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## Graduate Student Instructors Coping Strategies and Concurrent Impact on Learning, Teaching, and Research

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## Graduate Student Instructors Coping Strategies and Concurrent Impact on Learning, Teaching, and Research

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### Introduction

The stressors international students face in adapting to a new culture and learning environment are called *acculturative stress* (Berry, 1970). Building scholarly, teaching, and research competence contemporaneously can be overwhelming in a new academic environment. It is, therefore, imperative to investigate the coping strategies international graduate students employ to deal with acculturative stressors in learning, teaching, and research, respectively. Few studies (e.g., Hahn 2011; Ra 2014) assess international students' distinct coping mechanisms. Constantine et al. (2005) pointed out that limited studies address the experiences of international students from Africa and their cultural adjustments. This paper is within the context of acculturation of African international students, specifically Ghanaian graduate students studying in the United States, and their coping strategies for learning, teaching, and research.

In this paper, we investigate the coping strategies Ghanaian Graduate Student Instructors (GGIs) employ, how they mitigate stressors, and foster learning, teaching, and research proficiency. Studies about coping strategies and acculturative stress identify social support (i.e., support from family, friends, peers, and institutions) as the predominantly used coping strategy among students, including international students (Alharbi & Smith, 2018;

Amponsah, 2010; Andrade, 2006; Berry, 2005; Berry, 2006; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; McClure, 2007; Shu et al., 2020; Yan, 2017). That is because fellow nationals easily empathize with them and readily offer suggestions and advice (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). Although social support is the predominant strategy for international students, extant literature does little to explain whether international students employ social support only in learning, or also teaching and research.

In this paper, we argue that African international graduate students, especially GGIs, use different coping strategies to mitigate acculturative stress in learning, teaching, and research. GGIs utilize social support to deal with learning-related stressors more than they do for teaching and research. The following research questions guided this study: 1) How do Ghanaian graduate student instructors (GGIs) address learning, teaching, research workload, and family time? 2) What coping strategies do GGIs employ in learning, teaching, and research? 3) How do GGIs' strategies help mitigate stress and foster proficiency in learning, teaching, and research? This study informs graduate students, primarily African international students, about other applicable ways of dealing with acculturative stress and fostering graduate proficiency. Additionally, it offers academic advisors diverse ways of advising international students. The paper also offers recommendations for new and current GGIs.

### Conceptual Framework

Coping strategies and acculturation strategies are terms used [interchangeably] to refer to ways to deal with stressors (e.g., Berry, 1997; Endler & Parker, 1999; Pang & Wang, 2020; Yan, 2017). Berry's (1997) conceptual framework of *acculturation strategies* informed our inquiry into the

coping strategies Ghanaian graduate student instructors use in dealing with the stress associated with learning, teaching, and research. Berry defines acculturation as “how individuals who have developed in one cultural context manage to adapt to new contexts that result from migration” (Berry, 1997, p. 6). Such adaptations to new cultural contexts come with some stressors, which he describes as *acculturative stress* (Berry, 1970), a problem for many international students living and studying in the U.S.

Berry (1997) describes four acculturation strategies. The first is the *Assimilation* strategy—where individuals choose to discontinue their cultural identities and prefer daily interaction with other cultures. Conversely, the *Separation* strategy, which is the second strategy according to Berry, refers to individuals who prefer to uphold their cultural identities rather than interact with other cultures. The third is the *Integration* strategy—where individuals demonstrate commitment to upholding their cultural identities and are willing to engage in the broader social network with other cultures actively. The fourth and final strategy is the *Marginalization* strategy—where individuals are neither interested in maintaining their cultural identities nor in interactions with other cultures. In this paper, Berry’s *Integration* strategy [thus, coping strategy], which is more contextualized in environments that are “explicitly multicultural” [like that of the U.S.], guides the inquiry into the coping strategies GGSIs adopt to address acculturative stressors while schooling in the U.S (Berry, 1997, p.11). Such multicultural spaces provide avenues for cultural adjustment and integration, coping, and bolster a more inclusive and equitable spaces that consider racial and ethnic minorities (Osei-Tutu et al., 2022).

## Literature Review

Coping strategies are pragmatic ways to deal with stress (Endler & Parker, 1999). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping [strategy] as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p. 141). Research shows that there is an emphasis on the adaptation of immigrants into places like North America, Australia, and Europe, but “largely absent are studies in Asian, African, and South American settings” where acculturation is notable (Berry, 1997, p.7).

According to Berry (1997), social support is one of the variables that can curtail acculturative stress and help in adaptation. Social support in this context includes the support international students receive from family, friends, colleagues, and institutions (e.g., culturally sensitive healthcare and multicultural curriculum). Constantine et al. (2005) examined how international college students from Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana cope with cultural adjustment and adaptation in the U.S. Their study shows that family and friends’ social support is one of the main coping strategies to solve cultural adjustment problems. However, studies on coping strategies do little to explain whether social support addresses stressors in learning, teaching, research, or all three concurrently. We draw upon Berry’s framework and studies on coping strategies of international graduate students to investigate and address the strategies GGSIs use.

## Coping Strategies

Coping strategies are practical ways of dealing with acculturative stress (Endler & Parker, 1999; Berry, 1997) among international students. Studies on

international students' stress areas and coping mechanisms include cultural adjustment difficulties (Berry, 1997; McClure, 2007). International students face stressors (Mori, 2000), including the precariousness of job opportunities, immigration issues, academic and financial pressures, gender disparities, language barriers, stigmatization, marital status, duration of schooling, a program of study, and assimilation measures in a new academic environment (Yan, 2017). Some coping strategies international graduate students use are denial, self-blame, behavioral disengagement (Chai, 2009), problem-oriented strategies (Amponsah, 2010), self-determination, forbearance, exercises, sleep (Constantine et al., 2005), endurance (Yan, 2017), and social media (Pang & Wang, 2020).

The least used strategies are “going to church for religious comfort”; and consultation with a counselor for “professional help” (Yan, 2017, pp. 42). As the literature highlights social support as a coping strategy predominantly used by international students, Ra and Trusty (2017) investigated social support's impact on acculturative stress by studying 232 international students from East Asia. Their findings show that social support is a “partial mediator on the relationship between acculturation and acculturative stress” (p. 276). McClure's study (2007) also reports that international students struggle to adjust within the first six months to a year in a new learning environment; the adjustment difficulties are due to the cultural-educational expectations they transfer from their home countries into the new environment. However, married international students do not struggle to adjust to the American academic environment as much as single international students do because their American resident spouses give them an orientation about the

educational climate in America and serve as mentors to them (Yan, 2017). We explicate literature under three typical graduate school experiences (learning, teaching, and research).

### *Learning*

We examined the stressors associated with learning and the coping strategies within the existing literature. International students often experience social isolation and loneliness as prevalent stressors that forestall their cultural adjustments (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). According to Alazzi and Chiodo (2006), when international students develop a feeling of “inadequacy and a loss of self-confidence,” their academic successes and achievements can be negatively affected (p. 79).

Alazzi and Chiodo (2006) reported that international graduate students from Jordan encountered problems like “loneliness, time management, and homesickness” (p. 75) during their graduate life. The authors asserted that some of these problems emanated from the pressures students face in obtaining and maintaining higher grade scores to receive funding for their graduate studies. The pressure to excel academically impels such students “to spend their time exclusively in studies” at the expense of recreational activities (p. 75). The students from Jordan dealt with loneliness and homesickness by working tirelessly and being preoccupied with learning and religious activities. The demand for academic performance caused them to forgo the “willingness to be involved in extracurricular activities and resulted in lack of social contact with host nationals” (p. 77). The students discussed their problems with their academic advisors or colleague nationals. Another study by McClure (2007) shows that collegial support

helps Chinese international graduate students to form study groups to learn and solve exam questions. They also receive “instrumental and emotional support” from colleagues to prepare for seminar presentations (p. 213). Thus, although international graduate students encounter stressors in learning, coping strategies such as actively engaging in learning and religious activities, collegial support, and support from advisors help them ameliorate those stressors.

### ***Teaching***

Roach (1998) posits that not all teaching assistants (TAs) have the desire or the talent to teach. Certain factors account for their acceptance to teach, such as using teaching as a means of support for graduate study and the need for a job (Roach, 1998). Likewise, other individuals solely come to pursue a graduate degree (Roach & Olaniran, 2001).

Park (2004) expounds on the United Kingdom model of teaching assistantship as a graduate student assigned teaching responsibilities while maintaining the core duty of a student-researcher. According to him, teaching assistantships provide a graduate student with financial assistance and teaching experience. He further indicates that some strategies that bolster teaching assistants’ effective teaching practice are self-reflections and reflective activities. Those strategies help increase self-consciousness and provide mechanisms for change and improvement. Park claims that before any graduate student is appointed a TA, there should be a comprehensive framework detailing the employment requirements. His position considers transparency and fairness in the criteria for selection, proper training systems, and a system for mentoring and supervision.

Despite a load of TA responsibilities, there are benefits associated with it.

Park (2004) addresses the benefits teaching assistantship offers, such as “teaching to large numbers of undergraduate students, releasing teaching staff time for research activities, increasing funding opportunities for research students, and offering an apprenticeship for future professors” (p. 357). According to Fox and Gay (1994), graduate teaching assistants typically teach classes at the undergraduate level as their TA employment responsibility. Fox and Gay (1994) contend that many international students with English as their second language get teaching appointments in U.S. schools even though the efficacy of their teaching competence is contended and debated. Those students face the challenge of meeting the expectations of teaching responsibilities because they are unfamiliar with the U.S. learning environment and how teachers should relate to their students. Heikenheimo and Shute’s (1986) study (cited in Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006) shows that international graduate students from Africa exhibit more confidence in English skills than students from Southeast Asia because African internationals study English in their home countries. However, their accents pose a challenge for other students because “other students often found it difficult to understand” (p. 66).

Roach (2003) analyzed data from 121 new graduate teaching assistants from 16 countries to examine the degree of anxiety they face in their new job responsibilities. He elucidated a negative correlation between the fear TAs have in exhibiting clear communication and visualizing themselves teaching and the boldness to disclose their anxieties to their mentors and ask them for help. Roach argued that even though TAs need this mentoring, they do not seek it unless the mentor approaches them first. His study

reveals that the level of anxiety new TAs exhibited correlated positively and fostered the amount of time they committed to planning their instruction and learned materials since it could ameliorate their level of anxiety and improve their teaching. Also, Roach and Olaniran (2001) studied 201 TAs from 22 countries about their communication fears and anxieties with their teaching. The study shows that the fear and anxieties in TAs communication do not correlate positively with how they feel satisfied with students, their ability to relate well with students, and their opinion about the students' ratings of their teaching. Advisors and mentors should be cautious in addressing apprehensions and the limits for discussions because students can be nonchalant in conversations they feel uncomfortable with, such as religious, political, or social perceptions (Dwomoh, 2020). Despite international graduate students' apprehension about teaching and the stressors they face in teaching, they employ strategies such as self-reflection, reflective activities, ample time in planning instruction, and advisor-initiated mentoring to curb the stressors in teaching.

### **Research**

Developing research skills through thesis and dissertation writing, conference presentations, or manuscripts for publications are essential aspects of graduate studies. Research shows that international graduate students, especially doctoral students, need to be involved and socialized in academia (Schneider et al., 2020). According to Schneider et al. (2020), one way of socializing in academia is for international graduate students to serve on research teams with their mentors and advisors to introduce them to the rigor of research in the United States and enable

them to develop research skills congruent with the U.S. research standards.

According to McClure (2007), international students have the perception that to succeed in a new educational setting, "they must develop a high degree of independence to solve both their research and social problems" (p. 212). Educators must ascertain whether the notion of *independence* or research collaboration is practicable for building research proficiency among international graduate students. This study contributes to the ongoing discussions by explaining the specific coping strategies GGSIs use to develop their research skills.

## **Methods**

### **Design and Data Collection Procedure**

We utilized the basic qualitative design for this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We collected data primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews and used focus group discussions as complementary data. The in-depth interviews aided in exploring GGSIs' graduate experiences and coping in significant detail and analyzing their verbal and non-verbal cues (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We adopted a semi-structured format because it is "flexible and likely to promote fruitful reflection by the participants" (Mill 2001, p. 385). It also fosters a mutual connection between the researcher and the participant (Galleta, 2012). The focus group discussions provided insights into the shared experiences of GGSIs.

Before conducting this study, we pilot-tested with five graduate students from Russia, Costa Rica, China, India, and Ghana from a midwestern public university. The findings made us rethink the scope and the context of this study. The cultural differences, countries represented, and each participant's divergent experiences made

selecting a culturally representative sample necessary to bring context and coherence to the study. The pilot testing helped us adapt the interview time, refine the interview guide to include sub-questions and develop the focus group protocol. We developed five semi-structured open-ended interview questions with sub-questions as the interview guide for the individual interviews (see Appendix A). We developed six open-ended focus group discussion questions as probes to elicit further responses from participants until we reached saturation (see Appendix B).

To enhance confidentiality, we sought the consent of all participants for audio recordings and de-identified all identifiable responses during the data analysis. Each participant was assigned the data transcripts and analysis to review for accurate reflections and representation of their thoughts and words through member-checking. Participants requested a de-identification of the program of study and other demographic information.

We employed an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by using memos throughout the study to immerse in the data and document our decisions' trajectories. We reached saturation through in-depth individual interviews that lasted 60-70 minutes and the 90-minute focus group discussion. An audio-recording device enabled us to record all audio responses. We introduced data abstraction to remove unwanted details. We emailed the seven participants to clarify statements made during the interview. During the follow-up, one participant, Margaret (pseudonym), reached out a day after the interview to re-address a comment she made about her daily study hours (i.e., 15 instead of 20 hours) during the interview. We updated her daily study hours in the transcription before proceeding with the data analysis.

## Participants

The participants in this study were seven Ghanaian graduate student instructors in a U.S. midwestern public university. We used purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015) to select the participants because they shared common cultures and demographics. In purposeful sampling, the researcher aims to “discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). Three factors informed our sample choice: the assertion that few studies address the experiences of international students from Africa and their cultural adjustments (Constantine et al., 2005); the pilot testing we conducted; and we are Ghanaians trying to explore the experiences of Ghanaian students studying in the U.S.

We used a criterion-based selection (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010) to select the participants based on common attributes (similar culture, background experiences, and language). We explain three criteria we used in sampling. Thus, criteria one, the participant must be a Ghanaian graduate student; criteria two, the participant must be an instructor or teaching assistant; criteria three, the participant must exhibit competence in learning, teaching, and research. These criteria reflect the purpose of the study. Participants' demographics are addressed in Table 1.

**Table 1***Participants' Demographics*

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Family Type	Graduate Level	Class Size
Eunice	Female	H* + 2C*	Ph.D.	24
Margaret	Female	D*	Ph.D.	66
Patricia	Female	D*	Masters	24
Roy	Male	W* + C*	Masters	37
Festus	Male	S*	Ph.D.	40
Alex	Male	S*	Ph.D.	50
Moses	Male	W*	Ph.D.	20

*Note.* H\* denotes Husband, C\* denotes Child/Children, D\* signifies Dating, W\* signifies Wife, and S\* signifies Single.

Table 1 represents participants' identifiable demographics (gender, family, graduate level, and class sizes they teach). Out of the seven participants, four identified as males, and three identified as females. Five of them were doctoral students, and two were master's students. Two participants had families (spouses and child/children), two were dating, two were single, and one had a spouse only during the data collection.

### Data Analysis

Using Braun and Clark's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis in qualitative data, we analyzed the coping strategies of GGSIs thematically. We identified four themes from the data for patterns (Creswell, 2013). We transcribed all the data verbatim in phase one and printed hard copies. We did the first reading of the shared transcripts. We repeated reading by highlighting all ideas we identified as codes with pink, yellow, and orange highlighters. During the second and third phases, we coded manually. We made notes of all the codes identified with marking and matching codes for patterns. We developed thematic maps and tables of participants' demographics and categorized codes into themes for a visual

representation (see Appendix C). We finally reviewed all emerging coherent and recurrent patterns. We regrouped patterns in phases four and five and named them under four themes. Phase six incorporated the final analysis and report of the data extracts in a coherent form, citing several pieces of evidence of participants' responses to the questions.

We used tables to categorize the coding schemes into codes for learning, teaching, and research (See Tables 2, 3, 4). The three tables show the number of participants that prefer to use those strategies. We developed a thematic map for the coping strategies for learning, teaching, and research (see Figure 1). We also developed a map for the recommendations for future GGSIs (see Figure 2). This paper does not seek to generalize the coping strategies of international students. However, we can extrapolate the findings to other African international graduate student experiences and contexts.

### Researchers' Role

As Ghanaian investigators, we were familiar with the conceptual framework of international students' coping strategies in adapting to the U.S. academic environment. Author One facilitated the seven individual interviews, the focus group discussions, and the data analysis. Author One introduced reflexivity through daily memoing, detailing, rereading, and examining all responses from the data to examine if they aligned with the research questions and the study's design. That helped in not prejudging the study with personal perceptions of bias. Author Two assisted in the pilot testing and this study's design and refining of the literature and discussion by substantiating claims with evidentiary sources or citations. All ethical protocols were observed. The participants'



involvement in this study was voluntary. A prior notice of invitation to participate in the study was issued with an IRB protocol to seek consent and approval of participants before the data collection. The authors de-identified all participants and ensured strict participant anonymity and privacy.

## Results

Three research questions (RQ) guided this paper. RQ1: How do Ghanaian graduate student instructors (GGSIs) address learning, teaching, research workload, and family time? RQ2: What coping strategies do GGSIs employ in learning, teaching, and research? RQ3: How do GGSIs' strategies help mitigate stress and foster proficiency in learning, teaching, and research? We identified four themes for interpretation and in answering the three research questions. The themes include time allocation and family and recreational time, which answer RQ1; GGSIs coping strategies for learning, teaching, and research, which answers RQ2; and stress mitigation and proficiency-building, which answer RQ3.

### **RQ 1: How Do Ghanaian Graduate Student Instructors (GGSIs) Address Learning, Teaching, Research Workload, and Family Time?**

#### *1.1. Time allocation*

The participants responded to the concurrent learning, teaching, and research workload. Participants stated they do not have specific and recurring periods for learning, preparation to teach, and conducting research. Four participants indicated that they do random learning because their learning is either activity-based, spontaneous, or dependent on the number of classes and the assignments due for the week. The three remaining

participants stated specific times for learning, such as a few hours before class and two weekdays, were helpful in retaining information and engage in active class participation because they are less busy days. Patricia, a female participant, stated, "I am spontaneous, but I study in bits and pieces, so I might do 30 minutes now, I go take a break 15 minutes, come back. I don't have a fixed time for studying." Eunice, a doctoral participant, added that she studies on specific days, "mostly on Thursdays and Fridays because they are my less busy days. I dedicate time to work on assignments and other things (like 9 am-4 pm)."

All seven participants expressed concerns about the time and workload of preparing to teach. They indicated that teaching preparation is taxing and intensive, especially during the summer and when teaching the course for the first time. Some participants stated that they spend hours a day (approximately 2-4 hours) before teaching to prepare slides and teaching resources, grade, and read to refresh their memory about the topic to teach. When mounting a course on Brightspace (an online platform for teaching), the participant needs about three weeks to front-load preparation, especially if the participant has little knowledge about Brightspace.

It is taxing. I spend a minimum of 4-hours preparing (reading and slides) the night before teaching to have a fresh memory of the lesson. Two to three hours to prepare slides, and one to two hours to read to refresh my memory (Alex).

I get my grades done before the day I teach, I get my lesson preparation done, my what you call it, my research done, too about what topic I want to teach the next day, that's all... if I have taught the course the

previous semester, it will be quicker for me to get through my lesson plan. But if I'm teaching a different course a different semester, I have to put in time to study the material because I'm new to it. And so, that might take me time. For old materials it will take me maybe 30 minutes for the lesson planning the most I can think of. The new materials, it might take me about two hours because I am reading the chapters and then creating the lesson plan for those chapters (Patricia).

Participants' preferred research hours were at night or on weekends for quietness, a serene environment, and a mood to write. The minimum time they dedicated to research was four to five hours. Moreover, the maximum time one participant dedicated to research was 10 hours, due to working on a thesis, which required much effort if the participant wants to publish more as a graduate student and build research skills. Most of the participants indicated they take courses related to their research interest, and that helps streamline their research focus.

And also, in terms of my personal research, one thing that I do is that the classes that I'm taking, so I take classes that for example, it requires that oh! as part of the assessment, you do a proposal, like you do a research study. So, that is how I use it. So, I use it as an opportunity to also 'umm' do something that is of really interest to me. Something that I think that beside the class, if I complete the class, I will still maybe look at that proposal and try to complete the study. So, that is what I do. So, it's kind of combined

together with the class that I take (Festus).

When asked whether learning, teaching, or research consumes more time, four participants expressed that learning and research take more of their time. The reason is that the seminar nature of some classes at the graduate level incorporates many readings and other class assignments. Also, it is because learning and research are inextricably intertwined in a graduate school. A male participant, Moses, said, "I spend more hours working on my research since it is kind of linked to my learning and class assignments. I spend most of my time working on class assignments and doing research." Two participants added,

I didn't come to Ph.D. just to get the teaching experience, because the teaching, I think it was enough for me at the master's level. I'm more driven by research, therefore, I devote most of my time for research. Had it not been that I don't think I would have come to do the Ph.D. (Festus).

My two classes require two original research, new research, so I am working towards that research. And then, sometimes, I 'umm' read a book 'umm' towards that research or towards my larger dissertation program. But everything is kind of connected that the research I do, that is one thing my advisor told me, that once I enter the program, every research, I should kind of work it out into my dissertation. So, whatever I do is part of my larger project (Margaret).

The remaining three participants expressed that teaching consumes time

because of grading. When they are not grading, learning takes more of their time. Eunice indicated that

Grading takes time. In the course I was teaching, every week, there is something to grade. Grading took a lot of my time, and you will always have students complaining about grades and always coming to ask questions about grades.

Patricia also expressed similar concerns,

I will say my teaching takes most of the time because aside teaching, you are also grading, and also responding to students' emails. You are giving feedback to different students, new things keep coming up, you are making adjustments, and because you are responsible for other people and they are dependent on the answers you give them when they send the emails, that turns sometimes to become a priority. So, you turn to attend to those things more than your own studies.

### ***1.2. Family and recreational time***

Five participants expressed how their family time suffers due to academic and teaching responsibilities. Students with no spouse resorted to talking to their parents on weekends; even with that, they did not talk for long. Others received encouragement from family members. Patricia shared her experience of nearly quitting graduate school because of an “imposter syndrome”—a feeling of incompetence and overwhelmed, as she described it. Her brother studied overseas and encouraged and reminded her of her strengths and that she could do it. That encouragement she received saved her graduate career.

I think in all of these, the family suffers a lot. I don't specifically have family time because when you come home, there are things that you have to take care of like cooking, cleaning the house, making sure the kids bath, making sure things are in order. The only time could have been the weekends, but after doing household chores, I become tired, too, and will need to read and prepare for the week ahead (Eunice).

Recreation was the least of the priorities of several GGSIs. Four participants indicated they do not have a specific time for recreation. That is because the weekdays are mostly busy for them. It becomes difficult for students with children to have the time to join other social groups, research groups or projects, and other engagements. Some also believe that having much work done during the day eliminates the feeling of guilt of watching a movie at night or spending time with friends in the evening. Alex expressed that he sees “graduate school as a lifestyle instead of a work.” Graduate school, to Alex, is a lifestyle because “one must constantly do something, and things don't get done completely,” he stated. He believes that “trading off an hour for fun today demands an additional hour at night or tomorrow to make up for the time used.”

The other three participants expressed they have random recreations—they either watch television/movies or drive around town with a partner for a change of environment. Some students feel they could use those hours for research, but they need them for their mental health, social life, and motivation to work on their papers. Patricia opined, “They definitely help relieve stress because I don't think you can always do school the whole time.”

**RQ 2: What Coping Strategies Do GGSIs Employ in Learning, Teaching, and Research?**

The coping mechanisms [or strategies] are the various strategies GGSIs use to de-stress and relieve themselves of being overwhelmed with the rigor of graduate work. This part of the findings addresses the *specific* coping mechanisms for learning, teaching, and research. The strategies outlined provide answers to research question two.

**2.1. Learning**

In the data analysis, the predominant strategies used for learning were family and social support. Family support includes emotional support and assistance with household duties. Participants could dedicate most of these hours to their learning. All the participants (married and unmarried) asserted that support from colleagues, especially friends, positively impacts their learning. They can talk over an assignment and share ideas. One activity they used during the COVID-19 pandemic was the “Pomodoro method,”—which Alex described as a situation where “you study with colleagues for about 45 minutes, and you talk for five minutes via Zoom.” According to Alex, this activity prevents the feeling of isolation and getting work done. He further stated,

The therapeutic aspect of that “pomodoro method” is that you feel like you have a group of people that you are all suffering together, and so you work together, and you talk for some minutes and then you work together, and that helps me get things done while I am not feeling isolated.

All the participants indicated they use family support in their learning for families, spouses, parents, or siblings. The second strategy often used is watching movies or television shows and self-reflection or journaling, followed by exercising and social media (Google, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). Engaging in religious activities, driving around for a change in environment, taking short breaks (taking a nap, showering), and self-motivation are the least strategies GGSIs use in learning. Patricia added, “My family is also in Ghana. For them, they don’t know what it is, but then they are very supportive (laughter), they say it’s okay, we are here for you, do something, try to be happy, that is it.” Table 2 below shows the ratings of participants’ coping strategies for learning.

**Table 2**

*Coping Strategies for Learning*

	Doctoral Students	Master’s Students	Total
Family and social support	5	2	7
Movies/Television shows	4	1	5
Self-reflection	3	2	5
Exercising	3	1	4
Social media	3	1	4
Religious activities	3	N/A	3
Drive around	2	1	3
Short breaks	1	2	3
Self-motivation	2	N/A	2

**2.2. Teaching**

GGSIs use different coping mechanisms for teaching. The major strategies used in teaching are professional work ethics (decency, honesty, and consistency) and setting classroom rules. They believe that will make the students see

them as credible and serious about their work, and they will not downplay the class. Patricia said, “those professional work ethics, they don’t make me do much because they just tell the students she is nice, but then she is also serious about her work.” Some other strategies participants use are respecting students, serving as a support system for them, being patient and showing empathy, resonating with the unique cultural experiences GGSIs bring to the American classrooms, and communicating them to them. Alex believes his unique cultural background impacts his class more than an American TA who teaches American students. Alex claimed that “letting students know you are a support system for them gives them assurance, and it is interesting both academically and theoretically to do so.” This idea emanates from Alex’s learning philosophy while growing up to learn something and his comprehension struggles.

If you respect people, they respect you. And I don’t take things personal. I talk positive about my students to my colleagues... When I see students are disengaged in my class, I do not call them out, rather, I walk to the student. Students normally stop what they are doing when I get close to them in class (Festus).

Four participants prefer to self-reflect or self-talk (reflecting on past teaching experiences and motivating oneself through affirmative words). They also seek assistance from senior colleagues who have previously taught the course. Three participants prefer using YouTube to improve their teaching skills. Watching YouTube videos about a lesson or instructional strategies helps them see what is missing, what to include, and how to

improve their teaching. The least strategy used in teaching is using teaching manuals. Table 3 below shows the ratings of participants’ coping strategies for teaching. I remember every time I was going to class, I looked in the mirror and said, I am confident, I am able, I am a good teacher, I am a good instructor. I will say all the good things I wanted to show in class, and because of that, it showed. If I was in class and I felt tensed, I will think I am confident and then it will just leave (Patricia).

**Table 3**

*Coping Strategies for Teaching*

	Doctoral Students	Master’s Students	Total
Professional work ethics	5	2	7
Setting classroom rules	4	2	6
Respecting students	3	2	5
Empathy/Patience	4	1	5
Support for students	3	2	5
Unique cultural background	4	1	5
Asking senior colleagues	3	1	4
Self-talk/Reflection	2	2	4
YouTube	2	1	3
Teaching Manual	1	1	2

**2.3. Research**

In research, collaborations with faculty and peers are the predominant coping strategy for many GGSIs. They prefer this strategy because of the shared workload, reduced stress, and the avenues for accountability. It also helps them publish more academic papers than they would have done individually. Working with peers on research endeavors also gives them “room”

to discuss new information about their scholarly field and the opportunities available. Festus responded, "That is why I have about six papers under review." Moses added, "This faculty collaboration has helped me with two publications in one semester."

The only caveat that can cause solo authorship among the participants is when there is a non-interest from colleagues or if the paper requires solo authorship to meet graduation requirements. Participants expressed that they enhanced their research ideas when talking with their advisors. Receiving support from academic advisors and refining class papers into publishable manuscripts are the following best strategies for many GGSIs. Margaret stated how supportive her advisor is, "occasionally, we meet on Zoom just to talk, and you know, how are you doing? She checks in with me. How are you doing? How can I help? She is very supportive in that sense."

Some GGSIs use papers they submit as assignments for a class, refine them and submit them as manuscripts for publication. Some also ensure the classes correspond to their overarching research goals or topics for their thesis or dissertations. The least-used research strategy is asking people random questions in informal ways to ascertain how they influence research. Patricia said, "Research is just what happens informally but in a more formal way." The doctoral participants in this study were more prone to refining their assignments into manuscripts than the master's students did. Festus (a doctoral student) and Patricia (a master's student) retorted, respectively, "I feel like at the master's level, I didn't have those opportunities to really develop myself, and even two years wasn't enough for me to develop myself into somebody that, like a researcher that I wanted to be." Again, she stated, "When I started school, I didn't have hours allocated for research because I was

just taking classes...." Table 4 below shows the ratings of participants' coping strategies for research.

**Table 4**

*Coping Strategies for Research*

	Doctoral Students	Master's Students	Total
Faculty/Peer collaboration	4	2	6
Advisor support	4	1	5
Class papers into manuscripts	5	N/A	5
Intrinsic motivation	4	N/A	5
Academic subscriptions	3	N/A	3
Random questioning	1	1	2

**RQ 3: How Do GGSIs' Strategies Help Mitigate Stress and Foster Proficiency in Learning, Teaching, and Research?**

**3.1. Stress mitigation and proficiency-building**

We assessed how GGSIs mitigate stress and foster learning, teaching, and research proficiency. This assessment provides answers to research question three. Most participants admitted that they sometimes procrastinate, which causes more work close to deadlines. That inadvertently causes much stress for them. One way of mitigating this stress is collegial support from friends and peers. Learning with colleagues, asking bothering questions, and sharing ideas help them become effective and shield them from procrastination and isolation. Those who use YouTube as a learning and teaching strategy indicated that it exposes them to different forms of knowledge. One student said,

I've literally learned everything I know within my program from

YouTube, you get it, so academically, it has been very impactful. So, those chunks of time you know, I do, I learn a lot. I know so many things because of YouTube. I think it has impacted me in a lot of ways (Roy).

Participants who resort to short breaks as a strategy indicated they help them revitalize to make crucial decisions in life. Margaret said, “For me, when I take a nap, my mind is refreshed, and once I jump out of bed, I am able to write, write, write.” She further stated, “When I feel like it’s getting too much for me, I sleep, I call my partner, we go for a walk, or we just take a drive, or I just watch TV and get back to it.” Roy also added,

And also, me being in the shower, it helps me to rewire my brain to make very important decisions. So, every important decision I make, I make it in the shower. So, I can shower like 10-15 minutes most of the time, you know. And also, today for instance right, I forgot everything I was supposed to do. I had to go and shower to just rewire my brain to know my plans, yeah! So, that is what I do. So, that has been the impact so far.

For strategies like exercising (walking, running) and watching movies, Eunice said, “It helps in recollection of thoughts. I get stronger and ready to work when I run.” Moses also said, “Watching movies really releases stress for me. I feel refreshed to come back to my writing when I take some time to watch a movie or listen to the news.” Two doctoral participants claimed that their strategies have helped improve their grade scores. The strategies

also help them publish more research papers and build proficiency in teaching.

Foster learning, yes, they do foster learning. It helps me know what’s happening because you don’t want to be so closed up in your research and before you know it, oh! somebody has done it, like oh! my God! you wasted time. So yes, it keeps me grounded in my research (Margaret).

The coping strategies for teaching, such as respect and support for students, help GGSIs receive positive feedback and evaluations. Also, talking with colleagues helps them identify the best instructional strategies for teaching and assessing students. Alex stated, “There was one (student) who said, I think the professor really cares about students, and his real motivation is to help you succeed.” Patricia and Festus added, respectively,

One student said he wished that we have more African professors because to him, it was one way he learned about our culture, having that diversity for him. Because all he ever had is maybe White professors, he’s never had an African professor before, and it was one way to enjoy the class as well because he finally felt somebody could relate with him. I even got 5/5 in terms of assessment. The moment that I loved was when the semester was ending and one or two students sent me an email, like... [Festus] (pseudonym), you are awesome, and you are one of my best instructors so far that I have taken. And that melted my heart. This is what I really want. Making impacts in somebody’s life and they come and tell you.

In research, the strategies help GGSIs stay motivated and accountable and develop a sense of urgency. They also help them develop publishable writing with peers for later publication. Another significant contribution the strategies offer GGSIs is networking. These networks introduce them to job openings and grant opportunities. Festus indicated that “especially for grants, I was introduced, I was invited because this professor took a class, and then she invited me, and she spoke highly of me.” Margaret also responded,

For research, one time I joined, ‘umm’, there was a book reading, and I joined, and then I met these other professors on it and was like Hi, you know, it kind of gives them a sense of familiarity even you haven’t met them in person, and now I have a number of mentors outside (school) which I think is very important because you need network. At the end of the day, when you are out with your degree, you need these networks to tell you which schools, you know, where are the openings to kind of get.

### Discussion

This study addresses the coping strategies GGSIs use in their learning, teaching, and research and how the strategies mitigate stress and foster proficiency. This study does not seek to generalize the coping strategies of international students. This section discusses the significance for students, educators, and researchers and recommendations for new GGSIs. We also address the study’s limitations and suggestions for future research.

### Significance for International Students

This paper helps identify specific strategies that mitigate stress in each graduate life category (learning, teaching, and research). Identifying and understanding the strategies for each category will help international graduate students become well-informed about what works best in addressing stressors in each phase of graduate life. From the findings, GGSIs use family and social support to mitigate stresses in learning but not in teaching or research. In teaching, they use professional work ethics and set classroom rules. For research, the predominant strategy is faculty and peer collaborations.

The least-used strategy in learning is self-motivation. In teaching, GGSIs prefer asking their senior colleagues for assistance, searching YouTube for teaching tips and ideas, and reflecting on their past teaching experiences and self-talk (talking positively about self) than using a teacher manual. Chhikara and colleagues (2022) posit that although individuals encounter many stressors, such as personal and professional stressors, there is the need to self-reflect on experiences as humans to listen to the inner voice and critically examine the contexts in which they find themselves. For research, GGSIs motivate themselves to write and join several online academic subscriptions rather than ask random questions in informal ways to ascertain how they influence research and share ideas about their research interests or topics.

Most participants expressed that they do not have recreational time due to academic and teaching responsibilities. This finding echoes the results of Alazzi and Chiodo (2006) about how the pressure to excel academically impels students “to spend their time exclusively on studies” at the expense of recreation and recreational activities (p. 75). Having time for recreation



is necessary for revitalization, and it is mind-refreshing. Nevertheless, it is the least optimized by GGSIs. Knowledge about the strategies for learning, teaching, and research can help students effectively allocate time for recreation to ease the mental stress they face.

### **Significance for Educators and Researchers**

Few studies (e.g., Hahn 2011; Ra 2014) assess international students' different coping strategies. Also, limited studies address the experiences of international students from Africa and their cultural adjustments (Constantine et al., 2005). This study makes contributions to this discussion by categorizing the graduate life of GGSIs into three categories (learning, teaching, and research). Studies about coping strategies highlight family and social support as the main coping strategies for many international graduate students (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Amponsah, 2010; Andrade, 2006; Berry, 2005; Berry, 2006; Constantine et al., 2005; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; McClure, 2007; Shu et al. 2020; Yan, 2017). Also, according to McClure (2007), collegial or social support helps Chinese students form study groups where they receive emotional support from their colleagues. These studies do little to differentiate the specific areas of graduate experience and the strategies impact, whether in their learning, teaching, or research.

In this paper, we point out that GGSIs predominantly use family and social support in their learning but not in their teaching or research. Family support has little or no impact on their teaching and research. GGSIs use two main strategies in teaching: professional work ethics (dressing decently, being punctual, being honest with students) and setting classroom rules that

guide the course of the teaching throughout the semester. They believe these two strategies help them deal with stresses associated with communication, acculturation, and student-teacher relationships.

The findings of this study concur with the assertion of Roach (2003) that international students do not conveniently disclose their teaching anxieties to their mentors and ask them for help. As Roach examined in his study, GGSIs also spend more time preparing to teach to improve their teaching and de-stress than sharing their anxieties with their advisors. Almost all participants in this study expressed no struggle with talking with their advisors. However, they do not discuss their teaching anxieties. They indicated that they receive support from their advisors in their learning and research. Academic advisors can use mentoring opportunities in the research groups and research collaboration teams to start conversations about their students' teaching apprehensions and anxieties since that will provide a conducive atmosphere to introduce such discussions.

In research, GGSIs resort to faculty and peer collaboration—working together on a research project—as the first coping strategy that helps them to deal with stressors associated with research, publications, and presentations. Participants expressed that they publish many papers. Also, some manuscripts are under review because of collaboration with a faculty member or a peer. They believe doing individualistic research coupled with academic and teaching responsibilities is overwhelming and can negatively affect their research productivity. According to Schneider et al. (2020), one way of being socialized into academia is for international graduate students to serve as research teams by their mentors and advisors. They assert that involvement and collaboration through

research teams can introduce international students to research rigor in the U.S. Students will be able to develop research skills congruent with the U.S. research standards. Advisors are encouraged to be open and invite international graduate students to their research teams to help enhance their research skills as graduate and emerging scholars. Leaving them to do individual research will be overwhelming and forestall the research opportunities they could have explored during graduate school. Graduate programs and departments can incorporate a session during orientation for new students to highlight strategies that can help new students in their learning, teaching, and research, respectively.

### **Recommendations for New GGSIs**

GGSIs experiences and coping mechanisms shape their perspective on graduate school. GGSIs offer 14 recommendations to current and new Ghanaian graduate student instructors (see Figure 2). Participants recommend that new GGSIs prepare themselves both mentally and emotionally to teach and manage American students. They should also build self-confidence and know that they can teach; that is why their department entrusted those responsibilities to them. They should build networks both on-campus and off-campus. Primarily, they should spend time taking care of themselves (physically, mentally, and emotionally). They should ask for help from colleagues or senior colleagues when needed. They must take required graduate courses early, utilize resources in the department, and join associations where applicable, such as a Ghanaian association in the schools.

New GGSIs should know their strengths and weaknesses and avoid the “imposter syndrome”—a feeling of incompetence and insignificance. They

should devise ways to stay motivated with activities that interest them throughout their graduate school years and avoid unnecessary procrastination. GGSIs must organize mini-groups for students through mediums like “slack” or “GroupMe” to engage students in responding to each other’s questions and augmenting the load of responding to several emails from students. Lastly, associations like the Ghanaian associations and other College or departmental associations are encouraged to offer tips for teaching and research to new and current GGSIs.

### **Future Research**

An extension of this study is needed to examine international graduate student instructors’ (IGSIs) coping strategies for learning, teaching, and research using quantitative approaches for a broad data sample to identify the strategies IGSIs employ. Also, research is needed to ascertain the empirical evidence for prioritizing social support as the dominant coping strategy by international students vis-à-vis domestic students.

### **Conclusion**

GGSIs employ different coping strategies in their learning, teaching, and research. A widely used strategy, social support, is predominant in learning but not in teaching or research. The dominant strategies for teaching are professional work ethics and setting classroom rules. The preferred strategies for research are faculty and peer collaborations and advisor support. GGSIs expressed that learning and research take more time because of the seminar nature of some classes at the graduate level and because learning and research are inextricably intertwined. From this paper,

social support has little to no impact on teaching and research for GGSIs.

Additionally, family time suffers due to academic and teaching responsibilities. We deconstructed the overarching concept of coping strategies into segments of graduate life (learning, teaching, research). Deconstructing coping strategies into three distinct parts can aid international graduate students in identifying “optional” coping practices for mitigating stressors and fostering graduate proficiency. International graduate students are encouraged to consciously incorporate recreational time in their daily or weekly planning to ease mental stresses. This paper offers 14 suggestions for current and new GGSIs and suggestions for academic advisors, educators, and researchers.

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## Appendix A. Interview Guide

1. Diversity?
  - a. Gender
  - b. Tribe/culture,
  - c. Graduate-level
  - d. Program of study
  - e. Degree
  - f. Family/Children
  - g. Course taught.
2. How do you allocate time?
  - a. For academic work/studies,
  - b. For teaching responsibilities
  - c. For Research?
  - d. Which of them consumes more time and why?
  - e. Do you have any papers published? If yes, how many, what type of paper, and how did you get them published? If not, why not?
3. How does family commitment impact your learning, teaching, and research? If any, and if not, how do you apportion family and recreational time?
4. What coping strategies do you employ to stay relevant to
  - a. Learning
  - b. Teaching
  - c. Research duties?
  - d. How do those strategies mitigate stress and foster your graduate study learning, teaching, and research?
5. Why do you prefer the strategies chosen? What significant impact have you observed overtime on your achievement and success?
  - a. Learning
  - b. Teaching
  - c. Research?
  - d. How do you plan to bridge the time gap in the three, if any?

### **Appendix B. Focus Group Discussion Protocol**

1. What was the first teaching experience in an American classroom like for you? What were some of your apprehensions and hopes?
2. What are some of your challenging moments and experiences in?
  - a. Learning
  - b. Teaching
  - c. Research
3. What role do groups and associations play in your graduate life? Does being part of a group or association impact your learning, teaching, and research?
4. Over time, what mistakes have you realized in your learning, teaching, and research? How did you correct them or plan to correct/ameliorate them?
5. What resources do you consider a need from your department, professors, mentors, and academic advisors to foster proficiency in learning, teaching, and research?
6. What recommendations do you have for new Ghanaian graduate student instructors? What other comments would you like to add?

Appendix C: Thematic Maps

Figure 1

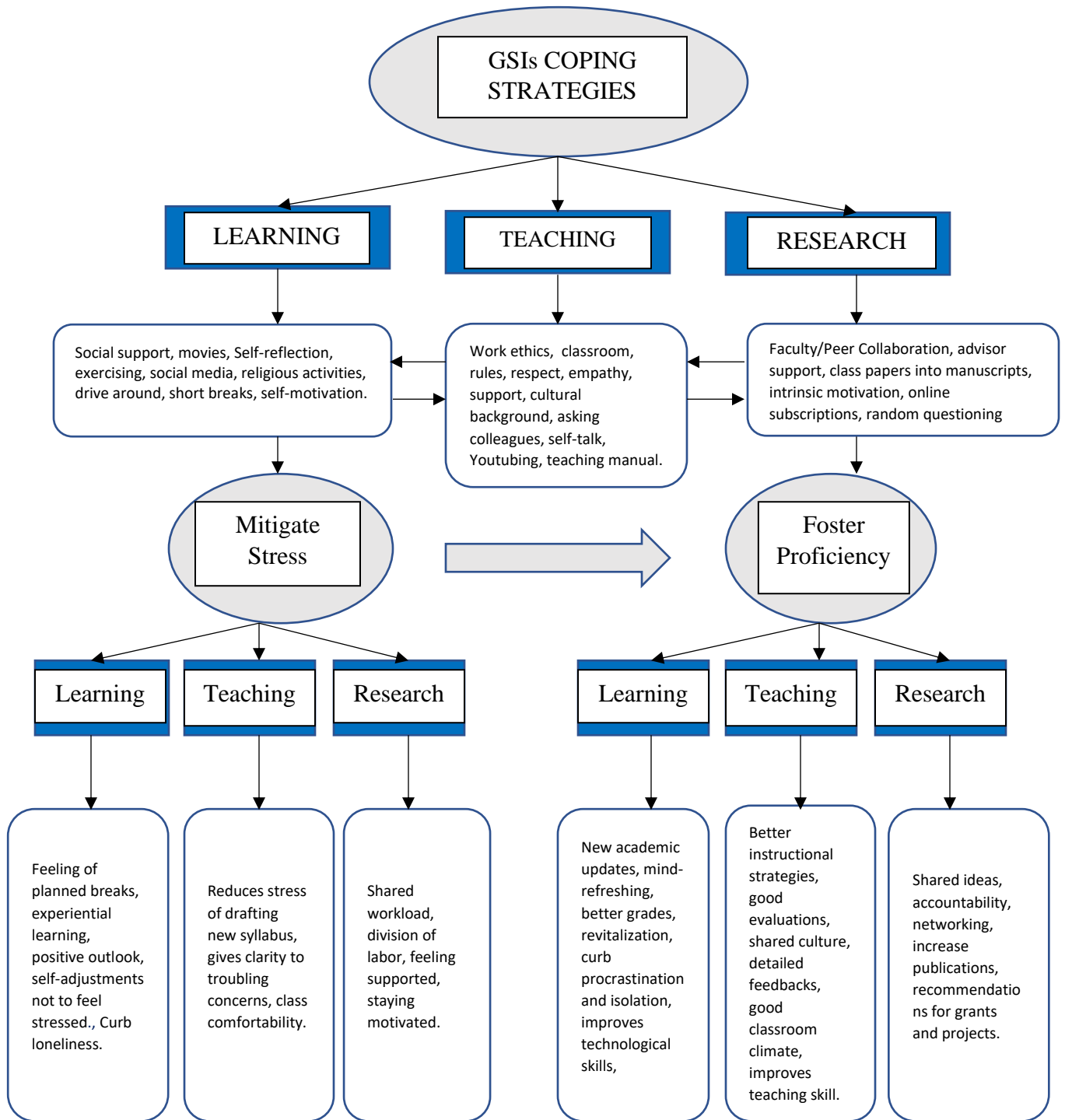


Figure 1. A conceptual map detailing GSIs coping strategies for learning, teaching, and research, and how they mitigate stress and foster proficiency.



Figure 2

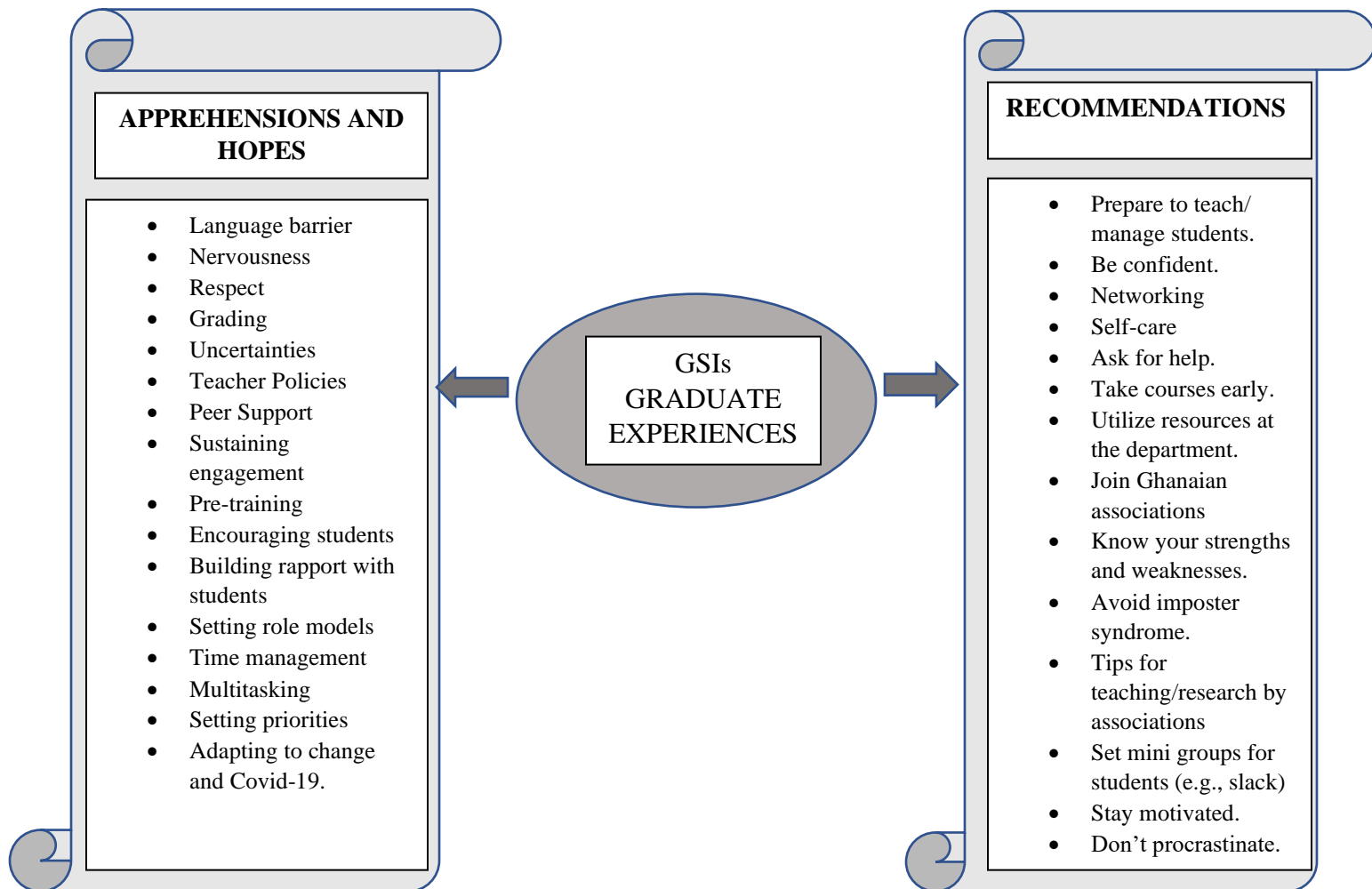


Figure 2. Details a representation of graduate experiences of GSIs and their recommendations to new GSIs.