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# Characterizing Global Citizenship Education in U.S. International Student Services Office Websites: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study critically examines how U.S. international student service offices (ISSOs) represent global citizenship education (GCEd) on their websites. By employing critical discourse analysis, it explores the discursive and practical strategies used to foster global citizenship among international students. The analysis identifies four key themes: (1) emphasis on "Living in the U.S.", (2) neutrality toward global political issues, (3) lack of explicit GCEd spaces, and (4) inconsistencies in the vision-mission statements. The findings suggest that ISSOs often promote a U.S.-centric, neoliberal, and implicitly colonial framing of GCEd, which may limit the transformative potential of global citizenship. The study proposes a typology of four levels of GCEd engagement as reflected in ISSO language and practices. It argues that higher education institutions must strive for deeper, more critical engagement with global issues if they are to genuinely cultivate global citizenship as an institutional goal in higher education internationalization.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Global Citizenship Education (GCEd) has emerged as a vital dimension of higher education internationalization, a process that has evolved significantly since the 1970s in U.S. institutions and globally (Wintersteiner et al., 2015). Initially, focused on study abroad programs and international student recruitment, internationalization now encompasses strategies such as internationalization-at-home (Gaitan-Aguilar et al., 2024), cross-border academic collaborations, and area studies and language programs (Aktas et al., 2017). GCEd, rooted in UNESCO's commitment to peace and international understanding and articulated in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7, reframes long-standing educational values such as solidarity, respect for diversity, and shared humanity within a globalized context (Nikolitsa-Winter et al., 2019; APCEIU, 2021). It emphasizes cultivating students' awareness of global interdependencies and encouraging their engagement with social, political, and economic issues across borders. Designed for all learners but especially emphasized in formal education systems, the GCEd equips students with cognitive, socioemotional, and behavioral competencies to act responsibly at the local and global levels. While not all higher education institutions (HEIs) explicitly position themselves as incubators of global citizenship, many contribute through curricular and cocurricular initiatives (Kishino & Takahashi, 2019; Massaro, 2022; Negrusa et al., 2020). In higher education, GCEd aligns closely with internationalization efforts by fostering intercultural understanding, ethical global engagement, and competencies essential for navigating complex global challenges.

International student services offices (ISSOs), where they exist, serve as critical touchpoints for international students—typically those on temporary visas such as F-1 or J-1 in the U.S.—and can play a significant role in shaping students' experiences and perceptions of global citizenship. Traditionally, ISSOs have focused on providing visa compliance, orientation, and transitional support to help international students navigate life at U.S. universities (Andrade, 2009; Calley, 2021). These foundational services are essential for student retention and legal status maintenance. However, recent scholarship suggests that ISSOs are increasingly positioned to move beyond transactional support and engage in developmental programming that fosters intercultural competence and global

leadership (Calley, 2021; Killick, 2015). When ISSOs adopt a more holistic and inclusive posture, they can contribute meaningfully to the internationalization of the cocurriculum and the cultivation of global citizenship among both international and globally mobile students.

Moreover, institutional websites – often the first point of contact for international students – serve as digital representations of a university's culture, values, and priorities (Abrams, 2022; Ely, 2021; LePeau et al., 2018). These online portals may reflect implicit or explicit discourses surrounding global citizenship, which, upon critical examination, can reveal inequitable or lopsided representations (Fanari, 2024). While prior research has explored international students' experiences and challenges (Kim, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2017; Ritter, 2013; Yakaboski et al., 2018) and the role of campus websites (Ely, 2021; LePeau et al., 2018), there remains a gap in understanding how GCEd is conceptualized and communicated through ISSO websites. Kishino and Takahashi (2019) noted the lack of operative frameworks for assessing global citizenship in higher education contexts.

## Research Purpose and Question

The research question guiding this study is as follows: How do ISSOs in U.S. HEIs discursively and practically support international students in their development as global citizens? By undertaking a CDA of ISSO websites, this study examines both the discursive representations and the substantive practices of ISSOs as they relate to GCEd. We distinguish between discourse (language and framing on websites) and practice (actual programs, services, and structures offered), recognizing that both shape international students' experiences of global citizenship. Furthermore, it seeks to examine the linguistic and practical strategies employed by ISSOs to foster global citizenship among international students. Rather than assuming a universal role, this study investigates the strategies employed by ISSOs and their potential to promote global citizenship values and cultivate a sense of responsibility and engagement with global issues. The following hypotheses were proposed:

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SERVICES OFFICES AND GCED

Historically, international student services offices (ISSOs) have functioned primarily as compliance-driven units, focused on managing visa regulations, orientation logistics, and transitional support for international students in U.S. HEIs (Hammons et al., 2004; Durrani, 2024). These offices often serve as the "home base" for international students, providing essential services such as immigration advice, cultural programming, and workshops on practical matters, including taxes and transportation (Ward, 2015). However, their role has largely been reactive and transactional, emphasizing legal adherence over holistic development. As international student populations grow, this limited scope has led to capacity strains and gaps in integration, belonging, and cross-cultural engagement (Bhandari, 2012; Ward, 2015). Findlay (2020) and Bi (2025) add that

while ISSOs are central to international student support, they often operate within decentralized structures and face staffing shortages, limiting their ability to provide comprehensive services. Their studies highlight the need for semester-long orientations, mental health counseling, and culturally responsive programming, noting that many institutions fall short in these areas and may ultimately result in inequitable practices and the invalidation of international students' diverse backgrounds. Scholars such as Calley (2021) and Castiello-Gutiérrez and Tozini (2020) critique the deficit-based framing of international students and advocate for a shift in posture—from marginalization to empowerment—through inclusive programming that recognizes the multiplicity of global identities. ISSOs, therefore, stand at a pivotal juncture: they must evolve from service providers to coeducators, cultivating intercultural competence and global citizenship across the entire campus community.

This evolution reflects a broader paradigm shift in higher education, where ISSOs are increasingly viewed as strategic partners in student development and institutional transformation. Contemporary models call for holistic, inclusive, transformative, and developmental frameworks that move beyond compliance to actively foster leadership, intercultural sensitivity, and global engagement (Calley, 2021; Hughey, 2025). Andrade (2006) emphasized that integration should not be equated with assimilation; rather, it is a dynamic process of mutual adaptation that allows students to thrive academically and socially while preserving their cultural integrity. Castiello-Gutiérrez and Tozini (2020) further argue for intersectional approaches that address the diverse identities and needs of international students, urging HEIs to adopt campus-wide collaboration and advocacy against discriminatory policies. In this expanded role, ISSOs are not merely support units—they are catalysts for inclusive internationalization, equity, and student success.

While GCEd has gained traction in higher education, its implementation remains largely concentrated in curricular domains and study abroad programs, with limited attention to student service offices such as ISSOs (Kishino & Takahashi, 2019; Mittelmeier et al., 2024; Massaro, 2022). This gap is significant given the transformative potential of ISSOs to shape intercultural experiences and foster global engagement. Obst et al. (2025) emphasize that GCEd must extend beyond classroom instruction to include holistic, experiential learning environments that cultivate empathy, ethical reasoning, and civic action. Stearns (2008) in Clothey (2011) similarly critiques the fragmented nature of global education efforts, noting that while many institutions espouse global citizenship in their mission statements, few have developed integrated strategies that include student-facing services. Olds (2012) further argues that global citizenship is not merely an academic outcome but a lived practice, one that emerges through everyday interactions, institutional culture, and civic participation. These perspectives reinforce the need to critically examine how ISSOs, as key facilitators of international student integration and mobility, contribute to or constrain GCEd. By analyzing ISSO websites through a critical GCEd lens, this study seeks to uncover how these offices operationalize, or overlook, the

pedagogical principles of justice, participation, inquiry, and historical awareness in their support of international students.

## CRITICAL GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION FRAMEWORK

Global citizenship and global citizenship education (GCEd) are often used interchangeably, yet they represent distinct but interrelated concepts. Global citizenship refers to a sense of belonging to a broader community and the development of ethical dispositions toward global interconnectedness (UNESCO, 2014). Higher education institutions (HEIs) increasingly reflect this ethos in their mission statements, using terms such as civic engagement and global engagement to signal their commitment to holistic student development beyond academic and career success (Grad & van der Zande, 2022). GCEd, on the other hand, is the structured educational paradigm through which learners cultivate the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to act as global citizens (Stanlick & Szmodis, 2020). Kotze and McMillan (2019) argue that GCEd initiatives should reinstill principles of justice, civil rights, and human decency, especially in light of rising global inequalities and democratic erosion.

UNESCO APCEIU (2021) describes GCEd as nurturing respect for diversity, solidarity, and a sense of belonging to a common humanity. Gaitan-Aguilar et al. (2024) expand this definition by integrating social science concepts such as intercultural competence, global social identification, and civic engagement. They emphasize that global citizenship cannot be reduced to a single definition; rather, multiple complementary approaches are needed to reflect students' diverse experiences and pathways toward GCEd objectives. Kuleta-Hulboj (2020) further calls for reframing GCEd to be more inclusive of migrant and transnational experiences, especially in light of global migration patterns. The 2020 UN World Migration Report (LIRS, 2021) identified the U.S. as a primary destination for migrants seeking educational opportunities, underscoring the urgency of embedding the GCEd in institutional practices. Given their role in facilitating the "immigration" of international students, International Student Services Offices (ISSOs) are uniquely positioned to enact GCEd principles.

### GCEd critical paradigm

To analyze how ISSOs contribute to GCEd, we adopt a critical lens informed by Pashby et al. (2020), who identify three dominant paradigms in GCEd discourse: neoliberal, liberal, and critical. The neoliberal paradigm frames global citizenship in terms of market-oriented skills and global competitiveness, often emphasizing employability and economic mobility. The liberal paradigm centers on universal values such as human rights, intercultural understanding, and civic participation, aiming to foster responsible global citizens. In contrast, the critical paradigm interrogates systemic injustices and colonial legacies, advocating for transformative and decolonial approaches to education. Akkari and Maleq (2019, p. 178) caution that global citizenship often functions as an "empty signifier," filled with competing meanings and agendas. They argue that without conceptual

clarity, global citizenship risks becoming a buzzword rather than a meaningful instrument for educational change. Bamberger and Morris (2024) echo this concern, critiquing the postcolonial framing of internationalization for its selective application and Western exceptionalism and calling for pluralistic critical approaches that recognize diverse geopolitical contexts and local agency.

These paradigms provide a conceptual foundation for evaluating how GCEd is interpreted and enacted in institutional contexts. To bridge these theoretical orientations with practical analysis, we apply Wintersteiner et al.'s (2015) four pedagogical principles as a rubric to assess ISSO websites. This framework allows us to identify whether institutional practices align with neoliberal, liberal, or critical approaches to GCEd, offering a structured lens through which to examine both discourse and implementation.

**GCEd Principles**

Wintersteiner et al.'s (2015) pedagogical principles of GCEd are grounded in four interrelated dimensions: (1) orientation toward human rights, peace, and social justice; (2) participation in and competence in political action; (3) critical inquiry; and (4) historical-critical reflection. These principles are not merely additive but form a paradigm shift in education, one that moves beyond content acquisition toward transformative learning. Wintersteiner et al. (2015) emphasize that GCEd must be both a cognitive and ethical endeavor, cultivating global citizens who are self-reflective, politically engaged, and capable of critically analyzing global structures of inequality. Their framework aligns with Andreotti's (2006) distinction between "soft" and "critical" GCEd, with Wintersteiner et al. (2015) clearly advocating for the latter: a structural–political cosmopolitanism that challenges Western hegemony and promotes democratic global participation. We adhere to a critical GCEd perspective in this article.

This framework also responds to calls for justice in international student mobility. Mulvey (2025) critiques the inequities embedded in global education systems, arguing that international students are often treated as economic commodities rather than rights-bearing individuals. He proposed a global convention to protect the human rights of internationally mobile students, emphasizing the need for ethical governance and equitable access. Bhandari (2012), in her review of Andrade & Evans (2009), reinforced the importance of ISSOs in addressing adjustment, persistence, and orientation challenges, framing international students as critical resources rather than passive recipients of services. These perspectives underscore the transformative potential of ISSOs not only as support units but also as agents of justice and inclusion within the broader internationalization agenda.

In sum, this study applies Wintersteiner et al.'s (2015) GCEd principles to evaluate ISSO practices while remaining attentive to alternative models and critiques. By foregrounding critical and decolonial perspectives, we aim to deepen the field's understanding of how student services can contribute to GCEd in meaningful, justice-oriented ways. ISSOs, often overlooked in GCEd discourse, have the potential to be transformative spaces where international students are not

only supported but also empowered to participate in shaping a more equitable global society.

## METHOD

This qualitative study, grounded in the critical paradigm, employed a two-phase analytical approach to examine how ISSOs represent international students and GCEd on their websites. First, we conducted a content analysis to identify the presence or absence of specific resources, programs, and services. This allowed us to establish what substantive support was publicly communicated by each institution. We analyzed the publicly accessible websites of the top 25 U.S. institutions with the highest international student enrollments in 2022, as reported by IIE Open Doors, which were accessed between July and August 2023 (Table 1). Our focus was on each ISSO's landing page and its linked subpages, which usually include "Home," "About/Vision," "Students," "Scholars," "Immigration," "Resources," and other iterations. Website content may have changed since our last access in August 2025.

**Table 1: ISSOs of the top 25 U.S. leading host institutions**

| Institution | State | Total IS | Name of ISSO |
|---|---|---|---|
| New York University | NY | 21,081 | Office of Global Services |
| Northeastern University - Boston | MA | 17,836 | Office of Global Services |
| Columbia University | NY | 16,956 | International Students and Scholars Office |
| University of Southern California | CA | 15,729 | Office of International Services |
| Arizona State University - Campus Immersion | AZ | 15,293 | International Students and Scholars Center |
| University of Illinois - Urbana-Champaign | IL | 12,833 | International Student and Scholar Services |
| Boston University | MA | 11,798 | International Students and Scholars Office |
| University of California - San Diego | CA | 11,279 | International Students and Programs Office |
| Purdue University - West Lafayette | IN | 11,198 | International Students & Scholars |
| University of California - Los Angeles | CA | 10,990 | International Students & Scholars |
| University of California - Berkeley | CA | 10,664 | International Office |
| University of Michigan - Ann Arbor | MI | 9,349 | International Center |
| Pennsylvania State University - University Park | PA | 9,313 | International Student and Scholar Advising |
| University of Washington | WA | 8,682 | International Student Services |
| Carnegie Mellon University | PA | 8,196 | Office of International Education |
| Georgia Institute of Technology | GA | 8,040 | International Student and Scholar Services |
| Johns Hopkins University | MD | 7,893 | Office of International Services |
| University of California - Irvine | CA | 7,888 | Division of Continuing Education International Programs |
| University of Texas - Dallas | TX | 7,741 | International Students and Scholars Office |
| University of Wisconsin - Madison | WI | 7,686 | International Student Services |
| Cornell University | NY | 7,579 | Office of Global Learning - International Services |
| University of California - Davis | CA | 7,505 | Services for International Students and Scholars |
| University of Pennsylvania | PA | 7,400 | International Student & Scholar Services |
| Texas A&M University - College Station | TX | 7,162 | International Student Services |
| SUNY University at Buffalo | NY | 6,723 | International Student Services |

## Phase 1: Content Analysis

To guide our analysis, we developed a coding rubric informed by Wintersteiner et al.'s (2015) four pedagogical principles of GCEd, supplemented

by relevant website elements identified through a literature review (Figure 1). The rubric was not used for scoring but rather as a framework to identify and categorize both substantive offerings and discursive representations. It included indicators such as references to human rights, opportunities for political participation, critical inquiry, and historical awareness, as well as institutional language around inclusion, support, and global engagement.

The rubric was refined through a collaborative and iterative process. Each researcher independently reviewed a subset of ISSO websites and recorded observations in a shared spreadsheet. This included comments aligned with the rubric criteria and interpretive notes for ambiguous content. We then met to compare interpretations, resolve discrepancies, and revise the rubric for clarity and consistency. This process aligns with qualitative research practices emphasizing collaborative coding and consensus-building (Saldaña, 2021; McCarthy et al., 2021). The final rubric represents the third version developed through this iterative cycle.

## Phase 2: Critical Discourse Analysis

Following the content analysis, we deepened our inquiry through critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how language on ISSO websites constructs meanings around international students, their roles, and their needs within U.S. higher education. We applied Fairclough's (2020) three-dimensional model of CDA, which involves analyzing the text (description), discursive practice (interpretation), and social practice (explanation). This framework allowed us to move beyond identifying the presence of services to interrogate how those services and the students they target are framed linguistically and ideologically.

To support this process, we wrote analytic memos in our shared spreadsheet, documenting our descriptive observations, interpretive insights, and broader social explanations for each website. These memos captured how language reflected institutional values, assumptions, and power dynamics. Throughout the research process, we maintained reflexivity and ethical rigor by holding regular team debriefings, during which we discussed emerging interpretations, challenged assumptions, and recorded evolving insights in a shared document. This collaborative and iterative approach ensures consistency in our application of CDA and aligns with best practices in critical qualitative research.

To ensure intercoder reliability, we engaged in three rounds of peer debriefing and consensus-building discussions. After the initial coding, we met in person to probe our findings further, reconcile any divergent interpretations, and finalize the thematic structure. Through this reflective process, we identified four distinct themes in the data. This collaborative approach helped ensure consistency in applying the rubric and interpreting the discursive patterns across institutions.

## Positionality Statement

As two Asian international doctoral students in higher education and student affairs conducting research within the U.S. higher education system, we bring

both personal and scholarly perspectives to our analysis of GCEd characteristics on the websites of ISSOs at 25 U.S. institutions with the highest international student enrollment in 2022. Our lived experiences in navigating academic, cultural, and bureaucratic landscapes as international students inform our understanding of the challenges and opportunities these offices present.

Our positionality allows us to approach this study with a heightened sensitivity to the nuances of language, representation, and accessibility that may not be immediately apparent to domestic audiences. We recognize that our interpretations are shaped by our cultural backgrounds, linguistic repertoire, and the specific institutional contexts in which we are embedded. While this insider perspective offers valuable insights, we also acknowledge the limitations it may impose, including potential biases in interpreting institutional messaging or overidentifying with certain student experiences.

| Principle 1: Orientation towards human rights, values, peace, and social justice | Principle 2: Participation and competence for political action |
|---|---|
| Presence of links or descriptions (language) of programs/initiatives/resources on:<br>• institutional diversity and inclusion initiatives<br>• social justice centers or offices<br>• human rights-related programs and news<br>• community service and volunteer opportunities<br>• study abroad programs with social justice focus<br>• student organizations addressing social justice issues or dedicated to human rights advocacy<br>• adequacy of equitable support services for international students that cater to their rights and values which lead to wellbeing and cultural competence (e.g. counseling, language assistance, visa guidance) | Presence of calendar events, descriptions (language), or links to:<br>• current world news and events with commentary relevant to global citizenship<br>• university statements of support regarding social issues with emphasis on global citizenship<br>• workshops and activities that inform the college campus on global affairs, international students' concerns, and sociopolitical issues on a world scale<br>• health, safety, and assistance for international students affected by current issues with call to civic action |
| Principle 3: Critical inquiry | Principle 4: Adopting a historical-critical position on an individual or nation's part |
| Practices and descriptions (language) that:<br>• encourage international students to inquire, analyze, and examine social issues, news, concepts, and ideas related to global citizenship<br>• assess depth and breadth of global issues and describe their relevance to higher education and global citizenship<br>• inquire and include international students' perspectives on critical issues<br>• consider cultural sensitivity and represent international students appropriately, not in stereotypical nor tokenistic manner<br>• show willingness to discuss global and current issues with guest lecturers, various individuals, and international students through workshops and relevant events | Practices and descriptions (language) that critically portray the institution and its students as relevant members or partners in global citizenship and nation-building. These could be shown in ISSO's:<br>• "About" page<br>• vision, mission, and goal statements<br>• chronicled foundation, history, and significant events of the ISSO<br>• other relevant narratives |

**Figure 1: ISSO website rubric using Wintersteiner et al.'s (2015) four-GCEd pedagogical principles**

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four themes emerged from our analysis: 1) Compliance-centered framing in resources under "Living in the U.S." tabs, 2) HEIs' neutrality or limited engagement in global political issues and affairs, 3) a lack of explicit GCEd spaces for deep interaction with global social justice discussions, and 4) inconsistencies in HEIs' commitment to global citizenship, as stated in their vision-mission and inclusion statements.

### Compliance with "Living in the U.S."

Our analysis of 25 ISSO websites reveals a dominant emphasis on survival-oriented resources—housing, visa guidance, academic support, and cultural navigation. Purdue University and Columbia University, for example, offer extensive visa and legal compliance information, framing international student support primarily through a regulatory lens.

This compliance-centered approach positions ISSOs as mini-immigration hubs, reflecting a Western-centric discourse that prioritizes legal conformity over holistic educational development (Bamberger & Morris, 2024). From a critical GCEd perspective, such framing reinforces neoliberal dynamics, where institutional support hinges on students' legal status before broader engagement is encouraged (Pashby et al., 2020). Cornell's phrasing: "Now that you're settled…" and SUNY Buffalo's legal disclaimers exemplify this conditional access to campus life.

While necessary, this focus on compliance risks overshadows deeper values such as equity and global solidarity. Only 15 institutions extend support to health and well-being, and just five demonstrate broader GCEd-aligned initiatives such as leadership development and community engagement. USC and Texas A&M offer comprehensive wellness resources, whereas UC-Davis and UPenn promote civic participation and belonging.

However, most ISSOs stop short of connecting these services to global justice or peacebuilding. International students are often framed as passive recipients rather than active contributors to institutional transformation (Andrade & Evans, 2009 in Bhandari, 2012). Without intentional programming that fosters dialog on human rights and global challenges, internationalization risks becoming transactional rather than transformative (Calley, 2021; Killick, 2015).

Encouragingly, a minority of institutions are beginning to challenge this discourse. Future research should explore how these models can be scaled to reflect critical GCEd values more broadly.

### Neutrality to Global Political Affairs

Our analysis reveals that most ISSO websites show limited engagement with global political affairs, often focusing narrowly on U.S. immigration policy. For instance, NYU and Boston University provide updates tied to federal changes, reflecting a neoliberal approach to GCEd. A few institutions, such as UW-

Madison and UPenn, have responded to international crises—such as Libya's flooding and the war in Ukraine—by offering support services and public statements. However, these examples are exceptions; approximately 60% of the universities analyzed made no reference to global events, suggesting a stance of neutrality or prioritization of administrative content.

While neutrality is not inherently problematic, it raises concerns about missed opportunities for fostering critical GCEd. As Pashby et al. (2020) argue, higher education institutions often neglect global political, economic, and ecological issues, limiting their potential to cultivate decolonial and civic engagement.

Political engagement here refers not to partisan positions but to institutional responses to global crises, such as war, displacement, and climate disasters, that affect students. A robust GCEd approach would include current world news, statements of solidarity, and resources with calls for civic action. Some universities exemplify this, but many fall short.

This gap is further complicated by how institutions frame international students as vulnerable, especially in scam prevention messaging. Ten universities provide extensive resources on fraud, but this protective stance may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes of helplessness. For example, UIUC's ISSS suggests that international students are frequent scam targets due to unfamiliarity with U.S. systems, potentially portraying them as less competent. Hanoch and Wood (2021) noted that scams affect all demographics, yet ISSO messaging often singles out international students, warranting reflection on inclusive communication.

To empower international students, HEIs must model political awareness and responsiveness. Public acknowledgment of global events, educational programming, and support services signals that civic engagement is a valued aspect of higher education. Such efforts can foster agency and affirm students' roles as active participants in global discourse (Kotze & McMillan, 2019; Kuleta-Hulboj, 2020).

**Lack of GCEd Spaces**

Half of the top 25 HEIs have developed programs that foster intercultural engagement, often through dedicated spaces and initiatives that promote community and belonging among international students. These GCEd spaces serve as platforms for dialog, cultural exchange, and mutual learning and are often designed to facilitate social connection. While such spaces may foster global citizenship through critical inquiry, their potential to fully embody GCEd pedagogical principles and the movement from liberal to critical GCEd (Pashby et al., 2020) depend on the depth and intentionality of the engagement they support.

At the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (UMich), programs such as International Coffee Hour and 60 Minutes Around the globe invite students, scholars, and staff to connect across cultures. These events emphasize inclusivity and shared experience, offering opportunities for intercultural dialog. Northeastern University's (NU-Boston) Global Student Mentor Program pairs

incoming international graduate students with experienced peers to support their transition to life in the U.S. Through small group sessions and identity-based affinity groups, the program fosters community development and highlights values such as cross-cultural sensitivity and citizen diplomacy.

Digital spaces are also emerging as key sites for GCEd engagement. Penn State University's Experiential Digital Global Engagement (EDGE) program embeds international virtual exchange projects into courses, enabling students to collaborate with peers worldwide. The EDGE promotes intercultural competence and global learning objectives, especially for students unable to study abroad. Similarly, Carnegie Mellon University's (CMU) Virtual Neighbors Program connects international students with staff and administrators for monthly virtual meetups, aiming to foster meaningful relationships, cultural exchange, and a sense of belonging.

While most ISSO websites focus primarily on logistical and social support, a few institutions offer programs that explicitly encourage international students to engage in global issues. Arizona State University's (ASU) Global Leadership Academy exemplifies this deeper commitment (Figure 2). Through tracks such as "The Human Connection: Nonprofit and Global Change," "The Economic Impact: Global Business," and "Working Together: Intercultural Competence and Communication," students participate in webinars and activities that cultivate empathy, cross-cultural collaboration, and critical reflection on global challenges. This program moves beyond social connections to actively involve students in leadership development and global discourse.



**Figure 2:** ASU's program for exposing international students to global issues

These initiatives not only provide social and academic support but also reflect values aligned with global citizenship. Language such as "inclusive community," "shared experience," "intercultural competence," and "citizen diplomacy" signals a commitment to helping international students feel seen, supported, and empowered to engage with diverse perspectives (Gaitan-Aguilar et al., 2024). However, the fact that only approximately half of ISSOs have adopted such approaches reveals a significant gap in the integration of GCEd within international student support services. Many existing GCEd spaces lack the depth needed to critically engage international students in analyzing global issues, examining social justice concerns, and reflecting on their roles as global citizens.

A more comprehensive application of GCEd principles would involve programming that actively includes international students' perspectives, encourages inquiry into global and current issues, and avoids tokenistic representations. This requires the intentional design of culturally sensitive spaces that support critical dialog, diverse guest speakers, and workshops that connect global challenges to students' lived experiences and academic contexts (Bi, 2025; Obst et al., 2025). Without such depth, GCEd risks being reduced to surface-level multiculturalism rather than a transformative educational practice.

## Inconsistencies in Vision Mission Statements

To better understand how GCEd is institutionally framed, this study examined the vision, mission, inclusion, and strategic statements found on ISSO webpages. These statements, often located on "About" pages or in sections detailing the ISSO's goals and history, offer insight into how U.S. HEIs position themselves and their international students within broader global and national contexts. Analyzing these narratives helps assess whether institutions adopt a historical-critical stance on global citizenship and nation-building or whether they primarily frame internationalization through service provision and compliance.

Among the top 25 HEIs, only 10 ISSOs had publicly accessible vision-mission or inclusion statements. Of these, only Arizona State University explicitly referenced "global citizens," while the University of California–Los Angeles cited "global connection" and "international understanding." The remaining institutions emphasized themes such as providing a "safe and welcoming environment," offering "culturally sensitive services," and promoting "intercultural engagement." While these are important for supporting international students' well-being, they fall short of articulating a critical GCEd perspective that positions students as active participants in global discourse and transformation (Pashby et al., 2020; Stearns, 2008 in Clothey, 2011). This leads us to question whether global narratives and histories are intentionally ignored by U.S. HEIs.

This limited framing suggests that many ISSOs function primarily as immigration and resource centers rather than as spaces that cultivate global citizenship. The absence of language that encourages critical inquiry, civic engagement, or global responsibility reflects a missed opportunity to align

international student services with the broader educational mission of fostering globally minded graduates (Olds, 2012; Grad & van der Zande, 2022).

Moreover, many HEIs reserve their most explicit commitments to global citizenship for study abroad offices, which primarily target domestic students. This bifurcation reinforces a problematic narrative in which international students are positioned as recipients of support rather than as co-constructors of global knowledge and action. For example, while Arizona State University's ISSO references global citizenship, its broader institutional initiatives, such as the Global Leadership Academy, are more clearly aligned with GCEd principles. Similarly, the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor's strategic plan for global inclusion and Penn State University's global impact page, which commits to "resolving global challenges of our time," reflect institutional-level engagement with global citizenship, although not always through the ISSO itself.

A critical GCEd lens calls for institutional narratives, especially those found in ISSO "About" pages, vision-mission statements, and historical accounts, to portray international students not as passive beneficiaries of services but as relevant members and partners in global citizenship and nation-building (Stanlick & Szmodis, 2020). This includes using language that reflects the institution's commitment to global responsibility and intercultural dialog and chronicles the ISSO's evolution in ways that highlight its role in fostering global engagement. Without such framing, ISSOs risk reinforcing a narrow, transactional model of internationalization. To fully realize the transformative potential of GCEd, HEIs must embed critical global citizenship values into the foundational narratives of their international student services.

## SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

Taken together, the four themes, compliance-centered framing, institutional neutrality toward global political affairs, limited GCEd spaces, and inconsistencies in vision-mission statements, reveal a fragmented landscape of GCEd across U.S. HEIs. While some ISSOs demonstrate promising practices that support international students' holistic development and civic engagement, the dominant trend remains to focus on administrative support and risk management.

These patterns suggest that institutional approaches to GCEd vary not only in depth but also in how international students are positioned—either as passive recipients of services or as active contributors to global discourse. To better understand these variations, we propose a typology that categorizes HEIs on the basis of their level of GCEd implementation and their framing of international student agency. This typology offers a conceptual bridge between thematic findings and institutional practice, providing a structured lens to assess how ISSOs enact global citizenship values in both discourse and design.

**Typology Levels of GCEd Initiatives in HEIs through ISSOs**

Mittelmeier et al. (2024), in their scoping review of nearly a thousand articles on higher education internationalization, argue that transformative internationalization must counter Westernization and colonial imaginaries. This requires challenging the colonial structures and practices embedded in International Student and Scholar Offices (ISSOs), particularly as represented through their websites. The development of critical global awareness is essential, especially when advocating for the inclusion of international students as partners and active agents on campus. When international students face systemic marginalization and exclusion through sociopolitical forces, higher education institutions must move beyond superficial multicultural initiatives and commit to institution-wide efforts that embody global citizenship education (Tavares, 2024). Based on our analysis of ISSO websites, we propose a matrix to categorize HEIs by their implementation of GCEd initiatives and their perception of international students as either passive or active agents of global citizenship. This typology identifies four levels of engagement (Table 2):

**Table 2: Levels of GCEd Initiatives on ISSO Websites**

|  | **Passive** HEI | **Active** HEI |
|---|---|---|
| **Passive** International Students | Level 1 Resources Provision | Level 2 Sharing of Political Affairs |
| **Active** International Students | Level 3 Encouraging Discussion Spaces | Level 4 Envisioning the Future for Global Citizenship |

In the first level (passive IS–passive HEI), institutions provide extensive resources for international students, which accentuate their rights in several aspects— housing, safety, language support, and legal presence in the U.S. HEIs do well at this level, as they flourish websites with multiple links and descriptions to institutional resources that international students can access. However, we argue that this is the bare minimum in GCEd implementation and that focusing mainly on providing resources alone will highlight international students' struggle to survive living in the U.S. and assimilate or acculturate sooner. The ISSS Scam Safety page of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign offers extensive resources but frames international students as vulnerable due to their unfamiliarity with U.S. systems. This reinforces a narrative of dependency rather than empowerment.

The second level (passive IS – active HEI) acknowledges HEIs' active engagement with global civic and sociopolitical affairs, recognizing their scholarly contribution to the international discourse. With HEIs paving the way to initiate competently with global citizenship through the sharing of news and extending messages of support, among other links and descriptions on ISSO websites, they embody international cooperation and understand and model

proper civic engagement for all students. UPenn's response to the Ukraine crisis included expert briefings, counseling, and immigration support, modeling civic engagement and institutional solidarity.

The third level (active IS–passive HEI) allows international students to be engaged with global citizens through discussion spaces that HEIs provide for safe, healthy, and curated participation. ISSO websites have to be more discerning in including descriptions and links to resources, events, workshops, organizations, and individuals who serve as safe spaces for dialog for international students to discuss and share their identities, experiences, insights, and opinions on matters that affect and are of interest to them. Beyond a safe campus, ISSOs and HEIs, through websites, must encourage international students to be active participants in civic engagement and global affairs, eminent in a university of thought and learning. NU-Boston's Global Student Mentor Program includes identity-based affinity groups and small group sessions that encourage cross-cultural dialog. However, institutional framing remains focused on transition and support rather than critical engagement with global issues.

Finally, the fourth level (active IS–active HEI) is the transformative and systematic appeal of global citizenship across the entire HEI. With vision-mission statements revised in ISSOs to target global citizens in their graduates to gather narratives inspired by intercultural cooperation and global understanding, HEIs and all their constituents are invited to foresee a future where global citizenship is achieved by everyone, for everyone. ASU's Global Leadership Academy exemplifies this level by offering tracks focused on global change, economic impact, and intercultural competence. Students engage in webinars and activities that promote leadership, empathy, and critical reflection on global challenges. The program reflects the vision of international students as co-creators of global citizenship.

This typology highlights the need for HEIs to move toward Level 4, where global citizenship is not only a stated value but also a lived institutional practice (Olds, 2012). To do so, universities must revise vision-mission statements, integrate global citizenship into strategic planning, and create inclusive spaces that empower international students as agents of change. By modeling critical engagement with global affairs, HEIs can inspire students to participate meaningfully in civic and political action, anchor their agency and engagement in campus life and fulfill the transformative potential of global citizenship education and critical internationalization.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The work of international student service offices (ISSOs) across U.S. higher education institutions is commendable in its provision of extensive services that support international students from prearrival through adjustment. However, these offices must also reflect a critical global perspective that aligns with the broader educational mission of fostering global citizenship. While some U.S. HEIs are recognized internationally for their academic excellence and sustainability efforts, this status is not universal. Therefore, rather than assuming global prestige,

institutions should strive to demonstrate a commitment to global citizenship education (GCEd) through intentional and inclusive practices within their ISSOs.

Our analysis reveals that many ISSO websites reinforce a U.S.-centric, neoliberal, and at times colonial framing of global citizenship, primarily positioning international students as recipients of immigration and logistical support. This narrow focus risks reducing ISSOs to administrative hubs rather than centers of intercultural learning and civic engagement. To counter this, higher education institutions must embrace a transformative approach that positions international students as active contributors to global discourse and institutional development.

In alignment with a critical GCEd paradigm, HEIs, particularly through their ISSOs, should adopt a proactive and advocacy-oriented role in international affairs. This involves moving beyond facilitating adaptation to the U.S. context and instead fostering meaningful engagement with global concerns. ISSOs should create visible and accessible opportunities for international students to participate in global initiatives, including volunteering, organizing humanitarian and sustainability efforts, and contributing to informed discourse on international politics. These efforts should be reflected not only in programming but also in the language, structure, and strategic priorities of institutional platforms.

Where possible, ISSOs should align their vision, mission, and strategic objectives with the core principles of GCEd, including historical-critical awareness, intercultural competence, and a strong orientation toward human rights and social justice. This means cultivating support systems that empower students to become active participants in global civic life—not just within the classroom but across the entire campus ecosystem. When HEIs institutionalize the tenets of GCEd, they contribute meaningfully to the advancement of diversity, equity, inclusion, and global solidarity. Future research that explores our typology levels of active international student engagement and examines critical GCEd is encouraged to pursue unity in higher education internationalization aims and practices.

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