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“A Blessing and a Curse”: Challenges, Strategies, and Needs of International Graduates in the Midwest USA

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ABSTRACT

International graduate students are among the most vulnerable populations in university settings due to diverse academic, social, and mental health challenges. Despite this, few studies have examined how they navigate these difficulties. This study explored the mental health experiences and coping mechanisms of international graduate students at a large, research-intensive university in the Midwestern United States through a resilience-informed lens. Using a descriptive qualitative design, nine participants were recruited through purposive sampling, and semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed using thematic analysis. Three main themes emerged: (1) the ups and downs of stress, describing the fluctuating nature of students' emotional well-being; (2) finding ways to thrive, highlighting diverse coping strategies and personal growth; and (3) the need for proactive services, emphasizing students' calls for tailored institutional support. While existing services were acknowledged, participants identified gaps in culturally and contextually relevant resources. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on international students' mental health, coping mechanisms, and service needs in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, there has been an increase in international student enrollments at higher education institutions, supported by the ease of travel (Weber et al., 2025). In the 2023–2024 academic year, over 1,126,700 international students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions, with approximately 502,300 being graduate students (Institute of International Education, 2024). This marks a 3% overall increase, continuing the upward trend of 7% in 2022–2023 and 12% in 2021–2022. Undergraduate enrollment rose by 6%, while graduate numbers declined slightly by 2%. India became the leading sender of students to the U.S. for the first time since 2009, though growth appears to be stabilizing (Institute of International Education, 2024).

The benefits of these increasing numbers include that they promote significant economic benefits to the host country while also promoting

cross-cultural learning (Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2025; Park et al., 2017) and exchange (Y. K. Kim et al., 2019). These benefits exist, despite systemic-level bias within hosting countries that often see international students as ‘cash cows’ (Wong & Sohi, 2025) or ‘illegal immigrants in disguise’ (Ploner, 2017).

International graduate students pursue higher education in the U.S. to achieve their life and career goals; these are predominantly professional and academic growth opportunities (Nam & English, 2025b), political freedom, or economic security (Ploner, 2017). However, during the transition to U.S. academic and social life, international students experience challenges that impact their well-being and academic success (Zhao et al., 2025) that impact their academic success, well-being (Barneche et al., 2025), as well as their mental health (Barneche et al., 2025; Jin & Wang, 2018). Some can manage these challenges through

resilience, but others cannot (Dinh & Vu, 2024; Wang & Mireles-Rios, 2025).

These challenges have been well documented in research focused on behavioral health. Research has identified that international students have higher rates of behavioral health difficulties (Y. K. Kim et al., 2019). International graduates within the U.S. are among the most vulnerable students within American universities because of the many acculturative stressors they experience.

These stressors include language barriers, educational stressors, discrimination (Alao, 2025; Bayati et al., 2025; Osa et al., 2025), culture shock, satisfaction, and cultural and social competence (Ivanova et al., 2025; Ying & Han, 2006), living environment, the learning and academic culture (He et al., 2025; Zhang & He, 2025), and access to social support (Cheung & Yue, 2013; Yu et al., 2025).

In addition to these stressors, limited access to culturally appropriate resources further compounds students' struggles. Hosting institutions often fail to sufficiently address international students' needs or to encourage meaningful interactions between international students, faculty, and domestic peers. This can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation (Ivanova et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2025), which may be fueled by cultural misunderstandings or a lack of cultural empathy in the university community (Barneche et al., 2025; Cables et al., 2024).

While much of this research documents challenges, less has explored strength-based approaches to international graduate student well-being. Most research that has been conducted about this subject has addressed multiple challenges that international students must face when studying abroad. Still, not many of them focus on the international graduate students themselves. Graduate students who engage in higher education often have their unique challenges. Prevention and early intervention to improve mental health in higher education students can be improved by better understanding international students' experiences (Reavley & Jorm, 2010; Sakız & Jencius, 2024).

Numerous studies have found that international students deal with the challenges of studying abroad by relying on personal and multicultural strengths (Wu et al., 2025; Yakunina et al., 2013), increasing social support (Al Juboori et al., 2025), having strong friendship networks

(Hendrickson et al., 2011; Tang et al., 2025), using religion and spirituality (Y. K. Kim et al., 2019), increasing their sense of belongingness (Preuß et al., 2025) or engaging in leisure activities (Cavan & Hums, 2025).

International students must cope and adjust to their new environment to succeed (Park et al., 2017). How well international students cope has been suggested to be linked to their resilience (Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015), as resilience directly relates to stress. The higher an individual's resilience, the lower their stress (Larcombe et al., 2024). This means that resilience significantly impacts how international students adjust to academic and life stressors.

With resilience being defined as an individual's capacity or opportunity to find resources (psychological, social, cultural, and physical) that supports their well-being and prospects (alone or with others), and through the utilization of these resources in culturally meaningful ways achieve adjustment and well-being (Asal et al., 2025; Cheung & Yue, 2013; Nam & English, 2025a). In other words, resilience allows individuals to adapt to their new environment positively through adaptive coping (Y. K. Kim et al., 2019).

An essential component of resilience is the internal assets of the individual and their use of these to maintain well-being (Y. K. Kim et al., 2019). Jin and Wang (2018) found that mental toughness is a resilience factor and coping mechanism, as it can mitigate the sense of adversity through how stress is perceived. (Tang et al., 2025) and (Cheung & Yue, 2013) found that social connectedness with the dominant group was another important resilience factor. Being optimistic about life and oneself while having flexible thoughts and social relationships are also important factors of resilience (Alabdullah et al., 2025; Jing Wang, 2009). Two of the main factors that research has identified to promote resilience are optimism (Alabdullah et al., 2025; Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015) and social support (Park et al., 2017; Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015) or social connectedness (Tang et al., 2025).

However, international students tend to develop friendships and peer relationships with other international students rather than with peers from their host community (Andrade, 2006; Mittelmeier et al., 2025). This trend may reflect

comfort and shared experience, but can limit integration and broader social support. All this means is that the stronger and broader an international student's resilience is, the better they can cope and adjust to adversities while maintaining well-being (Jing Wang, 2009; Soong & Mu, 2025).

Yet, significant gaps remain in the literature. To date, studies about the resilience of international graduate students and how they can overcome the challenges they experience at host U.S. universities to become successful in the U.S. are lacking. With researchers calling for more research (S. R. Kim & Zalaquett, 2025). What is known is that international students' resilience incorporates their ability to face adversity and still maintain a determination to succeed with their studies, ultimately leading to improved academic performance. However, this resilience varies between individuals and is based upon a collection of internal and external factors. Some of these are known; however, more research is needed (Larcombe et al., 2024).

Authors of a grounded theory of international student well-being (McLachlan & Justice, 2009) also concluded that students demonstrated a sense of resilience even facing stresses and challenges. However, the authors did not state the coping strategies used by the international students and possible reasons why they used them.

Another issue is that international graduate students are sometimes reluctant to seek help in mental health due to differences in culture (Cables et al., 2024; Yoon & Jepsen, 2008). Only a few studies research mental health among this population (Sakız & Jencius, 2024). Research has shown that international graduate students' mental health is interconnected with stress and experiences of xenophobia in U.S. Universities. However, mental health services are not accessible to support this due to stigma (Girmay et al., 2019). This is confirmed by other research into mental health needs and mental health service usage (Hyun et al., 2007; Sakız & Jencius, 2024). None of these authors explored the coping strategies used or the resilience of the international graduate students (Girmay et al., 2019). These were also not covered in a literature review of factors impacting international graduate students' health and quality of life (Vakkai et al., 2020). Park et al. (2017) explored the challenges, coping strategies, and

resilience of international students within U.S. universities. However, this was limited to East Asian experiences.

This reinforces the need for a focused investigation. Despite the extensive literature on the challenges faced by international students, there is a notable gap in research specifically addressing the resilience and coping strategies of international graduate students. Most studies have focused on general student populations or international students as a whole, without differentiating the unique challenges faced by graduate students. This gap underscores the need for further research to explore how international graduate students in U.S. universities cope with challenges, their resilience in adjusting to their academic and social environments, and the strategies they employ (S. R. Kim & Zalaquett, 2025; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Wu et al., 2025).

This study seeks to address this gap by examining their experiences from their perspectives, ultimately contributing to a better understanding of how to support international graduate students in building resilience, developing support networks, and enhancing their overall mental health.

This study aimed to address this gap by examining the experiences of international graduate students at U.S. universities, the challenges they face, the coping strategies they engage with, and how resilience is involved in these processes. Contributing to a better understanding of how to support international graduate students in building resilience, developing support networks, and enhancing their overall mental health.

METHODS

The researchers approached this study with curiosity and a desire to understand the experiences of international graduate students. They refrained from making assumptions about the outcomes, acknowledging that their academic environment predominantly focused on objectivist research, which shaped their approach. Importantly, two of the primary researchers are international scholars themselves, which influenced their perspective and approach to this study.

A descriptive qualitative research approach was used to explore the experiences and coping strategies of international graduate students, specifically through the lens of resilience. This

approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth description of phenomena (Sandelowski, 2000). Descriptive qualitative research involves obtaining insights from individuals closely connected to the phenomena under study, which are often poorly understood (H. Kim et al., 2017). This approach emphasizes low-inference interpretation, promoting greater consensus among researchers regarding the “facts” of the phenomena (Sandelowski, 2000). A key goal of this approach is to ensure descriptive validity, meaning that data is collected in a manner that fully captures the elements of the phenomenon (Maxwell, 1992; Sandelowski, 2000). This approach was chosen as it supports the development of a comprehensive and accessible summary of the experiences of international graduate students (H. Kim et al., 2017).

The study involved nine participants from a large public university in the US Midwest. A small sample size was chosen, as descriptive qualitative research does not prescribe specific limits for sample size (Boddy, 2016). This sample size is

typical in interview-based studies (H. Kim et al., 2017).

Furthermore, qualitative rigor is supported by the concept of information power, whereby the more relevant information participants hold for the study aims, the fewer participants are needed (Malterud et al., 2016). In this study, participants shared key characteristics and provided rich, focused data, supporting the adequacy of the sample size. Thematic saturation was also observed, indicating that the data sufficiently captured the range of perspectives relevant to the research questions (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017).

Eligibility criteria included that participants were: a) international graduate students, b) 18 years or older, c) had been at the university for one year or more, and d) were currently enrolled as full-time students. Purposeful snowball sampling was used to recruit participants, with initial referrals made by the Office of Global Education, which is responsible for supporting international students. These initial participants then referred others from their networks (Sandelowski, 2000). Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Sex	Age Range	Graduate Level	Country	Duration in U.S. (Years)
PT1	Male	25-30	Doctoral	Taiwan	6 years
PT2	Female	31-36	Doctoral	Saudi Arabia	5 years
PT3	Female	25-30	Master	Honduras	1.5 years
PT4	Female	24-29	Master	Indonesia	1.5 years
PT5	Female	20-25	Master	Syria	>6 years
PT6	Male	20-25	Master	Saudi Arabia	5 years
PT7	Female	25-30	Master	Ghana	3 years
PT8	Female	25-30	Master	Nigeria	1 year
PT9	Female	28-32	Master	Ghana	1.5 years

[Redacted for Blinding] Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for the study, and participants who expressed interest were screened for eligibility. Interviews were conducted in English during the fall of 2018, at times and locations convenient for the participants. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded. Participants were compensated with a \$10 Amazon gift card. The first author transcribed the interviews and de-identified the data to ensure confidentiality.

In line with descriptive qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were employed to uncover the “who, what, and where” of the

phenomena being studied (Sandelowski, 2000). This method allows for the exploration of participants' subjective experiences and interpretations of distress and well-being (Kleinman & Benson, 2006). The interview guide was developed based on a literature review and expert guidance. The full interview protocol, including all guiding questions and prompts, is provided in Appendix A.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data, a fundamental technique within descriptive qualitative research (H. Kim et al., 2017). Unlike content analysis, thematic analysis emphasizes low-inference interpretations to stay

closely aligned with the data (Neergaard et al., 2009). This method allowed for identifying patterns related to resilience among international graduate students adjusting to life at a U.S. university (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was conducted in six steps as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarization with the data: T.N. and A.C.L. engaged with the transcripts by reading and re-reading them, noting initial ideas, and verifying transcripts against the original recordings.
2. Initial code generation: Using an in-vivo coding process (Saldaña, 2015) in Microsoft Word, T.N. and A.C.L. generated basic meaning units from the data and compared their codes to ensure consistency.
3. Searching for themes: Using QSR International NVivo 12 software, the authors grouped codes into potential themes after having loaded the coded Microsoft Word transcripts into the software.
4. Reviewing themes: Refining of themes was then done by T.N. and A.C.L., by collapsing similar ones and separating others to ensure clear and distinguishable distinctions. This ensured that the themes accurately reflected the data.
5. Theme naming and definition: Themes were finalized and labeled by T.N. and A.C.L., with a focus on their essence, describing the key aspects each theme captured. This involved developing an understanding of how each theme fits into the 'overall' story told by the data.
6. Report production: The authors collaboratively wrote the manuscript based on the analysis.

To ensure quality and rigor in this study, the authors followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) quality criteria for thematic analysis. Key strategies included systematic snowball sampling, building rapport with participants, ensuring participants had the freedom to share their experiences, accurate transcription, and data-driven coding (Milne & Oberle, 2005). Dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining audit trails using NVivo (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Siccama & Penna, 2008). Reflexivity was addressed through journal entries within NVivo, which were triangulated with the interview data to enhance the analysis. Investigator triangulation was employed throughout the research process to strengthen the

findings. Transferability was promoted by providing rich, thick descriptions of the phenomena being studied (Siccama & Penna, 2008).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We developed three main themes from the data, including Ups and Downs of Stress, Finding Ways to Thrive, and The Need for Proactive Services. To explain these results, the themes are described using the categories, along with exemplary evidence from transcripts. These themes collectively reveal both the challenges international graduate students face and the ways they cope, adapt, and build resilience throughout their academic journey.

This study involved two participants working on their doctoral degree and seven working toward their master's degree. Participants came from different majors and colleges in the university. These international students were from different countries and continents, including Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America (see Table 1 for more demographic information). The following section presents the most recurrent themes and sub-themes that emerged from our inductive analysis of the international graduate students.

Theme 1: Ups and Downs of Stress

International graduates reported various stresses when they came to the U.S. to pursue their education. Those stresses came from three primary sources, including 1) Resource Insecurities, 2) Unmet Expectations, and 3) Facing Discrimination and Isolation. These stressors represent the adversities that test students' well-being and challenge their ability to adjust, setting the context for the coping strategies and resilience-building explored in later themes.

1. Resources Insecurities (Basic Needs, Finance, Health, Legal, and Time)

All participants faced many different insecurities, from minor needs to more significant necessities. These gaps in resources generated a lot of insecurities for international students and impeded them from doing the things they like, as it was in their home countries. This meant that the lack of information about food, accommodation, and transport left them feeling that their basic needs were not met, raising many concerns and fears for themselves. Financial insecurity is always a big concern for international students. As many of them

come to the U.S. to study with the hope of improving their quality of life, the stress of not being able to fulfill the tuition or other utility needs weighed on them. Legal concerns also impede international students from doing many things to stay out of trouble, which implies that they do not like to complain, defend, or challenge things that could negatively impact their legal status. ...I always have to think about how much I'm making, how much I'm spending, how can I make more money, how can I save more money? Can I sell my old books? Should I eat lunch today? ... (student from the Middle East).

2. Unmet Expectations (Employment and Career)

International students are coming to the U.S. to achieve better graduation and better careers. However, the reality showed that their expectations would not always be met. Working was a significant concern for the students, who all expressed the need to work for money to support themselves while living and studying within the U.S. Working at a large midwestern university or off-campus was necessary and not a luxury. However, as international students, it was harder for them to find or maintain jobs (even if they found one). Policies and rules around working made finding employment difficult. Making the work even more difficult is their experiences of discrimination while working on campus. Such insecurities posed persistent challenges that students had to manage, influencing their coping responses and resilience development. These unmet expectations and work-related stresses formed part of the external pressures that students had to navigate through various coping mechanisms. ...She favored American students over international students, which was really terrible. She gave American students more hours even in the summer, while international students, who cannot work off campus, fought for hours just to earn enough... (student from Africa).

3. Facing Discrimination and Isolation

The three main groups under this subtheme were Lack of Acceptance, Poor Student Interactions, and Isolation. Many students in this study experienced a Lack of Acceptance either on their university campus or when interacting with the locals. In many situations, the international graduates felt discriminated against either because of their religions, appearances, cultures, or

languages. These experiences of exclusion further strained students' well-being, highlighting the social challenges that impacted their stress levels and the importance of social support in their coping and resilience.

They became very aggressive. They said we should believe in Christianity... They wanted us to become Christians. But in [my home country in Asia] or Saudi Arabia, we didn't face these situations... I was shocked... (student from Asia).

Poor Student Interactions happened on campus because of the Lack of Acceptance, the assumptions about international students from domestic students, and the assumptions about domestic students from the international population. This creates tension and a distance for these two populations to understand and cooperate effectively.

I don't know, maybe because of my hijab, I cannot get along with U.S. students... International students accept me more. With U.S. students, I have to put a lot of effort to get along... (student from the Middle East).

Isolation resulted from many stresses, including the Lack of Acceptance and Poor Student Interactions. This increased their level of stress over time. Their general lack of social support exacerbated This Sense of Being Alone because their families and social networks were back home in their home countries.

As an international student, you are kind of alone... You meet people, but at the end of the day, you're still alone... I don't have my family here... Contact is usually just phone calls... but time differences make it hard to reach them when you need to... (student from Africa).

Theme 2: Finding Ways to Thrive

Though the amount of stress and challenges was huge, the international graduates used a variety of coping strategies to overcome. Many methods were mentioned, and all of them can be grouped into three categories: Using External Supports, Using Internal Problem-Solving Skills, and Avoidance. These coping strategies illustrate the specific actions and behaviors students used to manage stressors in the moment, which contributed cumulatively to their overall resilience the sustained capacity to adapt and succeed amid ongoing challenges.

1. Using External Supports

A critical approach to adjusting to their environment and overcoming their challenges was to use support. Support was obtained from classmates, colleagues, professors, families, friends, especially international friends, mother tongue support, resource access, support from the university services, and physical activities. However, some support systems were more important for the international students than others. The main ones included resource access, support from families, and international friends or friends from their own countries. ...I had three friends very close to me during the first year... it felt like having a family... people who cared if I got home safe... I was not alone. That was the most important thing—and still is. (student from South America)

2. Using Internal Problem-Solving Skills

There were many skills that international graduates utilized that can help them overcome the stressors and succeed in their academic life and goals, such as assimilating with the locals, doing the right things, getting actively involved, living in the now, planning, problem-solving, reexamining their perspectives, and physical exercise. These coping strategies were necessary to solve the adjustment challenges they faced. The ability to overcome the obstacles and be more resilient was founded on their ability to solve the various challenges they had met. ...I also learned to speak up at work. If you give me a job I don't know how to do, I will ask. I don't think asking makes me look foolish. I ask because I need to learn and adapt to the culture here. (a student from Africa).

3. Avoidance

Avoidance was utilized by almost all the international graduates at one point or another. When facing difficulties, avoidance can help them overcome the various challenges and stresses. There were many ways of practicing avoidance, including persevering, being tough, not asking for help, and just ignoring it. ...We are tough-skinned. No excuses, just get it done. Even if I'm stressed out, I'm not seeking help from a counselor. I rely on my strategies, which include talking to family (a student from Africa).

Together, these coping strategies depict how students actively managed immediate stressors, while the interplay of these behaviors supported

their longer-term resilience in navigating graduate life abroad.

Theme 3: Need for Proactive Services

All the interviewees wanted to have more services and easier access to some of the current services on the university campus. There are four activities or services that these students mentioned a lot, which are 1) Giving Lessons on Cultural Sensitivity, 2) Promoting Mental Health Acceptance, 3) Promoting Integration, and 4) Improving Resource Accessibility.

1. Giving Lessons on Cultural Sensitivity

Part of the proactive services that the international graduates suggested was that the university engage in giving lessons on cultural sensitivity. They believed that the university should have intercultural training for both U.S. students and international students to promote more understanding and integration between these two populations.

It would be much better if [the university] offered intercultural training to American students, faculty, and staff. We are willing to share our culture, but it has to be mutual. If they understand how we think and process issues, it would really help our mental health. (a student from Asia)

2. Promoting Mental Health Acceptance

Mental health acceptance needs to be promoted, especially among international students. Although the international students had shown that they had a basic understanding of mental health, they were reluctant to seek help. Many of them would give up because it is too complicated to find help rather than deal with it themselves or their cultural differences.

In some cultures, like China and the Middle East, people don't feel comfortable talking about mental health issues. They hide them or seek help privately because they feel ashamed and fear judgment. But in America, it's okay to ask for help. I want international students to know it's okay to seek help here because this journey isn't easy, and you don't have family here—you're alone. (a student from Asia)

3. Promoting Integration

Promoting Integration with domestic students and local life was a focus of the international students' suggestions. They wanted more programs that could help them integrate with domestic students and other international students, especially

students from their own countries. Moreover, Promoting Integration would help enlarge international students' social support circle, which could help them in the long term.

I registered for a friendship family program where they matched me with an American family. If [the university] promoted programs like this more, it would help a lot. I feel I have many places to go—friends, roommates, or my host family when I'm worried. This kind of support is something all international students should experience (a student from South America).

4. Improving Resources Accessibilities

Many international students were actively looking for support services inside the university when they knew they needed help. However, the lack of access to these resources, either their information or their policies, impeded the participants from utilizing them. Therefore, the participants talked about how the university can make these resources more accessible, especially by spreading the information to international students.

Sometimes they bring service dogs, and I tried to pet one because they say it's good for mental health, but I never found them. Once they were in a building and another time in the [name] plaza, but I was too busy with academic life. If I could get a service dog, that would be nice. Also, the health center has a psychologist, but when I tried to make an appointment, the waiting list was like a month and a half (a student from South America).

International graduate students experience Ups and Downs of Stress for various reasons, including Resources Insecurities, Unmet Expectations, and Facing Discrimination and Isolation. This stress is often linked to poor academic interactions (i.e., Lack of Acceptance, Poor Student Interactions, and Unmet Expectations). These outcomes align with previous research that has documented similar challenges among international students, underscoring the need for more proactive university responses in the U.S. (Girmay et al., 2019; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). These challenges have significant implications for students' academic performance, social integration, and overall well-being. Importantly, such stressors prompt students to employ a range of coping strategies to manage immediate pressures, while also initiating longer-term adaptive processes that contribute to their resilience.

To face these challenges, international graduate students utilize various coping strategies, grouped into three main themes: using external supports, using internal problem-solving skills, and avoidance. Most of these strategies are positive in that they help students adapt to and navigate their new environment. For example, using internal problem-solving skills allows students to effectively address challenges directly, while using external supports promotes faster integration into U.S. academic and social life. These strategies reflect not only short-term behavioral and psychological efforts to manage immediate stressors—as described in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of coping—but also play a role in developing longer-term resilience. By practicing and refining these strategies, students build adaptive capacities that support their persistence and well-being over time.

On the other hand, some strategies might be detrimental and do not positively help these international graduate students and instead drive the individual to poorer health or well-being outcomes. The main example of this is avoidance, including self-protection, just ignoring it, not asking for help, and perseverance. Although these coping strategies may seem initially helpful and adaptive to international graduates (Park et al., 2017), they have been found to negatively affect mental health and well-being (Jin & Wang, 2018). These coping strategies are more common in the collectivistic culture of cultures with a community mindset (which was found to be the case among the participants in this study), where forbearance or minimization of personal problems is more prevalent, in order not to burden any essential people in an individual's life (Constantine et al., 2004; Wu et al., 2025). The tendency to avoid problems can be a temporary means of coping, but over time, it may lead to increased stress and hinder long-term adjustment.

The international graduates' coping strategies, including their efforts in finding ways to thrive, also promote their resilience. Using external supports helps the students deal with the separation from family and friends in their countries. However, most students form social networks with individuals from similar cultural backgrounds, which can hinder their full integration into U.S. society. Although international students often gain support from other

international peers, research indicates that forming friendships with American students can be more beneficial for their adaptation (Kristiana et al., 2022; Ying & Han, 2006). Whereas coping reflects a student's short-term response to an immediate challenge, resilience reflects their long-term capacity to persist, adapt, and grow despite adversity (Masten, 2001). In our study, students often continued to strive academically and socially even when coping strategies were not immediately effective—illustrating resilience as an ongoing, adaptive process.

Avoidance was an approach the international graduate students used to protect themselves by not taking their experiences to heart. This they achieved by seeing themselves as “being in thick skin”. They learned how to hide feelings and emotions, and literally “Fake it till you make it”. This aligns with prior research, which found that international students used mental toughness to cope and be more resilient (Jin & Wang, 2018). Finally, using internal problem-solving skills stands out the most as one thing that helped them keep going, despite the challenges. While this mental toughness may help students endure initial difficulties, it may also suppress emotional expression, which can hinder emotional processing in the long term. These findings demonstrate that while coping and resilience overlap, they are not interchangeable: coping responses may contribute to resilience over time, but resilience also involves a broader meaning-making process and internal growth (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Masten, 2001).

Another important source for international graduates' resilience that linked the prior three factors was meaning making, which is under the sub-group of reexamining their perspectives. Coming to the U.S. to study is challenging, and almost all of them had a clear purpose and goal in life that drove them to study within the U.S. These goals allowed them to interpret their experiences in ways that supported the achievement of this goal positively. This kept them going, allowing them to persevere and overcome the challenges they encountered. This optimism and sense of purpose are consistent with prior research, which shows a positive relationship between optimism and resilience (Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015). Meaning-making can be seen as a bridge between coping and resilience: by reframing challenges as purposeful or

goal-aligned, students were able to generate motivation and maintain psychological strength, which are core components of resilience (Pan et al., 2008).

Throughout the interviews, the needs for proactive services include giving lessons on cultural sensitivity, promoting mental health acceptance, promoting integration, and improving resources accessibilities provided a clear picture and strategies to help the international graduates. These findings confirm prior literature that found that universities in the U.S. needed to improve their services to international students (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Thorstenson, 2001). Promoting integration has a unique effect on international students because all participants came from countries rooted in community mindsets (i.e., Asian, African, and Middle East countries). In some respects, the community mindset helped the international graduate students to be more resilient by pushing them to reach out, find social networks, and communicate with others. On the other hand, since the U.S. culture generally values individualism, the international students, rooted firmly in the community mindset, found it difficult to integrate their lifestyles (Ansari Lari et al., 2025; Constantine et al., 2004; Ivanova et al., 2025). This difference in values can cause stress and internal value conflicts when these international students try to fit in or integrate with life in the U.S. This highlights how resilience is not merely individual, but shaped by cultural values and environmental fit (Masten & Powell, 2003; Ungar, 2011). Resilience may be compromised when institutional systems fail to recognize these mismatches, limiting access to necessary supports and disrupting adaptive processes (Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013; Windle, 2011).

To support integration, such programs as a mentor program need to be considered, especially among the graduate international student population, as often only the undergraduate population is supported. Mentor programs that connect individuals from the same cultural backgrounds could facilitate faster adjustment and integration. Previous research has shown that peer programs are effective in improving the performance and adjustment of international students (Altın-Gök & Yorulmaz, 2025; Matheka et al., 2025; Ying & Han, 2006). Other integration and

awareness programs would need to be supported to address stigma, promote cultural awareness and sensitivity, and social activities. These would raise awareness of resources, connecting students to these resources while supporting them in managing unmet expectations.

Physical activity programs can help students to increase their physical and mental health. Based on the literature, physical activity interventions have been proven to be effective for improving mental health and physical health (Alshehri et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2015; Yoh, 2009). During interviews, the students once again confirmed the results in the literature that doing exercise, fitness activities, or playing sports is suitable for their physical health and a tremendous benefit to their mental health. However, this study found that the international students engaged in physical exercise more than was found in other literature. Possibly, this difference is that these were graduate students, while prior studies were mostly among undergraduates (Jett et al., 2024; Yin et al., 2024; Yoh, 2009). By addressing what these international graduate students need for physical exercise throughout the year, the university will better support their health, well-being, academic performance, and ultimately their experience at the university.

International graduate students face ongoing challenges that university services have only partially addressed (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Thorstensson, 2001). Universities have fallen short of meeting their needs, and there remains a need for more proactive and effective programs specifically aimed at supporting international graduate students. One key finding is that even though these students experience significant stress and challenges, many demonstrate resilience and find ways to overcome them. This is often achieved through using internal problem-solving skills, using external supports, or avoidance (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pan et al., 2008). However, this does not mean they have all the resources they need to cope with these stressors. As these challenges persist, their resilience may become taxed, particularly when institutional systems fail to recognize or respond to cultural mismatches and environmental demands (Masten & Powell, 2003; Ungar, 2011). Therefore, more targeted interventions should be applied, and further

research on the resilience of international graduate students is warranted.

This study shows that, though facing a tremendous number of challenges, international students utilize different coping strategies to deal with them, and some might be more positive than others. Also, understanding coping strategies that international students prefer to use can help find ways to help this population. Even though some services on campus intend to help international students, they seem to be ineffective, both because of the lack of information and because those approaches are not in tune with international students' lifestyles and thinking. Therefore, implementing tailored or mimicking international students' coping strategies can be effective.

This research expands the understanding of international graduate students by highlighting how they cope with unmet needs and discrimination. While they employ various coping strategies, these often occur in the absence of sustained institutional support. Resilience emerges not only from individual traits but through meaning-making shaped by cultural and environmental fit. By distinguishing between short-term coping and long-term resilience-building, this study offers a more nuanced view of how students navigate academic life under stress.

Limitations

Sampling was done conveniently and was dominantly through the personal networks of one researcher. Some of the participants were drawn from Global Ambassadors, who do not necessarily represent the same experiences as other international graduate students. International students from this study were all at their graduate level, which might lead to different perspectives compared to undergraduate students. Also, no students came from Europe, so the results might not represent European international students' experience.

Ethical considerations, since the study involved interviews with international graduate students. The scope of this study is only at a large midwestern university. Therefore, the application can be limited to this university alone. English proficiency of interviewers and cultural differences can be barriers to fully understanding their stories and meanings.

The limitation of the study is that it is based on an interpretative position of the researchers, which may impact the overall outcome. This study was conducted at a large Midwestern university. The international students interviewed might not represent the whole population, both at this university and in other universities in the U.S. A larger-scale survey can help identify the homogeneous result of this study and confirm if the results apply to other international students at this university and might be similar to other universities in the Midwest U.S.A. The limitation of the study is that it is based on an interpretative position of the researchers, which may impact the overall outcome. This study was conducted at a mid-sized Midwestern university.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that international graduate students employ diverse coping strategies, including seeking external support and applying internal problem-solving skills, which foster their resilience amidst significant academic and social challenges. However, avoidance strategies, while sometimes protective in the short term, may impede long-term well-being. To better support this population, universities should implement culturally sensitive mentorship programs that connect international students with peers from similar cultural backgrounds to enhance social integration. They should also improve access to tailored mental health services that acknowledge cultural stigma and promote acceptance. Finally, expanding physical activity programs geared toward graduate students can promote both mental and physical health. Future research should evaluate the effectiveness of these targeted interventions to optimize support and promote resilience in international graduate students.

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