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Consequences of Fear: The Criminalization of International Students in the United States

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ABSTRACT: *In this article, we examine the criminalization of international students in the United States by reviewing publicly available policy documents and media sources. We discuss historical examples of how the United States has routinely criminalized international others. Grounded in crimmigration theory, this analysis situates contemporary procedural practices within broader historical, contemporary, and cultural trends of securitization and exclusion. We identify shared structures and language in policies of continuous documentation, required reporting to designated authorities, strict compliance mandates, and low thresholds for sanctions that can result in sudden loss of status or freedom. By framing these practices within larger carceral logics, we provide a critical analysis of how international students are treated as criminals rather than as members of our academic communities.*

Keywords: Criminalization, Higher Education, Immigration Policy, International Students, Surveillance, Control, Community Supervision

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INTRODUCTION

In the early months of 2025, the criminalization of international students in the United States increasingly mirrored the surveillance, compliance mandates, and swift, severe consequences for perceived violations traditionally associated with community supervision commonly known as parole or probation (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2025). Several reports were made about the violent detention, threatened deportation, and removal of international students in higher education contexts (Har & Brumback, 2025). In March of 2025, according to an article written by Popli (2025) in *Time*, as many as 4,700 students had their data deleted from the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). This number was corroborated by several other news sources (Alonsa, 2025; Castellanos-Canales, 2025; Sen, 2025).

The criminalization of international students reflects a broader national context in which carceral governance and logics are embedded within other institutions in the U.S. The United States has been noted as the prison nation because it has the most expansive carceral system in the world (Cloud, 2017). This carceral system is recorded by abolitionist scholars such as Angela Davis to have infiltrated every aspect of society, from schools to workplaces and everything in between, culminating in the prison-industrial complex (2003). This paper provides an additional description of how the carceral system is integrated into the systems and structures of the United States. Using crimigration theory (Stumpf, 2006), which argues that immigration law has become entangled with punitive criminal law, we conceptually examine the parallels between surveillance and control systems that affect both international students and people under community supervision.

Building on the social constructivist perspective that criminality is continually manufactured and reproduced (Gaynor, 2018; Rafter, 1990), this conceptual paper draws from federal policy documents housed on official United States government websites, including SEVIS reporting requirements, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) guidelines governing Designated School Officials (DSOs), federal supervised release and probation guidelines published by the Administrative Office of the United States Courts, and U.S. Parole Commission policy statements. These documents constitute the primary sources for our analysis. Selection prioritized documents that are publicly accessible on official U.S. government websites and represent the most current available procedures at the time of writing. Historical and legal peer-reviewed papers and media coverage from outlets such as CNN, BBC, AXIOS, Al Jazeera, *Time*, and more are used to contextualize the events in the spring of 2025.

Aim and Significance

The aim of this paper is to establish a conceptual bridge between two governance systems: the carceral system that regulates individuals under community supervision in the United States and the surveillance and compliance procedures that govern international students in U.S. higher education. This paper

is explicitly conceptual in nature. We do not claim to produce new empirical findings or speak to the lived experiences of the populations discussed. Instead, we place official governance documents side by side, identify structural and linguistic parallels, and interpret those parallels through the lens of crimmigration theory (Stumpf, 2006; Garcia Hernández, 2018).

The significance of this work lies in what the comparison may reveal. International students have yet to be discussed alongside individuals under community supervision in the scholarly literature, yet the governance procedures applied to both populations share commonalities, such as mandatory reporting to designated officials, strict compliance requirements, low thresholds for sanction, and limited pathways for appeal or restoration of status. Higher education scholars stand to benefit from adopting this framework because universities are structurally embedded in immigration enforcement through DSO reporting systems. This conceptual foundation, therefore, sets the stage for future empirical inquiry into how these overlapping mechanisms of surveillance and control are enacted and experienced in educational contexts. We hope it offers scholars, practitioners, and institutions a framework for examining carceral logics in the policies and procedures relating to international students.

This paper proceeds in four parts. We begin by establishing crimmigration theory as the conceptual foundation of the paper and explain and provide historical examples of the Criminal Other. Next, we introduce the two populations at the center of this analysis: international students and individuals under community supervision. We then examine the parallel mechanisms of control embedded in the procedural documents of both populations, demonstrating how shared language and structure can produce similar effects. To conclude, we present ideas for future empirical research that can deepen our understanding of what it means when the systems designed to welcome international students into higher education are built from the same logic as the systems designed to incarcerate.

Researcher Positionality

As researchers engage in scholarship about higher education, international study, and criminalization structures, it is important to acknowledge the positionality shaping this work. Positionality reflects the ways in which our identities (professional, experiential, personal, etc.) influence how we approach and present scholarly inquiry (Bourke, 2014). The engagement in this research for both authors stems from a commitment to exploring how international education policies intersect with systems of surveillance and control and how institutions both reflect and reproduce broader sociopolitical dynamics that affect international students' well-being and sense of belonging in university.

Yesharim's educational background includes the study of the school-to-prison pipeline, abolitionist pedagogy, and broader criminalization practices in the United States. Professionally, she has taught college courses to incarcerated individuals within a county jail system, an experience that has profoundly shaped her understanding of educational access, equity, and systemic barriers. Parks' academic and professional background lies in global and comparative education,

with a focus on the experiences of globally mobile student populations. Her research focuses on identity, belonging, and educational experiences in both international and domestic contexts. Having grown up internationally until the age of 18, she is empathetic toward international students coming to study in the United States. Professionally, both authors have taught college courses on diversity and inclusion in leadership, exploring how structures of power and inclusion shape educational environments.

CRIMMIGRATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CRIMINAL OTHER

Crimmigration offers a lens to understand the blurred boundaries that exist between immigration law and criminal law in the United States. It was first articulated by Stumpf (2006) and later expanded upon by scholars, such as Garcia Hernández (2018). It refers to

the convergence of immigration law with criminal law through the expansion of policing enforcement inside the country and its borders. Starting in the 1980s, immigration laws (in the United States and elsewhere, including Europe, Australia, and Canada) have shifted towards the criminalization of certain immigrants under ideologies of securing the nation from outside threats. (Menjívar et al., 2018, p. 2)

Historically, immigration law was treated as a civil regulatory system, distinct from the criminal justice process. However, as Stumpf (2006) argues, the emergence of crimmigration has significantly reshaped immigration enforcement within the United States. Illegal border crossing can be understood in one of two ways: (1) a civil offense to be handled with governance or (2) a criminal act mandated by policing. Stumpf explains a growing support for the latter, writing: “in the United States, immigration enforcement officials now constitute the largest armed law-enforcement body in the federal government” (Stumpf, 2013, p. 62). This creates a higher likelihood of acquiring a criminal record (rather than a civil record), ultimately barring individuals from returning to the United States after their removal. Even when individuals are held to civil charges, they are often treated as criminals with convictions under the same circumstances of surveillance and control to securitize individuals (Chacón, 2012).

Central to crimmigration is the process of securitization (Stumpf, 2013). The framing of migrants as threats to national safety, stability, and identity. This securitization acts as a way of justifying extraordinary measures of surveillance and enforcement. When migration is governed through a security lens, institutions that would not otherwise function as enforcement actors are tasked with monitoring noncitizens. The creation of SEVIS, for example, illustrates how higher education institutions were absorbed into the gears of crimmigration.

Expanding on Stumpf’s foundation, Garcia Hernández (2018) emphasizes that crimmigration is not merely a legal convergence but a political project rooted in growing national anxieties about race and security. Garcia Hernández cites legislative measures such as the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of the 1980s and the Anti-

Terrorism movement after September 11, 2001, as examples of how fear-based policy making expanded the reach of the criminal justice system into immigration enforcement. Furthermore, he discusses how minor encounters with the criminal justice system (even offenses as low-level as “vehicular traffic” (p. 216) violations or administrative errors) can trigger detention or deportation. As Garcia Hernández (2018) asserts, “immigration law today poses a hornet’s nest of pitfalls for migrants who encounter the criminal justice system” (p. 199). Crimmigration theory, therefore, demonstrates how immigration governance in the United States has moved toward surveillance and punishment in ways that extend beyond the border, increasingly implicating institutions such as higher education in systems of control.

The Criminal Other

We borrow the term Criminal Other from the field of criminology to refer to the designation of which people or groups of people are deemed inherently crime-prone outsiders. As explained by Degenshein (2024), the criminal other has a significant element of race, informed by Foucault’s (2003) description of the other:

A “race” includes any group deemed a danger to a “healthy,” dominant population. Accordingly, “racism” is a means of differentiation within the population that is essential to modern governance, Race identifies “the break between what must live and what must die,” where the (physiological, social, or physical) “death” of inferior or “abnormal” races protects the “healthy” population (Foucault, 2003, pp. 254–255, as cited in Degenshein, 2024, pp. 49–50)

Throughout history, the Criminal Other has been deployed along racial lines to ostracize specific communities. The literature includes how this term has hypercriminalized Black, Asian, Mixed, and other ethnic minority communities (Williams & Clark, 2018) and has been used to justify exclusionary measures taken against Muslim communities post 9/11 (Degenshein, 2024). Although not explicitly present in academic literature, examples of the Criminal Other are endless; however, we chose to focus on the 20th and 21st centuries when international study programs began to grow in popularity (Bound et al., 2021). Moments of national crises, such as World War II, the Cold War, and 9/11, motivated the growth and expansion of carceral logics and the resulting criminalization of international students.

World War II

During World War II (1939-1945), national security concerns led to the imprisonment of over 100,000 Japanese Americans, two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.). This hyperincarceration, based largely on racialized assumptions of disloyalty, marked one of the earliest mass-scale uses of surveillance and detention justified by

national security narratives (Austin, 2004; Daniels, 2004). Simultaneously, immigration restrictions began to tighten, reflecting a growing tendency to view people from other countries as security risks. While international education was not a major sector at the time, the systemic institutionalization of race-based surveillance, detention, and exclusionary immigration policies seen in the World War II era would have major implications in the future.

Cold War

The Cold War (1947-1989) further intensified domestic surveillance, extending wartime fears of espionage and disloyalty to U.S. higher education systems (Allen & Bista, 2021). The U.S. government viewed international students, particularly those from the Soviet Union, as threats. The fear of communist infiltration led to heightened surveillance of college campuses, including the use of loyalty oaths and the targeted monitoring of student organizations (Phillips, 2017). This period normalized the expectation that higher education institutions should cooperate with government security and surveillance efforts (Allen & Bista, 2021).

Post 9/11 Era

On September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon acted as a significant catalyst for formalizing surveillance systems over international students. However, Allen and Bista (2021) argue that the development of international student tracking systems had begun long before 9/11. In fact, the Coordinated Interagency Partnership Regulating International Students (CIPRIS) pilot program (a precursor to SEVIS) was initiated in the mid-1990s.

Nevertheless, the events on September 11th dramatically accelerated the political will and public support necessary to fully implement the nationwide SEVIS. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, media coverage revealed that several of the hijackers on the plane had entered the United States on student visas, leading to a surge of national outrage and a heightened scrutiny of international students. Organizations that had previously opposed centralized tracking systems, such as the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA), eventually withdrew their opposition and expressed support for implementing SEVIS following policy changes and federal mandates (Allen & Bista, 2021).

The historical account of immigration policy and international study allows us to recognize the deeply rooted crimmigration and Criminal Other designation in the United States. The incarceration efforts of the World War II era, the university surveillance of the Cold War era, and the national standardized reporting system, SEVIS, of the post 9/11 era have culminated in the normalized practices of surveillance and control over international students seen today. Such crimmigration ideologies set the groundwork for the belief in the need for control over those labeled as others. In this case, others are represented by both international students and individuals under community supervision. When

examining the policies and procedures presented to both populations, apparent similarities are seen. In this paper, we focus on the parallel structural components of both systems.

TWO POPULATIONS UNDER SURVEILLANCE

International Students

The U.S. actively recruits international students for a range of reasons, including revenue from tuition (NAFSA, 2024), research contributions (Bound et al., 2021), workforce development (Di Maria, 2025), internationalization goals, and building cross-cultural ties (Okai & Mandayam, 2024). It is important to note that while the majority of the literature presented here discusses the negative or difficult experiences of international students, many also report meaningful academic experiences and personal growth that impacts professional development (Moore & Popadiuk, 2011).

Table 1: Leading Countries of Origin of International Students in the United States

Rank	Country of Origin	Number of Students	% of Total
1	India	363,019	30.8%
2	China	265,919	22.6%
3	South Korea	42,293	3.6%
4	Canada	29,903	2.5%
5	Vietnam	25,584	2.2%
6	Nepal	24,890	2.1%
7	Taiwan	23,263	2.0%
8	Nigeria	21,847	1.9%
9	Bangladesh	20,156	1.7%
10	Brazil	17,277	1.5%

Note. Data reflect total enrollment in U.S. higher education institutions during the 2024/2025 academic year. Students represent more than 200 countries of origin worldwide. Adapted from Open Doors 2025 Report on International Educational Exchange, by the Institute of International Education, 2025 (www.opendoorsdata.org).

As shown in Table 1, while India and China account for the largest shares of international students, the population spans more than 200 countries of origin, reflecting considerable geographic, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity. Recent enrollment data from the Open Doors report (Institute of International Education, 2025) shows that in the 2024/25 academic year, there were 883,513 international students enrolled in U.S. higher education, with an additional 294,253 participating in Optional Practical Training (a federally authorized program that allows F-1 students to gain temporary work experience in their field of study for up to 12 months following graduation, with a 24-month extension available for students in STEM fields) for a total of 1,177,766 international students (6.1% of total U.S. enrollment). This represents a 4.5% increase over the previous year, underscoring both the scale and growing presence of noncitizen students in the U.S. postsecondary landscape. However, data from the Institute of International Education Fall 2025 Snapshot survey indicates that this growth has now reversed. Institutions reported a 1% overall decline in total international student enrollment in the 2025-2026 academic year, with new enrollments falling by 17%. Among institutions reporting a decline, 96% cited visa concerns as a contributing factor (Institute of International Education, 2025).

This section reviews the literature on international students in three parts: who international students are, the structural pressures they face, how those experiences differ across lines of race, nationality, religion, and political affiliation, and what recent scholarship published since 2025 reveals the conditions that produced the current crisis.

For the scope of this study, international students refer to noncitizen students who are enrolled in U.S. postsecondary institutions on temporary study visas, primarily F-1 or J-1 visas. These students must comply with specific immigration regulations and be subject to surveillance through federal tracking systems and institutional monitoring to ensure that their visa status remains active (Subkhanberdina, 2025). Termination can occur because of a number of reasons, including criminal activity, unauthorized employment, failure to maintain full-time enrollment, failure to update address or program information within required timeframes, and association with activities deemed a threat to national security (He, 2026).

International students have been widely documented as navigating distinct structural pressures within host countries that shape their academic experiences and well-being. Recent scholarship demonstrates that international students face elevated risks of stress and depression, with acculturative stress identified as one of the strongest factors associated with depressive symptoms. Limited social support, reduced social connectedness, and language-related challenges are documented as negative impacts as well (Tan et al., 2025).

Additional research highlights how these pressures intersect with academic environments, showing strong associations between stress, depression, sleep difficulties, and academic strain among international college students in the United States (Chaliawala et al., 2025). These structural pressures, however, are not experienced uniformly across the international student population, and a growing body of scholarship demonstrates that race, nationality, religion, and

political affiliation shape the degree to which students are surveilled, targeted, and made vulnerable.

Chinese and other Asian international students have been among the most extensively studied groups in this regard. Koo et al. (2023) documented how international students of color experienced explicit racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, including verbal assaults and social exclusion rooted in the association of Chinese students with disease. Nam et al. (2023) describe these experiences as racially traumatic, arguing that universities have a responsibility to actively address Sinophobia rather than treat it as an interpersonal matter. Yao and Mwangi (2022) situate this within a longer structural history, showing how Asian international students have been simultaneously framed as a model of academic achievement and as a financial resource for institutions, a dual positioning that renders them economically valued while leaving them socially and politically vulnerable. Houlette et al. (2025) examine how U.S.–China geopolitical tensions shaped the experiences of Chinese graduate students, documenting how federal initiatives created an environment of institutional suspicion.

Muslim international students face a distinct but related set of pressures. Jiang (2020) documents how racialization operates in international higher education to produce spaces of exclusion that exist alongside formal commitments to diversity, with Muslim students navigating campus environments where their religious identity marks them as outsiders. Anderson (2020) examines Muslim international students in the United States specifically, showing how post-9/11 surveillance logics continue to shape their experiences on campus and in interactions with immigration systems. Saito and Li (2022) apply an intersectional lens to show how these pressures compound for Muslim women, whose visible religious practice draws gendered scrutiny on top of racialized and national origin-based discrimination.

Rodriguez et al. (2023) extended this analysis across groups, documenting the microaggressions faced by international students of color more broadly and connecting these interpersonal experiences to the structural conditions produced by immigration policy and campus climate. The identity-based distinctions documented in this literature became particularly consequential in 2025, when a wave of SEVIS terminations and visa revocations brought the mechanisms of surveillance and control into sharp relief. The following subsection will synthesize more recent scholarships specifically surrounding the mass SEVIS terminations.

Recent Scholarship

The scholarship published in 2025 and 2026 documents the structural and social conditions that led to the 2025 SEVIS terminations. It is important to synthesize what literature has been published since these events. He (2026) identifies three linked mechanisms through which international students are marginalized: civic exclusion, civic deficit, and legitimation. Civic exclusion operates through what He terms “conditional legality,” (p. 8) which refers to “a form of lawful presence that remains contingent, temporary, and revocable based

on strict adherence to a complex administrative regime” (p. 8). He demonstrates that under 8 C.F.R. § 214.2(f), even minor procedural errors, such as failing to apply for a program extension before the end date, result in automatic loss of status. Civic deficit describes what follows from civic exclusion. Even when international students technically hold certain rights, they are often unable to act on those rights in practice. He documents this across domains, including due process, employment, housing, and healthcare, showing in each case that students face unequal power dynamics, lack of access to information, and insufficient institutional support. The third mechanism, legitimation, explains how these arrangements come to seem normal and justified. He shows that political framing, including Presidential Proclamation 10043 targeting Chinese graduate students and the 2025 State Department directive prioritizing visa revocations for students with ties to the Chinese Communist Party, transforms selective exclusion into a publicly acceptable defense of national security.

Fu (2025) grounds these structural observations in the lived experience of graduate students. Through interviews with 20 international graduate students and critical discourse analysis of public narratives surrounding the 2025 visa revocations, Fu shows that surveillance operates through external enforcement as well as through the behavior that external enforcement produces. For example, students describe making daily decisions about where to go, what to say publicly, and whether to assert their rights based on fear of triggering enforcement. One student in his study shared that they avoided protests because “the negative consequences outweigh the benefits” (p. 12).

Acar (2025) examines how universities themselves participate in and reproduce this system of monitoring and control. Drawing on intersectionality theory and Foucault's concept of panopticism, Acar argues that SEVIS functions as a digital panopticon in which students self-regulate to avoid triggering negative consequences. In other words, they internalize compliance as a personal responsibility. Acar's analysis of institutional language reveals a consistent pattern in which universities merge the language of care with the language of enforcement, with advising offices presenting themselves as student advocates while simultaneously holding authority to terminate a student's SEVIS record. Acar also documents how students from the Global South and those with racialized accents face compounded hypervisibility, experiencing heightened scrutiny alongside the symbolic expectation that they represent institutional diversity. This intersectional dimension, the differential experience of surveillance based on race, nationality, and linguistic profile, is important to consider as it adds nuance to how some international students are treated differently based on these factors.

Individuals Under Community Supervision

Individuals under community supervision refer to people serving parole and probation sentences. The most recent data from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, reported in 2023, indicate that approximately 3.77 million people were under community supervision (Kaeble). This section reviews

the similarities and differences of parole and probation, its intention versus reality, and who is most affected.

Parole and Probation

In this paper, we use parole and probation in a similar manner as they are functionally comparable, but they have distinct characteristics. Parole is a conditional release from imprisonment that allows an individual to complete their sentence under community supervision. Individuals must be eligible, apply, and be granted parole before release from imprisonment (U.S. Department of Parole Commission, 2025). Probation serves as an alternative to imprisonment and can be granted by a judge depending on the type of crime committed (Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, n.d.). These separate processes yield similar outcomes of conditional freedom, which may require a range of procedures, including check-ins, home visits, drug tests, court appearances, employment requirements, and travel restrictions.

Scholarship

In theory, community supervision should allow for smooth re-entry after incarceration or provide support to an individual instead of incarceration. The purpose of community supervision was originally intended to provide social assistance and rehabilitation (Saunders & Midgette, 2023). However, in practice, community supervision is harsh and rigid in structure, creating more opportunities for a person to be further criminalized (Harding et al., 2022). An individual granted parole or probation is subjected to strict surveillance and control, and any infraction can lead to immediate imprisonment. Infractions that could lead to incarceration can range from minor technical incidents, such as failing to notify supervising officers of a change in employment status, failing to appear in court, or accidental association with individuals with restricted status, to more major incidents such as new criminal activity (Uggen & Stewart, 2015). The Council of State Governments Justice Center reported that in 2020, approximately 42% of prison admissions were due to community supervision violations (2021).

Although research regarding the racial disparities of community supervision is highly understudied (Saunders & Midgette, 2023; Steinmetz & Henderson, 2016), the hypercriminalization of people of color and marginalized communities is widely documented (Rios, 2006; Wacquant, 2010). According to the United States Sentencing Commission, as of March 2025, the racial breakdown of the federally incarcerated population included 34.9% Black, 30.7% Hispanic, 29.9% White, and 4.5% other (2025). These statistics provide context for understanding disproportionality in criminalized populations because the general population, as estimated by the United States Census Bureau in 2025, includes 57.5% White (non-Hispanic), 20.0% Hispanic, and 13.7% Black (2025) individuals. It is important to note that there may not be congruence between how the Sentencing Commission and the US Census report identify identity demographics.

Furthermore, race has historically been misrepresented by incomplete or inaccurate options for individuals to report their race (Arias et al., 2025).

Only a few publications on racial and ethnic considerations in relation to successful or unsuccessful community supervision were located. According to Harding et al. (2022), the failure of community supervision disproportionately impacts people of color, poor communities, and people with low educational levels. An Urban Institute study in 2014 found that Black individuals on probation had higher rates of having their probation revoked compared to White counterparts (Ho et al., 2014). A few years later, Steinmetz & Henderson's 2016 study measuring positive and negative alternative probation outcomes: revocation (probation failure resulting in incarceration), early discharge (released from probation before full sentence completed), and adjudication (unsatisfactory completion of probation resulting in incarceration) found that probation was racialized and that African American and Hispanic men were most likely to experience negative probationary outcomes. One reason presented in the literature for the negative impacts on marginalized populations is outlined by Saunders & Midgette (2023) in their explanation of implicit bias in discretionary decisions within the system of community supervision, reporting that small bias can lead to large disparities because of the mass population under community supervision. The literature regarding racial implications of community supervision did not further address the disparity or provide explanations for the disparity.

The two populations described above, international students navigating visa compliance systems and individuals under community supervision, live under strict surveillance and regulations. When the policy documents governing each population are placed side by side, similar trends are seen. The following section examines these parallels directly, drawing on the language in the documents themselves to demonstrate how carceral logic operates across both systems.

PARALLEL MECHANISM OF SURVEILLANCE AND CONTROL

The social, political, and legal processes of criminalizing immigrants and those deemed outsiders intersect when international students study in the United States. These international students are assumed to be “national security...concerns” (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2024, para. 5) and experience similar treatment to individuals under community supervision. The following section will address the parallel structural components between the governing oversight of international study in the United States and community supervision as part of the U.S. carceral system.

Surveillance

The first commonality between community-supervised individuals and international students is the extent of surveillance that both groups experience. Surveillance as a form of control is classically seen through policing, imprisonment, and parole/probation of system-impacted people (Miller &

Alexander, 2015). What is less overt is the tracking of international students (Allen & Bista, 2021). Monitored through SEVIS, international students report to DSOs, who record and disclose student information, such as home address, school enrollment status, employment, and any changes to such information, to the federal government (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2024). Similarly, probation/parole officers (POs) collect and delineate individuals' information regarding criminal records, home addresses, employment and educational status, drug/alcohol use, interaction with other system-impacted individuals, domestic and international travel plans, and more (Administrative Office of the United States Courts, 2024). Both systems reveal how surveillance operates as a quiet but powerful way of limiting personal agency and autonomy by maintaining institutional control over international students and people impacted by community supervision.

Control

Second, holding an F, M, or J visa status allows the United States government to place controls on international students in a similar manner to that of an individual serving a community-supervision sentence. For example, international students are generally not permitted to work; however, after applying and receiving approval, students may work up to 20 hours per week at an on-campus job (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2024). Additionally, international students are required to maintain full-time enrollment status and must obtain approval to change their educational programs. Comparably, people experiencing community supervision are held to standards that include limitations and requirements on when and how an individual can work, where and when they can enroll in school and are legally required to report any changes in address, employment, and schooling (Administrative Office of the United States Courts, 2024).

Last, Table 2 presents an analysis of government websites, showing common language regarding the missions, responsibilities, and goals of systems governing international students and community supervision. The shared language includes words such as protecting, recording/reporting, and ensuring compliance. Diving further into each of these elements depicts additional overlap between the two programs. First, both address a perceived risk: one concerns international students as national security threats, and the other concerns community-supervised people as threats to community safety. Second, both express concern for their users (international students and individuals under community supervision), noting that the SEVIS system is continually improving to be easier for international students and that parole/probation is a tool for re-entry and independent living. In addition, the consequences of violation (or mistakes) are severe in each scenario (Administrative Office of the United States Courts, 2024; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2024; U.S. Department of Parole Commission, 2025). For international students, their visa status can be revoked, and students can be deported immediately with no opportunity for return. In the same vein, community-supervised people can have their individual freedom rescinded by

being arrested and imprisoned. The information provided in Table 2 is drawn directly from government-hosted websites and therefore depicts only structural components. Bolded words indicate similarities in language between the two systems.

Table 2: Comparison of Surveillance Structures: SEVIS/DSO and NCIC/Probation/Parole Officers

Surveillance Structures	SEVIS and Designated School Official (DSO)	NCIC and Probation/Parole Officer (PO)
Mission	<p>“[SEVIS] is a critical tool in our mission to protect national security while supporting the legal entry of more than one million F, M, and J nonimmigrants to the United States for education and cultural exchange” (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2024, para. 1)</p>	<p>“(a) The federal supervision model is founded on the conditions of release and comprises both of controlling and correcting strategies consistent with those conditions that are sufficient, but no greater than necessary, to facilitate achievement of the desired outcomes. (b) The desired outcomes of supervision are the execution of the sentence and the protection of the community by reducing the risk and recurrence of crime” (Administrative Office of the United States courts, 2024, p. 5)</p>
Responsibility of DSOs/POs	<p>“Fulfill the school’s legal reporting responsibility regarding student addresses, courses of study, enrollment, employment and compliance with the terms of the student status” (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2024, para. 2)</p>	<p>“Probation officers recommend and implement conditions and monitor defendants’ compliance with those conditions” and “keep a record of his or her work, and make such reports to the Director of the Administrative Office of the United States Courts” (Administrative Office of</p>

Surveillance Structures	SEVIS and Designated School Official (DSO)	NCIC and Probation/Parole Officer (PO)
Goals	“The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) is constantly evolving to: Address national security and public policy concerns Improve the user experience improve system performance (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2024, para. 5)	the United States Courts, 2024, p. 1&4) “Parole has a threefold purpose: (1) through the assistance of the United States Probation Officer, a parolee may obtain help with problems concerning employment, residence, finances, or other personal problems... (2) parole protects society because it helps the former prisoner get established in the community and thus prevents many situations in which they might commit a new offense; and (3) parole prevents needless imprisonment” (U.S Parole Commission, 2025, para. 1).

DISCUSSION

Comparing the treatment of international students and people under community supervision illuminates how surveillance, compliance, and criminalization operate similarly across these populations. Ultimately, this article reveals how systems in the United States continue to criminalize and control those perceived as different or outsiders. This is done by reinforcing historical patterns of systemic oppression under the guise of national security.

Crimmigration theory, as Stumpf (2006) articulated, describes the convergence of immigration law and criminal law into a system that governs noncitizens through the same logic of surveillance and punishment traditionally reserved for criminal actors. Central to this is the process of securitization, in which migrants are framed as threats to national safety, which justifies extraordinary enforcement measures (Stumpf, 2013). The insights from this paper extend this framework into a domain Stumpf did not address directly: higher education. Within this setting, DSOs function as officers embedded in academic institutions that are legally obligated to monitor and report international students to federal authorities. This effectively positions universities as actors within the crimmigration system.

The documents we analyzed side by side present similar language and missions for International Students and people under community supervision governance. The Criminal Other (Degenshein, 2024) designation, which Garcia Hernández (2018) roots in racialized national anxieties, provides the ideological grounding for why international students from particular national, religious, and racial backgrounds bear a disproportionate share of this enforcement. These findings may suggest that crimmigration has extended into higher education in ways that have not been fully examined and that the governance of international students reflects carceral logic. The subsequent section illustrates the implications of carceral logics and describes how the contemporary events of 2025 were the latest showing of criminalizing international students.

Individual and Social Implications of Surveillance and Control

International students and community-supervised people are othered, scrutinized, distrusted, and controlled at both personal and social levels. By being held to extreme surveillance, international students and community-supervised individuals lose their autonomy and are subjected to the mandates of their governing systems (DSOs and POs). International study was adopted and celebrated in the U.S. to increase global cooperation and innovation among other reasons explored above. However, when international students are under intense surveillance, they are not given the space to be their full intellectual thinkers (Gorokhovskaia & Vaughan, 2024), and research provides evidence of the toll this can take. International students under surveillance report elevated anxiety, self-censorship, sleep difficulties, and symptoms of depression, with fear of deportation shaping daily decisions about where to go and whether to assert their rights (Fu, 2025; Tan et al., 2025; Chaliawala et al., 2025). Analogously, people serving community supervision are isolated from society, stripped of their individual and civic freedoms, and faced with barriers to housing and employment, ultimately creating obstacles to living independent lives (Siegel, 2014).

Another similarity between international students and community-supervised people is who is disproportionately negatively impacted. Within both systems, marginalized community groups experience the most adverse outcomes. Within the international student population, Chinese, Muslim, and Global South students face heightened targeting through racialized enforcement and geopolitical suspicion (Koo et al., 2023; Jiang, 2020; Saito & Li, 2022; Houlette et al., 2025) In community supervision, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and other mixed racial identity groups fail community supervision at larger rates than White counterparts, resulting in further criminalization usually in the form of incarceration (Saunders & Midgett, 2023; Steinmetz & Henderson, 2016). For this scope of this paper, we choose to highlight racial and ethnic disparities that were prevalent in the scholarly literature, recognizing that these systems operate through a racialized surveillance lens. We understand that there is a wide range of lived experiences across identity groups as well as within identity groups.

The parallel mechanisms explored in this paper reached a crisis point in the spring of 2025 when the United States witnessed a wave of punitive actions against international students characterized by mass visa revocations, detentions, and heightened surveillance (Schwartz, 2025). The initial 4,700 SEVIS terminations in March of 2025 resulted in the loss of students' authorization to work and re-entry into the country, leaving many students fearful of their security in the U.S. (Castellanos-Canales, 2025; Popli, 2025; Sen, 2025). For some, the fear of detainment coupled with instruction from universities to halt working and attending classes led to their choice to self-deport, leaving it unclear how they can return, should they choose to (Di Maria, 2025; Rose, 2025; Sgagna, 2025). At this time, there is no disaggregated data showing demographic data of the impacted students.

A media report from AXIOS suggested that the U.S. government deployed an AI-driven program called "Catch-And-Revoke" (Caputo, 2025, para. 7) to monitor students' social media. This surveillance reflects an environment in which international students are treated not as scholars but as potential threats (Caputo, 2025). Critiques of the Catch-And-Revoke policy implied that mere association with political movements, such as pro-Palestine protests or social media posts, led to severe consequences for immigration status (Sen, 2025; Patel, 2025; Guardian News and Media, 2025). At the time of writing, the United States government had not released details regarding how Catch-And-Revoke was or would be implemented. However, the government included an official statement in their release of the first 100 days of the Trump administration, which read: "there is now a one-strike policy: Catch-And-Revoke (Rubio, 2025). Whenever the government catches non-U.S. citizens breaking our laws, we will take action to revoke their status" (Department of State, 2025, para. 9).

Media reports have attempted to document the number of students affected by SEVIS terminations and deportations; however, there is variation across reports throughout 2025. Between April and August, for example, reports ranged from 800 to 6,000 terminations (Faguy, 2025; NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2025; Schwartz, 2025). Some terminations appear to have been arbitrary (rather than based upon criminal activity), and many courts ordered these students' visa status to be reinstated (Masquelier-Page, 2025). The U.S. State Department stated that approximately 4,000 of the revocations were due to assault, DUI, burglary, and support for terrorism (Faguy, 2025). Based on these understandings of who received revocations, as presented by media outlets and the U.S. government, up to an additional 2,000 students were affected and unaccounted for on government web pages. However, there is speculation about the trustworthiness of "support for terrorism" claims, as many believe those violations could be as minor as pro-Palestine social media postings (Faguy, 2025). The immediate revocation of status experienced by international students is echoed in community supervision in the carceral system, when individuals' freedoms and rights can also be revoked suddenly due to technical violations, new criminal offenses, or at the discretion of parole officers. These existing policies can be found in a variety of locations that include sections 3565 and 3583 of Title

18, Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 32.1, or Chapter 7 of the guidelines manual for federal courts (United States Sentencing Commission, 2021).

It is noteworthy to express that these two systems are not identical. Community supervision is not typically voluntary (it can be voluntary in some cases as an alternative to imprisonment), whereas international students can make an informed decision about whether to enroll in international studies. Community supervision often results in additional surveillance and control measures, including court appearances, house arrest, and imprisonment. However, while initial entry is voluntary, the subsequent immersion in a carceral-academic environment subjects the student to involuntary surveillance similar to that of the carceral state.

The argument presented in this paper is that there is a significant overlap between the two systems, justifying further investigation. Additional empirical scholarly inquiry may suggest a strong link between international study and structures within the carceral system, ultimately uncovering the intimate connection between carceral logics and higher education in the United States. Through this research, researchers, scholars, and practitioners can advance efforts to dismantle carceral systems within higher education institutions nationwide.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper develops a conceptual connection between higher education policy in the United States and carceral logics in the governance of international students. By reading SEVIS/DSO policy alongside parole/probation policy, we identified similar mechanisms, such as routine data reporting, status-based compliance, low-threshold triggers for sanctions, and limited pathways for correction. These similarities normalize the treatment of international students as subjects of suspicion rather than as members of an intellectual community. We recognize the limits of the analogy, most notably the voluntariness of international study visa participation, and simply aim to provide a starting point for future research. Based on our conceptual findings, we identify four considerations for further research. These avenues include conceptually mapping race as a key indicator of criminalization, empirically analyzing policy, further investigating student experiences in light of recent SEVIS terminations, and bringing a global perspective to the discussion.

The first additional research inquiry extends the present theoretical paper. We imagine future research to include another conceptual paper that uses critical legal studies and critical race theory as central theoretical frameworks to intentionally investigate how race is interconnected with legal policy and higher education in the United States. These additional frameworks will examine how immigration, higher education, and national security are not race-neutral initiatives but rather are a reproduction of racialized oppression. By centering race, this line of study would deepen the understanding of how international students are situated within broader systems of racialized governance in the United States.

Second, there is a need for a comprehensive policy analysis examining how federal immigration, higher education, and carceral policies intersect in shaping the experiences of international students. This policy analysis seeks to determine whether and how international students are treated similarly to individuals labeled domestic criminals. Research in this domain would build upon the notion that the terms associated with criminal are neither objective nor natural; rather, they are socially reproduced through shifting policy and governance practices (Jenness, 2004). The policy analysis would ultimately draw parallels between policies, establishing that these systems work in concert to criminalize international students.

A third line of future study considers social identity theory and student development theory in understanding the impacts of criminalization on international students. Social Identity Theory expresses how membership in a group influences self-concept and behaviors (Turner et al., 1979), while Student Development Theory in Higher Education explains the importance of having a strong sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2015). Qualitative methods such as interviews, surveys, and/or narrative analysis of international students could reveal how factors such as surveillance, visa restrictions, and fear of deportation affect students' academic engagement, sense of belonging, and mental health. Understanding these lived experiences is crucial for informing institutional and policy reforms that support student well-being. Many college campuses in the United States have mission statements that articulate their aim of developing a "global campus" or "global citizenship" among students; this inquiry would support these efforts.

Finally, there is potential for international comparative research to evaluate whether similar criminalization systems exist in other popular host countries. The popularity of hosting international students has expanded beyond the leading countries of the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada and into additional countries such as France, Germany, Korea, Singapore, and others (Ross, 2025). This diversification of international studies across more countries creates additional urgency to understand how carceral logics are deployed against international students. Comparative analyses across nations could show how some national policies and political climates position international students as guests or potential threats. This work would broaden the theoretical understanding of crimmigration theory in a global context.

Theoretically, understanding crimmigration clarifies how civil regulatory systems adopt criminal forms in moments of perceived threat and how universities are enlisted (sometimes willingly, sometimes by mandate) in these governance policies. The historical analysis spotlights how the use of security measures in higher education predates contemporary events. For example, the events of 2025, including the mass termination of SEVIS records, visa revocations, and the use of expanded digital monitoring programs such as the reported Catch-And-Revoke initiative, reveal how the current administration's reliance on data-driven reporting systems allows perceived threats to be quickly addressed.

Practically, this framing invites institutions to confront the tension between their global, inclusive missions and their participation in surveillance practices. It

also leads to multiple future studies, including further racial implications; in-depth policy analysis across immigration, education, and carceral systems; studies of international students' well-being under surveillance; and global comparisons to determine whether criminalization systems exist in other major host countries. Addressing these inquiries is essential if universities are to move beyond compliance toward more just and humane global learning environments in which international students are treated as intellectual guests rather than as public safety threats.

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- None
- Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- Some sections, with extensive editing
- Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- Entire work, with extensive editing

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