed, as the student’s comments reveal, the university did send the ISs reminders on the documentation they needed to submit, but ISs felt this often took place at the last minute, and the entirety of the visa process was not laid out clearly where the ISs could easily follow it. Again, the ISs were left to implement their own practices to navigate this challenge, both logistically and emotionally:

I learned not to panic. Now, I know how to call people and stuff, but the way things are communicated – it's like at least that first year I just felt like, “oh, my God, this is so overwhelming, like, what am I doing wrong?” [And] as you can tell, I'm very outgoing... like I would go to office hours... and visit people and chat and ask questions, and still I was not given the full picture. (Interview, Lebanese Biomedical Engineering Ph.D. student P15).

This student’s comment reveals the difficulties even the most assertive ISs had in navigating this part of their journey.

Mental Health and Belongingness

Consistent with previous research on IS’s mental health and feelings of belongingness (Chen & Zhou, 2019; Glass & Westmont, 2014), ISs in this study also reported frequent challenges with this aspect of acculturation: a total of 42 excerpts were coded under the parent code *mental health and belongingness*. The theme often overlapped the themes already discussed above, since negative experiences with language and employment were detrimental to the IS’s overall wellbeing. ISs employed a variety of practices to maintain and build their mental health and belongingness even as they faced *othering*, *cultural differences*, and *isolation and homesickness*.

Othering

Nine excerpts were coded with the child code *othering*, which applied to instances when ISs felt othered, excluded, or treated differently due to their language or ethnicity/race. For example, as teaching assistants, ISs felt that the domestic students enrolled in their classes positioned them differently from other teaching assistants. One student explained that they felt undergraduate students only asked him and his fellow assistants questions in a science lab because all of them were ISs, and their students had no other choice. Another described feeling like the domestic undergraduate students held negative perceptions of ISs’ intellect based on their English skills:

I think it's because of the distance between international students and the native speakers, I think they think that since we cannot speak English very well, we

are not knowledgeable. (Focus group, Iranian Electrical Engineering Ph.D. student P10).

The student's comment reflects a sociolinguistic environment where speaking English "very well" is key to acceptance by others and reveals how ingrained linguicism is in U.S. higher education.

Some students spoke of not only linguicism, but instances of racism. One student described a situation where she felt her ethnicity might have played a role, and where she further felt her being an IS would mean the police would not be of help:

I don't know if it's a race-related issue, but over the summer I was walking back home, and a man started following me and I got really nervous. I started run, but he kept after me, and I didn't know what to do. I shared the story with a friend who said, "oh, why didn't you call the police?" ... but...I don't know. I maybe felt maybe that I'm an international. I didn't think that the police would be effective on that. (Interview, Turkish Biomedical Engineering and Biotechnology Ph.D. student P16).

Additionally, some participants reported hearing of instances of racism even if they had not directly encountered it themselves – some of these encounters had taken place on campus, others outside of it. Even such second-hand experiences with othering could negatively impact ISs' feeling of belongingness on campus and even their mental health. ISs did not report any support by the IHE that would help them navigate such encounters, and the authors are also not aware of any concerted efforts by the institution to address racism and othering towards ISs. For some of the participants, affinity groups offered many types of support, including as a safe haven from othering; for example, the Bangladeshi Students Association was an affinity group started by ISs from Bangladesh. Not all ISs found such support, instead reacting to instances of othering by practicing a "keep your head down" strategy of focusing on their work.

Cultural Differences

Thirteen excerpts were coded as having to do with *cultural differences*, or instances where ISs expressed that the differences they perceived between their own and the host country's or institution's cultures made it difficult to fit into the campus community or participate in conversations with domestic students. The sense of not belonging in a social group and the struggle to understand and be understood can be isolating and discouraging. One student described an instance where a combination of a lack of time and hastily turning down an opportunity to connect with others led to a situation where the IS felt he had offended his peers:

Some people were inviting me for lunch and I was in a rush, but I couldn't say my problem now, because I am in a rush. And do you know, culturally they were

offended and I didn't like that happen[ing]. (Interview, Iranian Electronics Engineering Ph.D. student P19).

Such misunderstandings stemming from cultural differences are perhaps an unavoidable part of the social interactions that take place during acculturation, yet they are no less damaging to the ISs' feeling of belongingness, as these instances can accumulate and make the ISs feel as if they will never truly be a part of their IHE's culture. As mentioned before, the university's buddy program could have acted as a support for ISs to learn to navigate cultural differences, but according to the ISs, the assigned buddies would often stop meeting with their IS counterparts. Here, again, watching movies and attending social clubs such as the Philosophy Club helped ISs notice and learn about cultural customs new to them, as well as come into contact socially with domestic peers.

Isolation and Homesickness

22 excerpts were coded for *isolation and homesickness*. For instance, ISs reported struggling to find any free time between studying and working on research and their assistantships to build meaningful connections on campus or just to relax:

[Being a Ph.D. student is] too much work... it's too much pressure on the people. It's not healthy. It takes so much time and you're pushing people, there is no specific time for work. So I can come [to campus] at one a.m. or I can come here at one p.m.... I'm here on the weekends. I'm here on the weekdays. So I don't have "me time" to be honest. (Interview, Turkish Biomedical Engineering and Biotechnology Ph.D. student P16).

Isolation meant both not being able to socialize on campus and not being able to visit family and friends back home, which caused feelings of homesickness. As mentioned above regarding challenges as visa-restricted workers, some ISs could not return to their home countries even during longer breaks. Support against the negative effects on IS mental health of such isolation was counseling at the student mental health center. This support was provided by the university, and agentively taken advantage of by some of the ISs. Still, this required that ISs knew how to access the service, and uncertainty around this served only to increase some ISs' anxiety. For example, one student expressed her experience with contemplating therapy:

I know the campus has offers like therapy and stuff... but I still don't know how to access it. And I think having access to that is important. Because there's so much stress. Yeah, someone to talk to when you're so overwhelmed. Like, do I walk to [the main building] and find someone, and like, knock on the door and be like, "hello?" (Interview, Lebanese Biomedical Engineering Ph.D. student P15).

It was evident that this student was not aware that the counseling center actually did offer easily accessible, same-day appointments, which highlights the importance

of effectively informing students of the support that is available for them at an IHE. Another student described accessing physical health care through the university when she needed vaccinations, and overall, it seemed that taking care of one's physical health was something ISs found more accessible.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to existing literature about ISs' acculturation into U.S. IHEs in important ways. The findings revealed that ISs encounter a complex array of challenges in their academic and social lives within their host IHEs. Key issues included difficulties using both social and academic English, unfair conditions and powerlessness as visa-restricted research or teaching assistants, and negative emotional experiences with homesickness, othering, and isolation. In the perceived absence of university-provided support, ISs drew from their own repertoire of personal and social resources (Sarmiento et al., 2019) to adopt various coping practices in order to overcome academic, social, cultural, and emotional challenges. They actively sought social interactions through clubs and events, utilized media resources to learn about cultural nuances and language, and leveraged technology to improve academic writing. Peer support also emerged as a vital resource ISs tapped into for emotional and practical assistance. These self-initiated practices played a crucial role in helping them adapt to their new environment and facilitated their social integration and overall well-being, which demonstrated the great resilience many ISs display when navigating their acculturation at a host IHE (Hunter-Johnson, 2022). This study, then, serves as a reminder to examine this navigation as a set of agentive actions and practices undertaken *by* ISs rather than as a set of experiences happening *to* them (Deuchar, 2022; Jones, 2017). Further, while acculturation theory typically frames acculturation as a bidirectional process between the individual and the host context (Berry, 2006; Sam, 2006), the findings of this study point to the centrality of the above-described, more psychological and individual factors and actions (Sam, 2024; Sarmiento et al., 2019). This was partly due to the study design, which focused on ISs' perceptions of their practices within the acculturation process rather than the institution's structures for supporting them; however, the fact that ISs mostly described their self-initiated practices raises questions about and a continued need for research on the interplay between individual agency within the acculturation process and the support the host context can provide for it. While uncovering more institutional and structural elements of the ISs' acculturation practices was not within

the scope of this study, it must be noted that overall, the findings underscore the urgent need for targeted university support services to better assist ISs.

Even though ISs are often characterized in acculturation literature as sojourners (Bochner, 2006) with a rather temporary and voluntary presence in the host country (Berry, 2006), the responsibility of the receiving institutions in easing the challenges related to ISs' acculturation process is no less central. The participants in this study found university support to be either wholly absent, such as in the case of navigating difficult advisor relationships or learning to teach undergraduate students; or in cases where support was found to exist, ISs deemed them inadequate for their needs, such as the buddy program where buddies would cease to meet with them, or guidelines about the visa process that were too piecemeal to form a coherent path, and given too late to be of help. While this study focused on one particular university, existing literature points to similar inadequacies in the supports provided by other institutions across the United States (e.g., a selective liberal arts college in the northeast, Bjork et al, 2020; a large research university in the Midwest, Jin & Acharya, 2022; a mid-sized public institution in the south, Rivas et al., 2019).

It is the responsibility of IHEs to serve their IS population better, especially since IHEs benefit from the diverse expertise and financial contributions that ISs bring to campus. This includes ensuring that ISs know about the support and how to access them when needed. Overall, university support is crucial for improving ISs' well-being (Cho & Yu, 2015; Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022), and IHEs are urged to take a closer look at what support might address the specific academic, social, cultural, linguistic, and health needs that characterize the IS experience. While the challenges ISs faced and the inadequacies in the supports the university provided, uncovered in this study, very much align with what literature has previously revealed, this study provides support for specific courses of action IHEs could take to remedy the situation. IHEs are particularly recommended to involve ISs in the process of designing targeted support for them, as ISs are not only keenly aware of their challenges, but as this study demonstrated, have often already devised informal networks and practices that could be adopted and more systematically implemented by the university. Reaching out to ISs could be a first step towards balancing the directionality of and roles in the acculturation process ISs now face mainly on their own, and research has already demonstrated the benefits of support co-created with ISs (Leslie & Wright, 2025; Meade et al., 2022).

As also demonstrated by this study, in some cases, ISs were not aware of university-provided support that did exist, such as writing center tutors and same-day appointments for the counseling center. Further inquiries with the International Students and Scholars Office revealed that the information about many of the support had been included in the ISs' orientation, but it may be that they overlooked this amongst the flood of new experiences and information that typifies the first weeks

of an IS's first semester at the host IHE. Therefore, another recommendation is that IHEs offer information about their support in a continuous manner throughout the year and through multiple channels, particularly social media (Zhao, 2016). In this study, researchers shared information about the university's support and resources with the participants at the conclusion of each data collection event. Since ISs in this study had little knowledge of the above-mentioned supports, it remains unclear how successful they were overall with the university's IS population. There is a need for research that demonstrates successful models of implementation of university-provided supports targeting ISs (for examples of such recent initiatives, see Leslie & Wright, 2025; Meade et al., 2022).

In this study most students were of Asian backgrounds, especially from Iran. Since extant research points to the benefits of tailoring support to match IS backgrounds (e.g., Hwang et al., 2016; Jin & Acharya, 2022), a final recommendation for IHEs stemming from this study involves considering support measures that are based on research conducted among their own IS population or a population that reflects similar characteristics. Finally, it must be noted that in the current political climate in the United States, IHEs' existing policies and practices to support ISs may be at odds with wider educational policies (Pinto et al., 2024). We urge policy makers at all levels of decision making to consider not only the economic value but also the intellectual and cultural assets ISs bring to the host context, and to create systems and structures that honor these students' own resiliency in navigating the acculturation process, but also come to the aid in meaningful ways when needed.

LIMITATIONS

As with any study, this inquiry is not without limitations. Due partly to the recruitment process, most of the participants were doctoral students in STEM fields, particularly engineering. Thus, more research is needed to illuminate how the challenges and acculturation practices of undergraduate and master's level students and students in other fields might differ from or align with the findings of this study. Further, most participants originated from countries in Asia, which further limits generalizability, though it must be noted that Asia is a vast, heterogeneous area, which in itself brings diversity to this group of students. What is more limiting of generalizability, as far as participants' countries of origin, is the fact that due to the authors' own networks utilized in the recruitment process, a disproportionate number of participants were from Iran. However, each IS brings unique insights into their acculturation journey, even when ostensibly from a similar background to another student. Finally, the study is limited to the perceptions of a few students out of the institutions' IS population, and their views may not represent the support

structure provided by the institution. However, the students' views align with what the authors know of the strengths and weaknesses of the institutional support based on their own employment at the university.

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