

Examining the Effect of Social, Cultural, and Political Factors on the Wellness of International Students in Engineering Doctoral Programs: A Collaborative Inquiry

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Introduction

The United States reached a record high by hosting over 1.1 million international students, and international students represent a significant portion of STEM enrollment in the U.S., with 56% of STEM students being international during the 2023-2024 academic year (IIE Open Doors, 2024). These students face numerous challenges, including discrimination, homesickness, academic struggles, and loneliness. Studies have shown that international students encounter acculturative stress, with emotional strain resulting from cultural adaptation, social isolation, and academic pressures (Kamardeen & Sunindijo, 2018). These factors contribute to anxiety, negatively affecting academic performance (Mamiseishvili, 2011). Languages also significantly hinder full participation in academic discussions and collaborations, making networking and seeking help more difficult. Many international students feel these amplify their sense of being "outsiders" (Wilczewski et al., 2023; Dutta, 2015; Farra et al., 2025).

In addition to social and cultural factors, federal policies also impact international students' quality of life. Recent immigration policies introduced new restrictions, such as increased visa application fees, stricter behavioral requirements, and more rigorous security checks (McKivigan, 2020). Although international students have not been banned outright, the tightening of visa regulations has made it more difficult to study in the U.S., and more international students feel unwelcome due to rising xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments (Roth & Ritter, 2020).

Building on these challenges, our paper brings together the voices of three international women of color (WOC) doctoral students, who are also the authors, to explore how social, cultural, and political factors shape their lived experiences in graduate school. To frame this exploration, we adopt the Eight Dimensions of Wellness/Healing model, which provides a comprehensive perspective on well-being (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA] 2016; Mosley, 2023). By integrating collaborative inquiry, we use a participatory approach to examine these challenges and their impact on well-being (Walther et al., 2017). Our goal is to provide a platform for sharing experiences and fostering a collective understanding of international graduate students' lived experiences.

Based on the insights gained through this reflective and collaborative process, we identify challenges faced by international graduate students and outline recommendations to address them. These suggestions include advocating for policy reforms to reduce systemic indifference towards wellness and establishing robust support systems tailored to enhance international students' well-being and academic success in U.S. graduate programs.

Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework is rooted in the Eight Dimensions of Wellness, and the eight Blafemme Healing models as proposed by SAMHSA (2016), and Mosley (2023), respectively. Both models introduce a broader, yet specific understanding of the meaning of wellness. Wellness can be understood as being healthy in various dimensions of life, including emotional(heart), physical(body), occupational(workspaces), intellectual(knowing), financial, social(relationships), environmental(ecosystems), and spiritual aspects. These dimensions are interconnected, with each one influencing the others (SAMHSA, 2016; Mosley 2023). According

to these models, each dimension represents a unique, yet interconnected aspect of overall well-being, which we introduce in detail below:

Emotional Wellness: Emotional wellness refers to the ability to handle personal feelings and emotions, recognize and manage stress factors and live joyfully (SAMHSA, 2016; Mosley, 2023). It also includes feeling positive about life and appreciating others' feelings (Stoewen, 2017).

Spiritual Wellness: Spiritual wellness refers to finding meaning and purpose in life, recognizing one's personal beliefs and values (SAMHSA, 2016); and identifying religious practices that serve one's purpose (Mosley, 2023). Spirituality and religion are distinct, though interconnected; spirituality can exist independently of religious practice (Adams & Bezner, 2000).

Intellectual Wellness: Intellectual wellness involves actively engaging in mentally stimulating activities that foster critical thinking, creativity, and lifelong learning (Mosley, 2023). This dimension of wellness also encompasses maintaining an open-minded approach and embracing challenges (SAMHSA, 2016).

Physical Wellness: This encompasses receiving adequate health care, self-care, and engaging in practices that promote physical wellness, including healthy sleeping habits, eating habits, and regular exercise (SAMHSA, 2016; Mosley, 2023; Almaawali, 2024).

Environmental Wellness: This is a comprehensive concept that recognizes the need to foster relationships between individuals and their neighbors (Mosley, 2023); and their physical

surroundings, emphasizing the importance of living in harmony with nature and taking proactive steps to maintain a healthy environment (SAMHSA, 2016; Harrington, 2024).

Financial Wellness: It can be described in various ways, but it generally encompasses factors such as income, debt, savings, and an individual's knowledge of financial systems and resources (SAMHSA, 2016; Mosley, 2023). Financial safety involves managing expenses and savings, while poor financial management, such as excessive debt, leads to distress and health risks (Netemeyer et al., 2018; Bialowolski et al., 2021).

Occupational Wellness: This focuses on how work fosters personal growth and satisfaction; encouraging participation in activities that reflect one's purpose, values, interests, and beliefs in learning and working environments (SAMHSA, 2016; Mosley, 2023). It also entails work-life balance, adequate time management, commensurate remuneration, and healthy employer-employee relationships (O'Mahony & Jeske, 2019).

Social Wellness: Social wellness fosters a sense of belonging and support through positive interactions within one's community and social network resulting in healthy relationships with others - friends, family, and the community at large (SAMHSA, 2016; Mosley, 2023; Meyers & Sweeney, 2008).

Methods

In this paper, we borrow from aspects of collaborative inquiry in our dual roles as researchers and research participants to make meaning of our experiences as international Women of Color adapting to a new US culture. Collaborative inquiry allows researchers to jointly reflect on their experiences with a particular topic and create new knowledge (Walther et al., 2017). We utilize

this approach to examine the social, cultural, and political factors that impact the wellness of international students in graduate education.

Participants

This study has a total of three participants, who also double as the authors of the paper. They are all Women of Color and international students in a PhD program at Southwestern HSI University in the U.S.

Procedure

The process began with each author writing a two-page reflection addressing the prompt: Write a reflection on how social, cultural, and political factors affect your overall experiences and well-being as an international graduate student.

Analytic Approach

The reflections formed the basis for a collaborative session, where we read and discussed our reflections. During our discussions, we recognized that the Eight Dimensions of Wellness framework (SAMHSA, 2016) aligns with the themes emerging from our reflections. This framework provided a structure for analyzing our experiences through eight interconnected dimensions (Feldman, 1999; SAMHSA, 2016).

Using a deductive coding approach, we applied the Eight Dimensions of Wellness as predefined codes to analyze our reflection transcripts. Each author first coded the transcripts independently, categorizing excerpts under corresponding dimensions. We then reconvened to collaboratively review and refine our coding decisions, ensuring consensus on which codes accurately

represented the data. This iterative process strengthened the validity of our analysis and allowed us to identify patterns and themes across the reflections.

Finally, we used the results from our coded data to write a comprehensive summary of the findings. These findings informed the development of recommendations aimed at enhancing international students' wellness and supporting their academic success.

Positionality

The first author is a third-year PhD student and an international Woman of Color from the Middle East. Growing up in a culturally conservative environment, working in the engineering field in her home country, and being an international graduate student, she has witnessed firsthand the systemic issues that women and international students face in engineering. These experiences have ignited a deep passion for transforming engineering education into a space that is more inclusive, equitable, and just. She brings her personal journey to her work, recognizing that her identity and lived experiences inform how she engages with literature and the perspectives she brings to her research. This awareness drives her commitment to critically reflect on and challenge the structures that perpetuate inequities in the field.

The second author is a first generation college student and an International Black woman, studying to obtain a doctoral degree in Engineering Education. Her African cultural background, and her experiences in a male dominated discipline of chemical engineering are the bedrock upon which her research interests are built. She hopes to contribute towards addressing the systemic issues that affect the persistence of international Black women and girls in engineering, and more broadly in STEM disciplines. It is her desire to challenge gender inequality through her research. Additionally, she feels the need to change the status quo because she is a woman who

has been supported all through her academic career and wishes that other women and girls can as well experience that kind of support.

The third author is a Black Woman in her first year studying for a PhD in Engineering education. She is a first-generation college student from a low-income background. Having relied on scholarships to complete her undergraduate and masters education, she understands the challenges associated with pursuing higher education. Since moving to the US as an international student, she has witnessed the struggles faced by her peers as they adjust in a new country while pursuing their academic goals. These experiences have fueled her passion for engaging in work that could lead to actionable changes to enhance international students' experiences.

Limitations

We identify a few limitations of this study that are worth mentioning. First, the authors' reflections were written as a single, retrospective exercise rather than through ongoing journaling over the course of time. This reliance on memory may have influenced the results of their reflection exercise as some relevant experiences might have been overlooked, forgotten, or poorly articulated. Second, while we address how different aspects of the authors' identities play a role in their experiences and overall wellness, there is limited consideration of the intersectionality of these identities. This shows that a deeper analysis that considers how identities such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and nationality interact to influence wellness could enhance the insights beyond what is presented here. Finally, all three authors are from the same institution, which limits the diversity of perspectives in the study. We acknowledge that every student's experience is unique and that the experiences of international

women of color in graduate engineering programs vary across different U.S. institutional contexts, such as PWIs, HSIs, and HBCUs.

Results

Our findings are represented in eight dimensions to demonstrate the connection between authors' experiences as international women of color interacting with social, cultural, and political factors in the U.S. context and how each of these experiences affects different dimensions of wellness. We ensure that each dimension has at least two authors' experiences.

Dimension 1: Emotional wellness

This dimension highlights the authors' accounts of how immigration policies force them to make difficult decisions that negatively impact their emotional well-being. One author explains:

I am married to the best husband in the whole wide world, and I have two beautiful kids aged 7 and 5 (I call them my jewels). Coming to study here meant separation from my family for only God knows how long. This is by far the most difficult, bravest, and scariest decision I have made in my life (I hope and pray by God that I don't regret it). I wake up some mornings, missing them like crazy.

She recounted in this quote how, as a mother, she was devastated by the experience of leaving her husband and her children behind in her home country to pursue further education in the US. Another author describes:

Another insight as an insider and observer is the major issue of not being able to go home or having a fragile temporary permission to go home. To spend time with your loved ones during holidays, to go recharge and come back, as a family- and community-centered person. Day by day and week by week, we see how our souls get crushed by the heavy weight of distance. For me, because of the lack of political relationship with my country, even one visit to my family with my two-year permission was a mix of anxiety, joy, fear, and the nightmare of getting stuck in airports or at the U.S. border because of the history of sudden bans on people from my region before.

This quote highlights how hard it is for some international students to go home at will during their studies to receive the emotional support they need from their families because of political disagreements between the US and their home countries.

Dimension 2: Spiritual Wellness

The United States is often seen as a land of opportunity where many students come to pursue their dreams and fulfill their purpose. The data in this dimension highlights how the pursuit of education in the U.S. impacts international students' spiritual wellness through their sense of purpose and religious practice. One author shares:

I had the opportunity to witness, firsthand, the cultural and structurally-embedded struggles students (especially girls) are confronted with as they navigate through their undergraduate studies. My desire to make meaning out of their experiences propelled my interest in engineering education research, and hence, my coming to the U.S ... I felt

fulfilled in the awareness that I am soon going to be a part of something meaningful and targeted towards making engineering education better for others and myself.

This quote illustrates that the author's purpose in pursuing her doctoral degree is to help undergraduate students navigate structural and gender-related challenges in her home country. Being able to pursue education that could position her to make necessary changes contributes positively to her spiritual wellness. However, another author shares how her status as an international student forced her to make choices about her area of research that detracted from her spiritual wellness:

However, I had a moment of doubt, thinking maybe I should choose something else—maybe I should go with sustainability in engineering because it's a hot topic now, and maybe the U.S. government would favor this subject more, making my process faster and easier.

Her passion involves mental health and systemic issues affecting women, especially Women of Color. However, there were moments when she considered giving it up to study a program that might increase her competitiveness in the job market.

Another aspect that arose related to spiritual wellness is the approach to religious practices. One of the authors describes the difference in worship practice between the United States and her home country:

There is a sense of urgency and rush I see during the celebration of mass here.

The masses rarely last up to an hour, worship songs are dull and dry, homilies are

rushed and most times I spend time trying to digest a portion of the message only to find that the homily has ended. It's as if both the priest and worshippers can not wait to get back to their lives. This leaves me feeling hollow and unfulfilled since I derive my greatest strength from God and religious communities.

The experiences shared by the authors highlight the complexities of navigating purpose and religious beliefs as international students, many of which can affect their spiritual well-being.

Dimension 3: Intellectual Wellness

In this dimension, the data points to the process of authors critically engaging with knowledge, power structure, and diverse perspectives to foster self-awareness, intellectual growth, and holistic wellness. As one of the authors shares:

Although my background is in STEM, getting into the field of engineering education research was completely new to me. I had worked with my current advisor before during a summer program, and that experience made me decide to challenge myself by pursuing a PhD in the field. It has been a learning process for me, especially as an International student having to learn concepts and terminology specific to the US education system.

Another author describes:

I had an experience that crushed my original belief in the “perfect nature” and integrity of the American system. I had requested a book at the school library, and a few days later, I got an email asking me to come to the

library to pick up the book. Two hours later on the same day, I received another email saying I canceled the book request which I didn't. When I went to the library for the book, it turned out someone initiated the cancellation and reassigned the book to another student who I later found out was a staff member. Although the issue was later sorted and the book loaned to me since I requested it first, yet I couldn't help but wonder at the injustice.

The quote conveys how institutional practices and perceived injustice disrupted her pre-existing beliefs, forcing her to critically reassess her expectations and assumptions about fairness and equity. Although the issue was later resolved, the author worries that such partial treatment can affect students' intellectual wellness.

Dimension 4: Physical Wellness

In this dimension, the authors discuss their experiences with physical wellbeing, including getting diagnosed with certain diseases and maintaining healthy eating habits.

In her narrative, one of the authors shares a fear of getting treatment when she first got to the U.S. She narrates:

Another one of these non-written laws is to try to get as few diagnoses, physically and mentally, because no government wants a sick person to serve their country, and I know many students who struggle with complex diseases who prefer not to get treated because of the fear of these unwritten laws. It may sound irrational or, for some people, absurd, but the question

is, have you ever lived their lives? I have a chronic disease that I have to keep under control, so for the first couple of weeks, I was scared to go to the doctor here and follow up with my treatment. However, I overcame my fear and started my treatment plan at the end of the first month.

She worries that international students' quest for acceptance can lead to non-disclosure of their chronic health challenges, which might come at a huge, life-threatening cost.

Another point related to physical wellness came up when an author shares her struggle with eating and staying healthy in the new U.S. culture:

Personally, I am not adventurous, and I am always skeptical about trying new things. So coming to a different culture, I have struggled with adapting to the new cuisine, which has contributed to developing unhealthy eating habits.

This quote illustrates how trying to eat healthy without having convenient access to all the same foods from their home country makes it more challenging to maintain physical wellness.

Dimension 5: Environmental Wellness

This dimension emphasizes the authors' experiences of being in a new environment and how they are affecting their overall wellness. As one of the authors describes:

As I waited in the departure lounge for my second flight, I suddenly, for the first time in my life, became aware of my skin color and how different

I am. I remember looking around in search of “people like me”, and finding only about 5 in the midst of hundreds, I felt like a fish out of water and became suddenly engulfed in a certain wave of trepidation.

This quote demonstrates the author’s sudden realization of her racial identity in the new environment. The stark realization, triggered by the lack of visible representation, created a sense of alienation, which she describes as “a fish out of water.”

Additionally, another author explains:

For the first few months after I arrived in the US, I had to use Uber to get to school. I had read horror stories of women’s experiences in Ubers on social media, and these made me hypersensitive to threats. Each time I had to get in an Uber, I would say a prayer, look around for any suspicious items in the sitting area, and share my location with at least one family member. I never drank water offered by the drivers. I knew that some of them were just being kind, but the stories I had read about drugged water bottles were too horrifying and I couldn’t take any chances. I avoided speaking in the car because my accent could easily be recognized as non-American, which could make riders more confident to take advantage of a newcomer.

This quote shows the author’s experience with the new atmosphere and her fear of exposing her accent in public.

Dimension 6: Financial Wellness

Relating to financial wellness, the data highlights the impact of limited work hours and insufficient pay. Reflecting on how such policy restrictions affect their wellness, one author narrates:

My current stipend as a graduate research assistant can only “do so much” considering the current cost of living, and with the issue being further compounded by the federal policy that places a restriction on how much international graduate students are allowed to be paid, one can only hope not to be caught in a life threatening situation.

This quote indicates the impact on the author’s financial wellbeing as a function of living off of a graduate student's salary. As the author’s quote illustrates, an implication of this for her is that she lives with anxiety, hoping not to be caught in a precarious financial situation. Similarly, another author states:

We never think of going to the dentist during this 5 years of PhD unless we are in severe pain because our insurance does not cover any dental treatment. From my own experience, I have a chronic disease that I have to keep under control, and I started to visit a doctor from my first month here. However, the copay I had to pay was always more than the normal amount, and I have always been under the anxiety and depression of financial debt.

The quote illustrates that while the author is grateful to have health insurance, she is also worried that since the insurance is restrictive in terms of ailment coverage, her finances are threatened.

Dimension 7: Occupational Wellness

Across the narratives, authors describe their dissatisfaction with the working situation of international graduate students. For instance, one of the authors noted how her close friend's experiences negatively impacted her well-being. She describes:

International PhD students are solid scholars in this country; they are knowledge producers, they are part of the workforce here, and they usually work more than 40 hours a week in their lab, and I am not speaking of myself here—I am talking about my close friend who is an international student, and my observation over the past two years, however, they only get paid for 20 hours and technically are not getting paid for their extra work. But the question here is, do they get paid according to their effort? ”

Another author reflected on how there is a lack of equal playing ground for international students to thrive and achieve their full potential. She narrates:

It is saddening and discouraging to see scholarship and career development opportunities I am qualified for, only to be considered ineligible because of my immigration status. It doesn't make sense to me that a system will give me an opportunity to come and study here, and at

the same time deny me avenues to fully develop to the best of my ability.

For me it is both hypocritical and contradictory.

The quote highlights her worries that with the myriad of restrictions for international students in the U.S., the future looks bleak in terms of career development, especially because the system treats international students unfairly by giving them less than they merit. This alludes to her desire for opportunities to compete favorably with her domestic peers; to be seen, recognized, and not be shortchanged. Similarly, another author goes further to narrate: “Granted, I am an ‘alien,’ but then I expected an equal playing ground to thrive.”

Conversely, one author highlights the support she experienced in her new working environment as a first year international Ph.D. student. In her words:

As a first-year PhD student, the more senior students in my lab have been helpful, providing me with resources like text books and papers in my area of interest, explaining new concepts, and giving me constructive feedback on my work.

This underscores the importance of faculty and peer support in helping graduate international students, especially those in their first year, navigate through and adapt to their new working environment.

Dimension 8: Social Wellness

In the last dimension, we describe how one of the authors felt about the sociocultural differences between her home country and the U.S. She states:

I have also had to deal with some cultural shocks, not just on the language afforded by the new American culture which I am slowly becoming a part of, but also on issues of simple courtesy like greeting. I felt awkward and taken aback when people failed to respond to my greeting. Sadly, I find myself “blending” into this culture of silence and indifference.

This quote illustrates the author’s stress at navigating cultural differences, including greeting styles between the United States and her home country. Further, the quote highlights the toll this adjustment is taking on her, fearing she might lose herself in the process. Another author expressed very similar sentiments. She narrates:

The first thing I noticed after moving to my new neighborhood was that my neighbors either responded to my greetings reluctantly or chose not to respond at all. I found this strange and sad, especially because back at home, we had strong bonds and would even share meals daily with our neighbors. This was my biggest cultural shock.

Again, this illustrates how sad the author felt for losing a part of the culture to which she was so accustomed.

Authors also reported on the positive aspects of their academic departmental culture, which contributed positively to their social wellbeing. One author reflects:

My department is amazing- they make a conscious effort to build a community within our program. We have had events like bowling and paint night, where students and faculty bond over fun activities. These

events have allowed me to connect with professors at a deeper level, building my relationships and network.

This underscores the importance of a strong community to the social wellness of international women of color. Another author reflected on how she felt when a certain professor hugged her at the end of one of their community events thus: “By that singular act of hugging me, she [the professor] showed me [without having to say anything] that I belong in the program.”

Discussion

In this paper, we explore how various social, cultural, and political factors (barriers and supports) impact multiple dimensions of international graduate students’ wellness. Drawing from our own experiences as members of this demographic, we provide insights to illustrate these realities.

Social factors

Social factors impact the environmental and intellectual dimensions of wellness for international students. Positioning in a new environment exposes them to new feelings of alienation, as seen in the sudden awareness of racial identity and underrepresentation in public spaces, leading to a sense of marginalization, which aligns with findings from Pepanyan and colleagues (2019). Additionally, the linguistic identity of international students can amplify their vulnerability, as being perceived as “different” often carries connotations of foreignness equated with weakness or diminished authority. This dynamic underscores international students' deep concern about being labeled an outsider—a designation that heightens their perceived risk of harm amidst the pervasive presence of xenophobia and biases against immigrants (shi, 2018).

Moreover, institutional practices can impact students' perceptions of fairness and equity. Experiences of perceived injustice, such as the mishandling of library resources, disrupt pre-existing beliefs about the integrity of academic systems, forcing students to reassess their assumptions about fairness critically. These experiences create social barriers, hindering integration and engagement, which could ultimately affect intellectual wellness, as previous research by Gohr and Nova (2020) has shown.

Cultural factors

Cultural factors significantly influence the social and spiritual dimensions of wellness for international students, shaping their experiences and sense of belonging. For many, the cultural differences in simple social practices, such as greeting neighbors, create feelings of disconnection and sadness. This is consistent with the findings of Bittencourt and colleagues (2021), who opined that the loss of familiar norms, such as exchanging pleasantries and building strong community bonds, underscores the emotional toll of adapting to a new environment and raises concerns about losing cultural identity.

While these cultural challenges can take an emotional toll, strong academic departmental cultures provide a counterbalance by fostering opportunities for social connection and support. Events that bring together students and faculty, such as bowling nights or community gatherings, offer valuable opportunities for international students to build relationships, strengthen networks, and foster a sense of belonging. Farra and colleagues (2023) also mentioned that such intentional efforts demonstrate how supportive academic communities can mitigate the challenges of cultural adjustment and create a welcoming environment for international students.

Similarly, adapting to different spiritual practices highlights broader cultural differences. Many international students struggle to reconcile their reflective, communal traditions with the more efficiency-focused worship styles common in the U.S. This cultural shift can leave them feeling disconnected, impacting their spiritual well-being. However, creating inclusive spaces that respect diverse cultural and spiritual practices can bridge the gap, helping students feel supported and valued.

Political factors

Political factors deeply affect the emotional, spiritual, physical, occupational, and financial dimensions of wellness for international students. Emotional wellness is profoundly affected by barriers stemming from restrictive immigration policies. One author's experience exemplifies this through the amplification of "mom guilt," a societal phenomenon rooted in the "good mother" ideology that imposes unattainable standards of motherhood, leading to heightened stress and guilt for women balancing motherhood and academic pursuits as they feel they are not doing enough for their families while being away (Sutherland, 2010; Maclean et al., 2021). This is heightened among international students due to political restrictions. Many are forced to leave their families behind, as they are often not granted permission to bring their families to the U.S. upon their arrival for studies.

Furthermore, CNN reported that several institutions have urged international students who traveled home for the holidays to return promptly, fearing political restrictions on re-entry (Sanchez, 2024). This climate of uncertainty and fear prevents many students from reuniting with their families, depriving them of the emotional support critical to their well-being.

These emotional struggles often intersect with other dimensions, such as spiritual wellness. For international students, spiritual wellness is closely tied to their pursuit of meaningful academic goals. However, immigration policies often compel them to compromise between pursuing their passions and meeting practical demands, disrupting their sense of purpose and spiritual fulfillment.

Occupational wellness also presents significant challenges for international students, rooted in systemic inequities and policy-related barriers. These include overwork without fair compensation, restrictions on career advancement, and limited access to opportunities due to immigration status (Cao et al., 2022; Newton et al., 2021). Political factors, such as restrictive visa regulations and policies that limit eligibility for scholarships, grants, or job opportunities, exacerbate these challenges. One notable example is the lack of equitable pay for excessive work hours, reflecting not only institutional exploitation but also policies that restrict international students from working beyond specified hours, regardless of their contributions (Newton et al., 2021).

Physical wellness is another dimension affected by political factors. Fears of stigmatization or immigration repercussions deter students from disclosing health concerns, while struggles to adapt to unfamiliar cuisine lead to unhealthy eating habits. These challenges are exacerbated by restrictive health insurance policies, which often exclude coverage for certain illnesses. This forces students to bear significant out-of-pocket expenses, further straining their finances and overall well-being.

Financial wellness for international students is also severely strained by restrictive earning policies, inadequate stipends, and limited health insurance coverage. Despite some students

being employed as graduate assistants, many live below the poverty line. Programs promoting financial literacy could provide much-needed support, helping students navigate these challenges and build resilience.

Implications

Our findings underscore the urgent need for systemic reforms to address the emotional toll of restrictive immigration policies on international students. Institutions must prioritize the development of targeted support systems, such as mental health services and community-building initiatives, to alleviate the stress caused by family separation and political uncertainties. Additionally, policymakers should consider creating more flexible and transparent immigration regulations to ensure international students can maintain essential family connections while pursuing their academic goals.

These findings also highlight the importance of creating spaces for culturally diverse worship and mentorship programs that enable students to pursue purpose-driven academic goals. Institutions could provide designated spaces that reflect the cultural and spiritual practices of their diverse student body, ensuring students feel recognized and valued. This can help mitigate feelings of disconnection and foster a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, policymakers should reform immigration and funding eligibility policies to ensure international students can navigate their academic journeys without compromising their passion or well-being.

The challenges faced by international students underscore how a new environment can impact their sense of belonging and security. Efforts to promote inclusivity and ensure safety in both

campus and public spaces are essential for fostering a supportive environment. Such efforts empower international students to thrive both academically and personally.

Financial stability is another critical area that significantly affects international students' overall wellness. Institutions can take steps to address these systemic inequities by advocating for equitable compensation, expanding health insurance coverage, and fostering financial literacy programs. Additionally, institutions should put systems in place to monitor international students' graduate assistant work hours to protect them from exploitation by faculty.

Supportive peers and faculty play a pivotal role in helping students adapt to and succeed in their academic and professional environments. Research in engineering education highlights how unequal access to emotional and social resources can negatively impact students' sense of belonging and academic success (Khorsandi Koujel & Major, 2024). Mentorship and collaborative support systems are essential for fostering a sense of community. Opportunities to connect with other students, staff, and faculty through structured peer-to-peer programs or faculty-student engagement initiatives have been proven to further strengthen social networks, which are instrumental in helping international students adjust effectively to U.S. institutions (Lee et al., 2021).

Ultimately, addressing the political factors affecting international students' wellness requires systemic reform. From immigration policies to financial support structures, these interconnected challenges highlight the urgent need for institutions to foster inclusive, supportive environments that prioritize the well-being of this vulnerable population.

Future Work

Since international graduate students are culturally diverse, future studies could adopt the Eight dimensions of wellness/healing (SAMHSA,2016; Mosley, 2023) to explore the nuances in their experience based on their nationalities, rather than treating them as a monolithic group. Additionally, this study was centered only on the experiences of international graduate students at one university, so future studies could focus on other universities in and outside of the U.S. Examining how different identities intersect to inform international graduate students' experiences could be the focus of future studies, as well. Finally, it would be a worthy study to further investigate the impact of holistic wellness, or lack thereof, on international graduate students' academic performance as well as their persistence and attrition decisions.

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