

Culturally Sensitive Mentorship of International Graduate Teaching Assistants in U.S. HEIs

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International Graduate Teaching Assistants (IGTAs) – graduate students on temporary visas who teach undergraduate courses in U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) – face unique challenges related to language proficiency, cultural adjustment, and academic integration. Despite their critical instructional role, formal faculty-led mentorship programs tailored to their needs remain limited. This study investigates the current mentoring programs offered to IGTAs by the top 25 U.S. universities hosting international students in 2024, with a focus on evaluating these programs through the lens of culturally sensitive pedagogy and human-centered design. Using a qualitative content analysis of institutional websites, the study identifies and categorizes mentoring initiatives based on their relevance, accessibility, and responsiveness to IGTA wellbeing. The findings reveal that while some universities offer instructional training programs specifically for IGTAs – emphasizing language support, pedagogical development, and cultural orientation – most mentorship structures are embedded within broader graduate student support systems or outsourced to peer networks and nonprofit organizations. Faculty-led mentorship programs explicitly designed for IGTAs are notably absent. Evaluated against the principles of Sentipensante pedagogy as the paper’s framework, which advocates holistic, emotionally attuned, and culturally inclusive education, and human-centered design, which prioritizes empathy and user experience, the existing programs fall short of fully supporting IGTAs as whole individuals. The study concludes that mentorship for IGTAs must move beyond compliance-driven models and toward intentional, reciprocal relationships that affirm their diverse identities and lived experiences. By reimagining mentorship through these frameworks, institutions can foster more inclusive academic environments and better support the professional and personal growth of international graduate students in the U.S.

Keywords: International graduate teaching assistants, culturally sensitive mentorship, sentipensante, graduate students

Introduction

International graduate teaching assistants (IGTAs) in U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) face several stressful concerns (University of Minnesota Graduate School, August 2022) with researchers using several perspectives to analyze this issue: perspective of IGTAs as novice instructors (Arshavskaya, 2015), cultural and linguistic perspective (Adebayo & Allen, 2020), identity perspective (LaCroix, 2018), and systems approach (Fox & Gay, 1994). Researchers and stakeholders are interested in studying IGTAs as they are involved in direct instruction and influential development of U.S. students, sparking controversy over their instructional quality, class management, language abilities, and eligibility (Deuchar, 2022). Deuchar (2022) argues that most of the IGTA research is taken from a deficit lens and a reanimated focus on research is necessary.

Thus, a unique perspective we needed to unearth is that of their mentors, which Arshavskaya (2018)

noticed having few in the literature. This paper followed up on her conclusion on how IGTAs rely on informal methods for professional development in the absence of a formal mentoring program (Arshavskaya, 2018). With this, I endeavored to identify the current mentoring programs for IGTAs of select U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) as presented through the institution’s webpages.

This paper seeks to answer the following questions: What are the current mentoring programs U.S. HEIs provide for international graduate teaching assistants? How do these mentoring programs for IGTAs fair with cultural sensitivity and human-centered design tenets?

With the existing dearth in the literature on formal mentoring programs for IGTAs within culturally sensitive mentorship frameworks and the current sociopolitical climate negatively affecting international students in the U.S., this research is necessary to reaffirm our commitment to retain international talent in HEIs and support international students’ overall wellbeing.

Literature Review

International Graduate Teaching Assistants and Mentorship in U.S. HEIs

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) are integral to undergraduate education in U.S. higher education institutions, often serving as the primary instructors in labs, discussion sections, and introductory courses (Linenberger et al., 2014). Yet, GTAs occupy a complex dual role as both students and educators, which creates tensions around authority, credibility, and identity. Slack and Pownall (2023) describe this as a “paradox of credibility,” where GTAs must assert instructional authority while remaining approachable and relatable to students. These dynamics highlight the need for structured mentorship that not only builds pedagogical competence but also affirms GTAs’ professional identity and emotional wellbeing (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2020).

For international graduate teaching assistants (IGTAs), these challenges are further intensified by cultural and linguistic barriers, social isolation, and unfamiliar academic norms (Ma, 2022; Lee, 2022). IGTAs often face additional scrutiny in teaching evaluations and may struggle to access the same informal support networks available to domestic peers. The lack of clear supervisory relationships and community support can exacerbate feelings of marginalization (Collins, 2020). However, scholars such as Deuchar (2022) and Howlett and Nguyen (2020) argue that IGTAs should not be viewed through a deficit lens. Instead, they emphasize the importance of reflective, dialogic mentorship that empowers IGTAs as active participants in their own development.

Mentorship models for GTAs vary widely across institutions, ranging from peer mentoring and department-specific initiatives to centralized teaching centers. While these structures offer valuable resources, they are not always tailored to the unique needs of IGTAs. Aparicio-Ting et al. (2022) define effective teaching mentorship as a supportive relationship focused on the novice’s development, yet traditional hierarchical models may reinforce power imbalances. Anders et al. (2023) advocate for human-centered mentorship designs that foster trust, identity development, and belonging—principles especially relevant for international students navigating unfamiliar academic environments.

Emerging research supports a shift toward more inclusive and constructivist approaches to mentorship. Breau et al. (2020) found that department-specific mentoring, led by experienced GTAs and faculty liaisons, was more effective than generalized institutional workshops. Similarly, Burger et al. (2021) distinguish between transmission-oriented mentoring, which emphasizes unidirectional knowledge transfer, and constructivist mentoring, which promotes collaborative reflection and emotional support. The latter was shown to reduce emotional exhaustion and support autonomy—key outcomes for IGTAs

adjusting to new cultural and academic contexts. These findings underscore the need for mentorship models that are not only pedagogically sound but also culturally responsive and emotionally attuned.

Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Mentoring

Culturally responsive mentoring begins with faculty who are willing to critically examine the cultural contexts of higher education (Pfund et al., 2022). Effective mentorship can enhance international students’ persistence, self-efficacy, and career satisfaction. However, mentors from dominant cultural backgrounds may struggle to connect with mentees from different nationalities or identities. Garcia et al. (2024) argue for training faculty in equity-based mentoring practices and compensating them for the emotional labor involved.

The University of Minnesota Graduate School (2022) outlines practical strategies for mentoring international students, including understanding immigration regulations, connecting students to resources, and communicating proactively. These actions, though seemingly small, can significantly impact IGTAs’ sense of belonging and academic success.

Harrison and Roodsari (2023) offer a more complex view, using chaos theory to describe the unpredictable nature of faculty-IGTA relationships. While this perspective highlights the multidimensionality of mentorship, it risks reinforcing a deficit lens. Instead, this study adopts *Sentipensante* pedagogy as a framework for reimagining mentorship – one that honors IGTAs as whole individuals with intellectual, emotional, and cultural dimensions.

Sentipensante as a Culturally Sensitive Framework for Mentorship

This study adopts *Sentipensante* pedagogy (Rendón, 2009, 2011) as a culturally sensitive framework for understanding mentorship among international graduate teaching assistants (IGTAs). *Sentipensante*, meaning “sensing/thinking,” challenges the dominant norms in higher education that prioritize monoculturalism, intellectual rationalism, and work addiction. Instead, it calls for a holistic, humanizing approach that values emotional intelligence, cultural diversity, and contemplative practices. In the context of IGTA mentorship, this framework urges faculty to move beyond transactional, performance-based relationships and instead foster spaces of empathy, reflection, and mutual growth. By embracing both the intellectual and emotional dimensions of mentoring, faculty can support IGTAs not only in their academic development but also in their personal wellbeing and cultural adjustment.

Aligned with *sentipensante* pedagogy is the principle of human-centered design (HCD), a framework that emphasizes designing mentorship programs with the lived experiences and needs of IGTAs at the forefront. HCD resists purely data-driven or standardized approaches, instead

encouraging faculty and institutions to consider the emotional, cultural, and relational dimensions of mentorship (Anders et al., 2023). Friess (2010) argues that effective design must be grounded in purpose, structure, and narrative, recognizing that both the designers (faculty) and end users (IGTAs) are human beings with complex experiences. When mentorship is designed with empathy, cultural awareness, and emotional resonance, it becomes more than a professional obligation - it becomes a transformative, inclusive practice. By integrating the values of Sentipensante and HCD, institutions can create mentoring environments that affirm the humanity of both mentors and mentees, fostering belonging, growth, and wellbeing.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative content analysis of official university websites from the top 25 U.S. higher education institutions hosting international students in 2024, as identified by the Institute of International Education (IIE Open Doors, 2024). These institutions were selected for their large international student populations and presumed investment in formalized support structures. Data were drawn from webpages related to graduate schools, teaching and learning centers, international student services, and GTA-specific training programs. Using a website content-mining approach (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2021), I manually searched for and analyzed webpages that met five inclusion criteria: relevance to international graduate teaching assistants (IGTAs), specificity to mentoring or international student support, credibility of the source, accessibility and clarity of information, and presence of faculty-led program components.

To ensure consistency and rigor, Boolean search terms such as “international GTA mentorship,” “GTA mentoring,” and variations like “teaching associate” were used to locate relevant content. The first accessible, qualifying webpage per institution was selected and recorded in a standardized spreadsheet, which included the actual links, fields for mentorship type, faculty involvement, and program specificity (Ely, 2021). Notes were thematically analyzed to identify patterns in mentorship structures and their alignment with culturally responsive and human-centered design principles. This method acknowledges the role of institutional websites as key communication tools for international students (Taneja, 2018; Hayes-Smith & Hayes-Smith, 2009), although I recognize in this paper the limitation of a potential underrepresentation of programs not prominently featured online.

Results

IGTA-Specific Programs

Of the 25 HEIs, no HEI provided highly specific mentorship programs for IGTAs with faculty serving as mentors. Six HEIs have specific

instructional training programs for IGTAs while the rest offer separate general mentoring programs and/or instructional training for graduate students or international students. Analyzing the content of these IGTA training programs from the five HEIs, I noticed they share common elements: language proficiency assessment, pedagogical training, cultural orientation, practice-based learning, and resources for continued development and support for IGTAs.

The University of California - Riverside's (UCR) Teaching Assistant Development Program for International TAs, under their GradSuccess Department, offers workshops and resources on two major items: language support and teaching in the U.S. In the language support area, they focus on supporting IGTAs' English language acquisition, conversational skills, pronunciation, and intonation while in the teaching in the U.S. context area, they focus on IGTAs' presentation skills, building rapport, and being culturally sensitive in the classroom. They listed the department's staff, advanced IGTAs, and language apps as “mentors” in the program.

Arizona State University (ASU) uses a different model by framing the program as a training certificate, open to IGTAs outside of their university, at a cost.

University of Wisconsin - Madison (UW-M), on the other hand, offers a non-credit International TA Training course focused on oral communication and classroom teaching skills. Cornell University's International Teaching Assistant Program, under their Center for Teaching Innovation, focuses on language assessment and offers courses for those needing further support.

UW-M and University of Southern California (USC), however, host their IGTA-focused programs under their respective English Language departments. The use of microteaching and video-recorded presentations as outputs in these programs relate to practical learning the HEIs intended of IGTAs.

The sixth HEI, Georgia Institute of Technology (GeorgiaTech), through their Center for Teaching and Learning, hosts the regular International Graduate Students Mentoring Series, with workshops dedicated to building mentor relationships and developing effective relationships with students. All programs, in one way or another, offered ongoing support for IGTAs' development by offering resources through links to other departments and online hubs for instructional skills, and contact information, for IGTAs to use in reaching out for assistance.

Only GeorgiaTech has an initiative on mentorship relationship specific to IGTAs, tackling both being a mentee to their faculty advisers and becoming an effective mentor to their students.

International Student Mentorship

While faculty mentorship remains the focus of this study, many U.S. HEIs support international students through alternative models such as

peer mentorship, student-led organizations, and outsourced services. These approaches often provide culturally responsive, community-based support, especially for newly arrived students adjusting to U.S. academic and social life. For example, the UW-M supports international GTAs through the Teaching Assistants' Association (TAA), a student worker union offering legal aid, visa support, and workplace advocacy. This student-led model fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment. Similarly, institutions like the University of Washington (UWash) link students to nonprofit organizations such as the Foundation for International Understanding through Students (FIUTS), which facilitates intercultural exchange and mentorship. These models reflect a broader institutional trend of situating international student support within student affairs rather than academic departments.

A growing number of HEIs also outsource mentorship to alumni and nonprofit networks. Boston University and the University of California-Irvine (UC-I) reference the International Student Mentorship Program (ISMP), a Christian nonprofit offering free mentoring in English language practice and American cultural adaptation. Purdue University pairs international students with local community partners for cultural immersion, while Northeastern University (NU) features an alumni-led entrepreneurial mentorship network on its international student resource page. This initiative, named after alumni sponsors the McCarthys, has supported over 300 ventures across global campuses. Although not exclusive to international students, it exemplifies scalable, cross-sector mentorship. These examples highlight how institutions like UC-I, Boston University, Purdue University, UW-M, UWash, and NU are leveraging external partnerships and student-led efforts to fill mentorship gaps - though often without direct faculty involvement, raising questions about the academic integration of international graduate teaching assistants.

Graduate Student Mentorship

Although few institutions offer mentorship programs specifically for international graduate teaching assistants (IGTAs), many provide broader graduate student mentorship models that reflect institutional priorities in pedagogy, professional development, and equity. Department-led teaching support is common, with institutions like Columbia University, Carnegie Mellon University, and the University of Illinois - Urbana-Champaign offering structured training, consultations, and feedback for GTAs. University of California - Berkeley provides mentoring for remote instruction through a dedicated office for graduate student instructors, while University of Texas - Arlington and University of Texas - Dallas support GTAs through teaching centers and handbooks.

Formal faculty-student mentorship is emphasized at ASU and the University of Michigan, where faculty are framed as advisors,

sponsors, and role models. Structured mentorship agreements and resources are also present at institutions like the University of North Texas, Pennsylvania State University, UC-I, and UT Arlington, offering documents that clarify roles, expectations, and discussion topics. Inclusive and reciprocal mentoring approaches are promoted at Cornell University and the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn). Cornell University's "Faculty Advancing Inclusive Mentoring" initiative and UPenn's mentoring worksheets emphasize co-constructed relationships and community-building. National resources, such as the American Council on Education's mentorship database (Kim, 2023), further support historically minoritized students.

Several institutions showcase campus-wide and multi-tiered mentorship ecosystems. University of California - San Diego, University of California - Los Angeles, SUNY-University at Buffalo, and Johns Hopkins University integrate peer, alumni, and faculty mentoring, often referencing national frameworks like the Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER), Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CIRTL), and the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). Career-oriented models are also evident: Boston University's medical education mentorship extends beyond graduation, New York University's engineering Ph.D. initiative emphasizes holistic support, and Northeastern University offers alumni-led entrepreneurial mentoring. While not IGTA-specific, these models offer scalable practices that could inform more culturally responsive, faculty-led mentorship for international teaching assistants.

Discussion

Viewed through the framework of *Sentipensante* pedagogy (Rendón, 2009), the diverse mentorship practices across U.S. HEIs reflect a growing recognition of the need to nurture graduate students not only intellectually but also emotionally and socially. Institutions that offer inclusive, reciprocal, and student-centered mentorship, such as Cornell's emphasis on compassion and collegiality or UPenn's community-building worksheets, embody the *Sentipensante* ideal of integrating heart and mind in educational relationships. Programs that support teaching development, career coaching, and personal growth (e.g., BU, UI - UC) demonstrate a commitment to mentoring that honors the whole student, acknowledging their lived experiences, aspirations, and challenges. Moreover, the presence of mentorship agreements, guides, and multi-tiered ecosystems suggests a shift toward intentional, empathetic structures that foster belonging and transformation, the core tenets of *Sentipensante* pedagogy. These findings affirm that effective mentorship in graduate education is not merely transactional but deeply relational, requiring institutions to cultivate spaces of mutual respect, reflection, and care.

Still, I wish for mentorship specific to IGTA, which sadly is not prominent in these universities with the most number of international students in the U.S. Reflecting on Sentipensante framework, I question whether these HEIs and their existing programs honor the IGTA's whole self – emotionally, culturally, intellectually – especially since they are encouraged to adjust their language and ways to the U.S. context. The mentorship structure in these programs is also not reciprocal, as they are primarily compliance-driven (e.g., taking the language assessment and the courses needed from the results), not providing enough space for IGTA to shape their own learning.

Based on the website mining process utilized in this paper, only GeorgiaTech has a mentorship building program specific to IGTA that is beyond compliance requirements. In Sentipensante, the highlight is on heart-centered pedagogy and relationship building. With formal programs based on wider university scope, I believe it is difficult to acknowledge IGTA's concerns which might be more personal and nuanced. A faculty-led mentorship might be more culturally responsive.

Lastly, the mentorship models for international graduate students show promising efforts to foster belonging and holistic support. Peer mentorship, student-led organizations, and nonprofit initiatives like ISMP reflect a compassionate response to the unique challenges international students face, especially in cultural adaptation and personal wellbeing. However, these models also reveal a critical gap: mentorship for international students is often positioned within student affairs rather than academics, sidelining the faculty advisor's role as a mentor. By outsourcing mentorship to external organizations and student initiatives, HEIs may unintentionally reinforce the notion that international students' needs are peripheral to academic life. This separation risks undermining the transformative potential of faculty-student relationships, which, under Sentipensante principles, should be spaces of mutual respect, intellectual growth, and emotional support. A more integrated approach where faculty actively engage in culturally responsive mentorship would better align with the Sentipensante vision of education as a humanizing and inclusive practice.

Conclusion

This study examined the current mentoring programs offered by U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) for international graduate teaching assistants (IGTA), focusing on the top 25 universities hosting international students.

The findings reveal that while some institutions provide instructional training programs tailored to IGTA – often emphasizing language proficiency, pedagogical skills, and cultural orientation – formal faculty-led mentorship programs specifically designed for IGTA remain largely absent. Instead, mentorship is frequently embedded within broader graduate student support structures or outsourced to peer networks, student organizations, and

nonprofit initiatives. These approaches, while helpful, tend to prioritize compliance and adjustment to U.S. academic norms rather than fostering reciprocal, developmental relationships between faculty and IGTA.

When evaluated through the lens of *Sentipensante* pedagogy and human-centered design, most existing programs fall short of culturally sensitive and holistic mentorship. The emphasis on technical training and institutional efficiency often overlooks the emotional, cultural, and intellectual dimensions of IGTA experiences. True human-centered mentorship would require faculty to engage with IGTA as whole individuals, co-constructing learning experiences that honor their diverse backgrounds and aspirations. This study calls for a reimagining of mentorship in U.S. HEIs, one that centers empathy, reflection, and mutual respect, and positions faculty not just as evaluators, but as compassionate guides in the academic and personal journeys of international educators.

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Appendix A

Top 25 U.S. HEIs Hosting International Students (IIE, 2024)

Institution	State	Total IS
New York University (NYU)	NY	27,247
Northeastern University - Boston (NU)	MA	21,023
Columbia University (Columbia)	NY	20,321
Arizona State University - Campus Immersion (ASU)	AZ	18,430
University of Southern California (USC)	CA	17,469
University of Illinois - Urbana-Champaign (UI-UC)	IL	15,376
Boston University (BU)	MA	12,853
University of California - Berkeley (UC-B)	CA	12,441
Purdue University - West Lafayette (Purdue)	IN	12,181
University of North Texas (UNT)	TX	11,917
University of Michigan - Ann Arbor (UMich)	MI	11,766
University of Washington (UWash)	WA	10,720
University of Texas - Dallas (UT-D)	TX	10,491
University of California - San Diego (UC-SD)	CA	10,467
University of California - Los Angeles (UCLA)	CA	10,446
Johns Hopkins University (JHU)	MD	10,054
Carnegie Mellon University	PA	9,607
University of Wisconsin - Madison	WI	9,526
Pennsylvania State University - University Park	PA	9,093
Cornell University	NY	9,091
University of Pennsylvania	PA	8,956
University of California - Irvine	CA	8,748
University of Texas - Arlington	TX	8,407
SUNY University at Buffalo	NY	8,380
Georgia Institute of Technology	GA	8,148

Appendix B

Top 25 HEIs' Links to Mentorship Programs/Initiatives and Types

Institution	Link to Identified Mentorship Program	Type of IGTA Mentorship Found
NYU	https://engineering.nyu.edu/academics/graduate/phd-hub/mentoring-guidelines	GS
NU	https://international.northeastern.edu/ogs/global-student-mentor-program/	IS-S
Columbia	https://www.gsas.columbia.edu/content/graduate-student-teaching-training-and-guidelines	GS
ASU	https://careercatalyst.asu.edu/programs/international-teaching-assistant-training/	IGTA-S
USC	https://ali.usc.edu/ita-exam/usc-ita-program/	IGTA-S
UI-UC	https://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/teaching-learning/conferences-workshops/grad-academy-for-college-teaching	GS
BU	https://www.bumc.bu.edu/gms/students/professional-life/advising-mentoring/	GS
UC-B	https://gsi.berkeley.edu/faculty-departments/teaching-with-gsis/	GS
Purdue	https://www.purdue.edu/gpp/iss/student/programming/ifp/index.html	IS-S
UNT	https://vpaa.unt.edu/fs/development/mentoring/resources/index.html	GS
UMich	https://rackham.umich.edu/faculty-and-staff/facilitating-academic-success/mentoring-advising/	GS
UWash	https://econ.washington.edu/resources-mentoring-international-students	IS-S
UT-D	https://graduate.utdallas.edu/mentoring/	GS
UC-SD	https://grad.ucsd.edu/student-life/professional-development/mentorship/index.html	GS
UCLA	https://grad.ucla.edu/life-at-ucla/mentoring/	GS
JHU	https://provost.jhu.edu/education/graduate-and-professional-education-resources/phd-mentoring-policies-and-resources/	GS
CMU	https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/services/graduate-students/index.html	GS
UW-M	https://esl.wisc.edu/ita-training/	IGTA-S
PennState	https://gradschool.psu.edu/faculty-staff/advising-and-mentoring	GS
Cornell	https://teaching.cornell.edu/graduate-students/ITAP	IGTA-S
UPenn	https://pan-school.sas.upenn.edu/graduate-division/community/principles-graduate-teaching-and-mentorship	GS
UC-I	https://tadp.ucr.edu/resources/international-tas	IGTA-S
UT-A	https://www.uta.edu/academics/schools-colleges/gradschool/resources/academic/gta-resources	GS
SUNY UB	https://www.buffalo.edu/studentlife/skills-for-success/life-skills/Mentorship.html	GS
Georgia Tech	https://ctl.gatech.edu/international-graduate-students-mentoring-series-registration	IGTA-S

Types: IGTA-specific mentorship (IGTA-S), International student-specific mentorship (IS-S), Graduate student mentorship (GS)