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Navigating New Shores: Strengthening Support Systems for International Students in Post-Pandemic America

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ABSTRACT: *The U.S. has long been a top destination for international students, with more than a million choosing it for higher education each year. Since the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the looming demographic cliff, universities have intensified their recruitment efforts, making effective support programs even more crucial. While many students thrive academically, others face challenges—not from a lack of ability but from the complexities of adapting to U.S. academic culture, which can differ greatly from their own. Students value support services such as orientation programs, social activities, academic advice, and opportunities to form meaningful connections. They see these as essential to their success. To stay competitive, universities must continuously strengthen these systems to attract and retain qualified students.*

Keywords: Adaptation, International Students, Retention, Success, Support

INTRODUCTION

International students are a vital component of colleges and universities in the U.S., bringing diversity and financial revenue to institutions. According to Campbell (2017), an international student is a temporary, nonimmigrant who is actively enrolled in an academic course of study at an institution of higher education in the U.S. They are recognized as a major source of income for colleges and their surrounding communities (Buckner et al., 2022). International students leave their families and friends behind and travel to a country that is completely different from what they are accustomed to. Adjusting to life in the United States is often a struggle for international students, leading to feelings of loneliness, isolation, and homesickness.

International students face many challenges when they come to the U.S. They need to adjust to a different academic environment and a culture that differs from their own. International students tend to feel pressure to adapt while holding back their unique cultural identities (Alinda, 2021). International students struggle with English and experience academic difficulties (Mitry, 2023). According to Mitry (2023), difficulties with English grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary can impede their ability to perform well on papers, assignments, and exams and may lead to academic integrity issues. Campbell (2017) asserted that language proficiency is often the greatest single barrier to academic success and full campus engagement. Mitry (2023) reported that domestic students' use of idioms and slang can pose language comprehension challenges for international students. Negative academic performance is closely linked to student retention, which is diminished by academic ability, language proficiency, loneliness, anxiety, and cultural adjustment (Haverila et al., 2020).

International students also experience social isolation and integration issues when they adjust to life in the U.S. They often feel disconnected from domestic students and lack meaningful opportunities to form friendships (Mitry, 2023). According to Campbell (2017), international students sometimes find it challenging to form friendships with domestic students because of the variations in the levels of friendships and are usually left feeling comparable to an outsider. The lack of communication between domestic and international students does not provide an environment for international students to be involved in activities and social programs that colleges might offer (Alinda, 2021). Many times, international students hesitate to become completely involved in campus activities because they are worried about being viewed as different from their American peers (Alinda, 2021).

International students also experience mental health issues and emotional strain when they transition to the United States. According to Mitry (2023), international students are more likely than domestic students are to experience high levels of anxiety, stress, and homesickness when they are assimilating to higher education institutions. As Koo et al. (2021) reported, international students face many challenges, such as finances, adjustments to a different education system, language barriers, social customs and norms, and homesickness, which can alter their mental state. The anxiety and stress faced by

international students extend beyond the sociocultural environment and academics, as they must adapt to new weather conditions, smells, and sounds that may affect their physical comfort (Alinda, 2021).

Navigating institutional systems and the differentiation they entail is also a challenge for international students. For example, according to Mitry (2023), institutional communication is confusing, and international students are unsure of where to seek assistance. Without clear guidance, many international students feel lost or redirected between various offices without any resolution (Campbell, 2017). According to Alinda (2021), international students found administrative processes, such as advising, registration, and financial aid, uncoordinated and confusing.

The COVID-19 pandemic increased the challenges international students already faced and created new stressors, particularly related to isolation, uncertainty, and limited access to in-person resources (Mitry, 2023). A survey with approximately 33,000 college students across the United States during the Fall 2020 semester indicated that half of the students witnessed depression and/or anxiety (Pat-Horenczyk et al., 2022). According to Alinda (2021), COVID-19 forced colleges and universities to reexamine how services were delivered to their international student population, as they struggled with a sense of uncertainty with visas, isolation due to campus shutdown, and restricted access to services they formerly counted on in person (Alinda, 2021). In addition, COVID-19 exacerbated the academic and social isolation of international students and emphasized the existing systemic gaps (Campbell, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic strongly affected the academic, financial, and mental well-being of international students, causing many challenges and stresses associated with immigration status and restricted access to financial support (Olatunji et al., 2023). The pandemic had a major effect on college students because of various challenges, including health concerns, economic confusion, loneliness and isolation, adapting to the remote environment, and graduating on time (Veerasamy & Ammigan, 2022). International students experienced increased financial and emotional challenges, including the need for alternative housing, adjusting to remote learning, bank closures in home countries, complex insurance and health care coverage, travel and reentry limitations, and new immigration protocols for maintaining status in the U.S. (Veerasamy & Ammigan, 2022).

There are numerous ways in which colleges and universities can attempt to decrease hardships and challenges for international students. To stay competitive, universities must continuously strengthen these systems to attract and retain qualified students. Given the numerous benefits that international students offer to colleges and universities, it is important that U.S. higher education institutions provide the proper support and resources for international students to ensure that they can flourish and succeed in a drastically changing environment.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg's transition theory provides insight into how international students experience and manage the significant life transition of students studying abroad. Schlossberg's transition theory serves as a framework for investigating an

individual's movement through and adjustment to a transition that they are experiencing in life, one that often develops into new routines, roles, assumptions, and relationships (Derrick et al., 2019). According to Derrick et al. (2019), a transition in a person's life occurs when "an event or nonevent results in change in one's behavior and relationships" (p.25-26). Under this transition theory, individuals move through the transition process in three phases: moving in, moving through, and moving out (Derrick et al., 2019). Schlossberg's transition theory focuses on a four-part model, referred to as the "4S" transition system, and describes the four categories of factors that affect how people cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies (Derrick et al., 2019). Many international students struggle with the transition, and Schlossberg's transition theory explains why some students thrive while others struggle. To a large extent, this depends on their pre-arrival preparation, personal resilience, access to institutional and social support, and ability to develop the coping strategies needed for adjustment and success.

Tinto's theory of student integration (1993) provides a theoretical framework for understanding international student persistence in higher education. Drawing on Tinto's assertion that meaningful academic and social integration is critical to student success, the article suggests that international student retention is strongly influenced by students' ability to navigate U.S. academic and cultural norms and find opportunities to positively engage with peers, faculty, staff, and the wider community. The model highlights the role played by institutions in the retention of these students and the importance of having well-resourced, coordinated, cross-campus support structures.

Postpandemic Landscape for International Students

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly reshaped international education, affecting virtually every aspect of how students study abroad, how institutions operate, and how governments regulate cross-border mobility. The immediate impact of the pandemic was disruptive, forcing universities to close campuses, shift to fully online instruction, and implement emergency measures to protect students and staff. However, while many of these disruptions have eased over time, several changes introduced during the crisis have become permanent features of the higher education landscape. One of the most significant shifts was the rapid expansion of online and hybrid learning models. Universities accelerated the integration of virtual components into their curricula, making remote instruction a viable complement to traditional in-person programs (Halpern, 2020). This not only allowed institutions to continue serving students during lockdowns but also opened new opportunities for flexible program delivery, accommodating students who may not be able to travel internationally for extended periods. In many cases, these hybrid offerings remain, reflecting a lasting adaptation that has broadened access to education while also providing resilience against future disruptions.

Moreover, immigration policies evolved in response to the pandemic. The U.S. Government temporarily introduced flexible measures, such as reducing in-person class requirements and extending poststudy work opportunities, to

accommodate students affected by campus closures or travel restrictions. These measures were eventually discounted (NAFSA, 2023). These changes temporarily altered traditional patterns of student mobility, allowing many students to continue their studies without disruption. Over time, some of these flexible measures were institutionalized, permanently influencing visa structures and postgraduation employment pathways. Globally, border and travel controls became more entrenched, signaling a long-term shift in how governments approach cross-border movement in response to public health threats (Keating, 2025). Even as the immediate health crisis subsides, the legacy of these policies persists through heightened scrutiny of travel, ongoing requirements for proof of vaccination or health status, and increased reliance on digital tools for monitoring and compliance. This trend underscores a broader recognition that international education exists within a complex web of health, safety, and regulatory considerations, which are likely to remain central in shaping student mobility for years to come.

As U.S. institutions continued to recover from the pandemic's impacts, a new wave of challenges emerged because of shifts in immigration policies. One of the most disruptive measures in recent years was the nearly month-long pause in scheduling new F-1, M-1, and J-1 visa interviews implemented beginning in May 2025. This temporary freeze occurred during a period when visa issuance activity is typically at its peak for fall academic intake, creating a significant bottleneck for students hoping to start their studies on schedule (Northeastern, 2025). This pause not only delayed the processing of thousands of visa applications but also introduced uncertainty and anxiety among prospective students, many of whom had already committed financially and academically to U.S. institutions. For universities, the delay disrupted enrollment projections, housing assignments, and course planning, highlighting the interconnectedness of immigration policy and institutional operations.

When visa interview processing resumed in June 2025, the U.S. State Department introduced stringent new vetting requirements. Applicants are now required to make their social media profiles publicly accessible so that consular officers can review their "online presence" as part of the evaluation process (Yale University, OISS, 2025). This measure represents a significant shift toward increased surveillance and scrutiny of applicants' digital lives, raising questions about privacy, equity, and the potential impact on students from countries with varying social media norms or limited digital access. While the policy aims to enhance national security and mitigate risks, it also adds another layer of complexity to the visa process, creating additional stress and potential barriers for international students.

The combined effect of the scheduling pause and heightened vetting requirements has had a measurable effect on student mobility. According to the ICEF Monitor (2025), compared with the same period in the previous year, F-1 visa issuances decreased by more than 14% between January and May 2025. The pause itself, which affected a critical three-week window in the high-volume May-to-August period, was projected to reduce visa appointments by between 80,000 and 145,000, potentially leading to a 7–11% decline in international

student enrollment. These disruptions have immediate practical implications for universities, including potential revenue shortfalls, reduced cultural diversity on campuses, and the need to adjust support services for incoming students. They also have broader implications for U.S. higher education's global competitiveness, as other countries may become more attractive destinations for students facing uncertainty in the U.S. visa process.

Department of State data from July 2025 further illustrate the scale of this disruption. In May 2025 alone, 12,689 fewer F-1 visas were issued than in the previous year, representing a 22% decrease (Mowreader, 2025). Shorelight's mid-year assessment corroborates this trend, reporting that as of May 2025, only 95,000 F-1 visas had been issued since January—the lowest mid-year total in the past three years (Shorelight, 2025). These figures not only highlight the immediate impact on students planning to begin their studies but also indicate potential longer-term effects on enrollment patterns, international recruitment strategies, and the financial health of U.S. institutions. If current visa policies remain unchanged, the cumulative effect could further hinder students' ability to access U.S. education and limit the diversity of perspectives that international students bring to campuses.

The implications of these changes extend beyond enrollment figures. International students contribute significantly to the U.S. economy, both directly through tuition and living expenses and indirectly by supporting research, innovation, and global partnerships (NAFSA, 2024). Reductions in visa issuance and enrollment can therefore have economic consequences, potentially affecting local communities, institutional budgets, and broader economic sectors connected to international education. Moreover, the pandemic-era shift in educational delivery models, combined with stricter visa requirements, may encourage students to explore alternative destinations that offer greater flexibility or less bureaucratic complexity. Countries with streamlined digital visa processes, shorter program offerings, and robust health contingency planning may gain a competitive advantage, compelling U.S. institutions to adapt their recruitment and retention strategies accordingly.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant and lasting changes in international education, including the transformation of instructional delivery, education abroad programming, and student mobility patterns. While many emergency measures have eased, several adaptations have become permanent, including online and hybrid learning, flexible program structures, and revised immigration policies. The recent pause in visa scheduling and the introduction of enhanced social media vetting for U.S. student visas exemplify the ongoing evolution of international student policies, highlighting both the vulnerabilities and the resilience of global education systems. The long-term legacy of these developments is multifaceted, affecting enrollment trends, institutional planning, global competitiveness, and the broader landscape of cross-border education. As universities and governments continue to navigate this complex environment, the ability to anticipate and respond to policy shifts, health crises, and technological innovations will be critical in sustaining robust, equitable, and accessible international education opportunities. As institutions strive to increase

accessibility for international students, several significant gaps remain that require attention and improvement. These gaps can impact students' overall experience and success in adapting to a new educational environment. The following section outlines some of the critical challenges faced by international students. Addressing these challenges is essential for fostering a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere for all students.

Gaps in Existing Support Structures

International students often encounter very fragmented and siloed services across campuses. This can affect their ability to successfully transition to and be integrated into U.S. college life. Fragmented services, if unmanaged, can cause conflicting information, delay the resolution of student issues and a struggle to navigate complex processes, which often do not take into account cultural nuances that might affect how an international student shows up to an office. Without intentional support for international students, these barriers lead to increased confusion, stress, and underutilization of needed services.

Many academic and administrative units are not adequately prepared to support international students because of gaps in staff advising on their general needs and the specific considerations they must understand when providing assistance. As a result, students occasionally receive incorrect information when they seek advice. For instance, if an international student is struggling academically, they might be encouraged to drop out of a course during the semester without realizing that doing so could jeopardize their immigration status by causing them to fall below the required full-time enrollment status. Another example would be academic units or career centers organizing international students to work off-campus without proper immigration approval. Because of the fear of misadvising and other frustrations, ISSS staff often overrely on even the general immigration policies related to their service area.

International students are often left feeling frustrated with what they believe is a bureaucratic institution of "innumerable and unnecessary hurdles", leading them to be unable to obtain direct answers to issues (Mbous et al., 2022). Students become frustrated when policies and procedures are created without consideration of unintended consequences for international students—usually because of a lack of representation of expertise at the policy table. Unpreparedness in this area causes an added layer of angst by the institution, when they must be reactive when a situation occurs that was never planned for or considered, such as an international student caveat to a policy concerning the death of a student. Without the internationalization of policies, processes and services, this continues to lead to a lack of knowledge on the part of faculty and staff, which limits the level of advocacy that an international student can expect to receive across campus units.

Over the past two decades, many institutions across the U.S. have invested in the significant expansion of international enrollment, without putting the same investment into the necessary resources to support them upon arrival—using them to primarily fund the general budget (Choudaha, 2017). This lack of necessary resources often looks like a very understaffed and underresourced International Student Support Services (ISSS) office—providing only basic immigration policy

enforcement and programming, instead of including advocacy and expanded support. This lack of preparation of the campus to welcome international students on campus, as well as ignorance of international student issues, can cause cultural misunderstandings, microaggressions, and frustrations on the part of both the student and the staff member or faculty.

Recruitment and admissions staff must work actively to ensure that the institution is able to deliver what is being marketed to students and their families. If universities are actively recruiting international students—often sight unseen—they have an ethical obligation to foster an overall positive experience for the students. One of the first breakdowns that often occurs during the student's journey is the lack of focused admission and prearrival support for international students. Students are often navigating the admissions process from thousands of miles away and will arrive with hopes that they have made the right choice. It is critical for institutions to ensure a seamless transition from admission to ISSS—to include early communication from ISSS regarding available visa support and arrival services. An international student's first impression of the institution and its support often set the tone for their transition. Without competent staff and a well-resourced ISSS office, international students lack the basic support that is necessary for them to successfully transition and thrive upon arrival at campus.

Orientation is a critical tool for helping students transition well to U.S. colleges and universities but can also be a source of anxiety and stress for many international students. In addition to confirming for students that they made the right choice in their attendance at an institution, it should also be an opportunity to introduce students to the services and support offices that are available to guide them throughout their student journeys. Orientation should be uniquely curated on the basis of the needs of the students, and the psychological and physiological states of the students during orientation activities should be considered. Failure to do this often leads to information overload because of the amount of information being delivered to the student over a very short period, while it is associated with travel fatigue.

The lack of optimal services and support can lead to students not integrating into the college and social environment—leading to feelings of insecurity, isolation, and academic and social challenges (Rivaset al., 2019). This is difficult for international students who are often studying in a country thousands of miles away from family and other established social safety nets. This lack of community often leads to feelings of depression and other mental health concerns, which, when coupled with the stigma regarding mental health in many cultures, affects a student's ability to achieve self-actualization.

International students enter the U.S. college classroom, often without the right tools for immediate success. Culturally, U.S. college classrooms are interactive and engaging, while international students often come from education systems where they are expected to absorb information given to them and regurgitate it on an exam at the end of the term. Oftentimes, there is no active discussion in the classrooms. Without a proper orientation of what the student can expect, they are bound to struggle—unlearning years of socialization in the classroom. Additionally, international students often struggle with identifying and

understanding issues of plagiarism and academic integrity (Sanni-Anibire et al., 2021). This issue, if not addressed in the beginning—and reinforced early and often, can lead to issues of academic dishonesty, sometimes unintended.

The existence of a support service is not enough if students are not aware of or understand their purpose in their overall student success. Perry et al., (2020) reported that many services go underutilized—often because students are unaware that it was available to them. International students may also choose not to use the support services they are aware of. There is sometimes fear of judgment, cultural nuances, and mistrust of services and concerns about whether usage could impact academic and visa status. Lee and Ciftci (2014) reported that this concern is even more amplified for students who are nonnative speakers of English, as they often have difficulty explaining and advocating for themselves.

Without the utilization of official services and support options, students rely on informal structures to solicit support and advice. Students often rely on peer networks, including individual students and student organizations, for advice on academic and social integration—which is seen as more relatable and trustworthy than the general university community is. This reliance on peer feedback can sometimes lead to misinformation and further reinforce feelings of isolation among students (Glass & Westmont, 2014). Some students look to faculty members for academic advice and mentorship. This also has its limitations, since faculty are often limited in scope with respect to how they are able to assist students outside of the academic realm. While students might feel a familiarity with faculty members who are from a similar cultural background, they may also struggle with faculty who are from cultures with high power differential (Glass & Westmont, 2014).

Promising Practices and Institutional Innovations

International students value and benefit from support services that tailor to their needs and assist them in adapting to a U.S. higher education institution. Virtual advising and engagement models that allow flexibility in meeting and connecting with students are vital in a dynamic and swiftly changing environment. It is also important for colleges and universities to implement community-building initiatives and a peer mentorship program, an individual who international students can reach out to in times of need. Collaboration across the campus community, such as through academic support, counseling, and career services, ensures that university personnel are working together to support international students with their flourishing and success.

Virtual advising and engagement models

Virtual advising and engagement models were crucial during the pandemic and have since evolved and become vital components of institutional success. Virtual advising developed into a lifeline for many international students during COVID-19, allowing the continuation of support and services for international students (Mitry, 2023). Although virtual advising was not meant for long-term utilization of colleges and universities, it allowed for easier and more efficient advising methods, increasing the opportunity for students to meet with

university personnel without having to be on campus. According to Alinda (2021), remote orientation programs, webinars, and peer support platforms were recognized as beneficial methods for connecting with students across borders and time zones. According to Campbell (2017), virtual student mentors or ambassadors played a crucial role in assisting new students in feeling less alone before and after their transition to the United States.

One of the main components that support international student engagement is developing a social network by forming more connections to the college campus and building a notion of belonging in their new environment (Sebit & Baroudi, 2024). Student engagement is crucial to the international student experience and includes students' involvement in social experiences and academic activities (Sebti & Baroudi, 2024). Sebti and Baroudi (2024) report that an international student's degree of social engagement has a major effect on their academic performance. Research indicates that interactions with different individuals, including faculty interactions and interactions with their peers, in addition to faculty care and responsiveness, enhance international student engagement in their communities and motivation, which in turn affects their determination to learn and succeed (Sebti & Baroudi, 2024).

To further increase access and success, colleges and universities should integrate asynchronous content, such as prerecorded workshops and video webinars, prerecorded orientation content and tutorials, in addition to active advising sessions (Alinda, 2020). Implementing various approaches, such as direct and mass email, video and teleconferencing, social media, newsletters, phone, and website updates, can assist in reaching and meeting the communication preferences of various student populations (Veerasamy & Ammigan, 2022). Colleges and universities should promote the intercultural engagement of faculty, students, and staff by ensuring that resources are accessible to all students, in addition to organizing events where students from various cultures and backgrounds can work together and learn about each other's unique culture (Sebti & Baroudi, 2024).

Peer mentorship and community-building initiatives

Peer mentorship and community-building initiatives are vital to ensuring that international students feel supported. Peer mentorship provides a sense of trust for international students, who have an individual whom they can connect with and go to for support. Peer mentorship plays a vital role in the successful social and academic adaptation of international students (Mitry, 2023). The social engagement of international students with domestic students and the overall community both inside and outside their university has many short- and long-term positive effects (Kamran & Awan, 2024). Community integration and social engagement greatly improve the academic success and overall experience of international students in U.S. higher education institutions (Kamran & Awan, 2024).

Peer mentorship is crucial when international students first arrive in the United States, connecting with peers and forming a social network to discuss challenges or concerns. According to Alinda (2021), peer mentorship should

occur during orientation weeks and beyond, creating longer-lasting relationships and ongoing interactions. Sebti and Baroudi (2014) describe a mentoring relationship as strongly influenced by various components that form the cultural identities, belief systems, values, and lived experiences of the mentee and the mentor, including their positionalities in their sociocultural, professional, and institutional environments.

Community-building initiatives should be ongoing and inclusive, providing an opportunity for international students to connect with individuals from various backgrounds, including domestic students. Alinda (2021) described how social programming, including faculty–student dinners, study groups, and cultural nights, helped international students feel welcomed and a part of the campus community. Colleges and universities that integrate student-led programming and affinity spaces resulted in stronger engagement and more culturally responsive interactions (Campbell, 2017). Campbell (2017) reported how international students valued peer events conducted in smaller groups or informal settings, such as cooking classes or virtual coffee chats. International students who adapt to the institutional culture, actively engage in extracurricular activities, and form connections with faculty and peers are significantly more likely to graduate on time and continue to succeed (Kamran & Awan, 2024).

Collaborations across campus units (e.g., academic support, counseling, career services)

Higher education institutions need to do more to assist international students in adapting and adjusting to life in the United States by working collaboratively across campus units. Colleges and universities need to develop centralized international student support teams with individuals from various offices around campuses, such as those providing financial aid, academic support, counseling, and career services (Mitry, 2023). According to Mitry (2023), ongoing interdepartmental meetings and joint communication platforms would streamline services and avoid miscommunication. Models of collaborative support services are needed where many departments around campuses can respond to the holistic needs of international students (Alinda, 2021). Alinda (2021) described how embedded support methods, such as having international student contacts within counseling or advising offices, formed easier, more effective service experiences.

Collaboration should be continuous, purposeful, and based on shared student information to target students' personal, professional, and academic development in an integrated way (Alinda, 2021). According to Campbell (2017), integrative programming results in a greater level of success and engagement for international students. International students who interacted with many, interlinked support services felt more prepared and welcomed to the campus community (Campbell, 2017). Community engagement among international students enhances their soft skills, improving their career preparedness at the same time (Kamran & Awan, 2024). As such, colleges and universities need to work collaboratively and continuously to ensure that international students are well

supported and have the proper resources for them to achieve their academic and professional goals.

Policy and Advocacy Considerations

There are several important policy and advocacy considerations to address in the effort to enhance support for international education and make studying abroad, particularly in the United States, more appealing to international students. Below are a few of these key considerations.

Role of federal and institutional policies

As the field of international education continues to evolve, it is essential for institutions and stakeholders to seek strategies that will fortify the field against the challenges it is currently facing. This support should be rooted in robust advocacy for systemic policy improvements and sustainable practices. For example, it is evident that in the United States, the implementation of restrictive immigration measures and the enforcement of actions against students from specific countries are on the rise (Lukacs, 2025). Policies such as the suspension of visas and the threat of deportation can significantly deter international enrollment in American educational institutions, not only jeopardizing the diverse intellectual capital that international students bring to universities and colleges but also threatening to diminish the country's soft power on the global stage (Haas, 2025). Soft power refers to the ability to attract and influence others through cultural and ideological appeal rather than coercion or monetary incentives (Nye, 2004). By alienating potential students, these restrictive measures may lead to a decline in the exchange of ideas and cultural understanding, which are vital for fostering innovation and collaboration. This situation highlights the critical need for policymakers to address potential pitfalls in immigration policy with a careful and forward-thinking approach, ensuring that they balance national security interests with the benefits of maintaining a welcoming academic environment for students from around the world.

On the other hand, institutions must uphold the commitments made to prospective students. During the recruitment process, U.S. higher education institutions often differentiate themselves by emphasizing distinctive approaches to supporting international students. These commitments range from promises of suitable housing, comprehensive orientation programs, access to campus facilities, and the cultivation of a welcoming community, which is a critical part of the student decision-making process (NAFSA, 2024). It is essential that these assurances are honored upon students' arrival, as unmet expectations can negatively impact retention, satisfaction, and institutional reputation (Choudaha & Schulmann, 2014).

Upholding such commitments requires careful balance. Institutions must navigate the needs and expectations of international students; address parental concerns; and comply with a complex network of local, state, and federal regulations governing housing, safety, and immigration (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2023). A student-centered approach, aligned with regulatory

requirements, strengthens trust and fosters positive academic and cultural experience for international learners.

Clear communication from government institutions

To strengthen trust in the agencies that support international students, it is crucial that policy updates, especially those affecting student immigration, are communicated clearly, consistently, and transparently. Organizations such as the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) play key roles in managing visa status and maintaining institutional confidence. When policy changes are unpredictable or unclear, they can significantly disrupt students' academic paths and personal lives.

A recent example underscores these dangers: in early 2025, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), via its Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arm, abruptly marked thousands of international students' records in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) as "terminated." Estimates vary; however, between 2000 and 4700 students were affected (Brasch and Hennessy, 2025). Even students with minimal interactions with law enforcement, such as minor traffic infractions, sometimes find their SEVIS entries eliminated, triggering immediate loss of lawful F-1 status, as recognized in immigration tracking systems (Olivares, 2025). The impact was immediate and devastating. Many students were caught off guard, received no warning from the DHS or their institutions, and found themselves suddenly out of status. One student with only a speeding ticket was speculatively linked to a SEVIS termination, despite having no criminal convictions (Presidents Alliance, 2025). Some students were coerced into "self-deportation," departing the country preemptively out of fear, even before formal notification or due process (Scott, 2025).

These unprecedented actions mounted legal pressure, yielding results, as federal courts intervened and ordered the government to restore many students' SEVIS records. ICE began reinstating statuses, with estimates indicating that thousands of records were reactivated. However, for some, the damage was irreversible. In particular, those who had already left the country were unable to return, often facing visa revocation or protracted reapplication processes (Mowreader, 2025). These events highlight the crucial importance of clear, fair, and effectively communicated policy processes. To restore confidence, the SEVP, USCIS, and DHS must implement consistent procedures when evaluating SEVIS terminations. It is essential that any criteria utilized, particularly those related to law enforcement violations, be clearly defined, narrowly focused, and applied uniformly. Students and designated school officials (DSOs) should receive advance notifications whenever feasible before any changes to records are made. Educational institutions should be empowered to assist students proactively, and standard pathways for review or reinstatement must be clearly defined and easily accessible.

Recommendations for Strengthening Support Systems on Campuses

Universities can strengthen support services for international students through the creation of comprehensive international services, investing in intercultural competency training for faculty and staff, and strengthening collaboration across campuses. Institutions can also leverage existing analytical tools to make data-driving decisions to proactively support international student enrollment goals and to create and implement strategies to address struggling students (Madden-Dentet al., 2019).

Recognizing that international students face unique challenges—not solely academic but also cultural—the International Student Office must offer integrative services such as orientation, social activities, and academic advice, all of which are key to helping students thrive in their new environment. Institutions must be intentional with the promotion of these programs and support services to students. International student offices, in collaboration with academic advising and student success units, for example, can implement semesterly check-ins for students falling below an established minimum GPA threshold. Relative to Schlossberg's transition theory, these early interventions teach students new coping strategies before academic challenges become worse. Using early alert systems also assists in catching students who are struggling in courses throughout the term. These support services not only provide practical support for international students but also offer opportunities for them to build meaningful connections within the campus community.

A comprehensive international office is often led by a Senior International Officer (SIO), who must have a strategic seat at the policy table within the institution. SIO plays a pivotal role in understanding the complexities of international education and combining the various aspects of international student support across campuses. By working with various campus departments, including admissions, academic advising, student affairs, and faculty, the SIO ensures that international students receive the necessary support to navigate both academic challenges and cultural adjustments. Understanding the unique needs of international students—from those just arriving to those near graduation—allows the SIO to champion the development of programs and services that promote their overall success.

By offering guidance and resources across campuses, international student offices play a critical role in creating an environment where international students can thrive academically, socially, and personally. Their efforts help ensure that the institution remains competitive while fostering a supportive and inclusive atmosphere that enhances both student success and the broader campus community. International student offices can maintain this support by sending semiannual reminders to key units, including HR, academic units, and student supervisors. This ensures that staff and faculty across the institutions remain informed about international students' needs and the resources available to them.

It is important for international students to feel safe and understood as they navigate living and studying in the United States. Intentionality in this area includes the creation of inclusive, trauma-informed student services—grounded in understanding challenging life events and their effect on student success. A

trauma-informed approach recognizes that many international students arrive after having experienced significant transitions, in relation to Schlossberg's transition theory, including separation from their family and friends and adapting to a new environment. To be successful in supporting international students, providing relevant training for staff and faculty; creating a welcoming environment; strategically addressing bureaucratic processes, procedures and services across campuses; and working toward offering holistic support in key areas such as counseling services and mentorship are important.

Training for faculty and staff is crucial to ensuring that international students can feel welcomed and well adjusted to life. Universities can provide training and support for faculty to assist them in best understanding the different learning styles of international students, as well as ideas to best increase their engagement in the classroom. Institutions must also invest in faculty and staff training, including tailoring academic support, to take into account international students' needs. This includes services within the writing center (plagiarism and academic writing), tutoring (time management and test taking) and counseling services (mental health and crisis intervention). Another avenue for training and positive engagement is intentional work with campus safety—including offering workshops for officers to interact positively with international students.

To strengthen international student support, institutions must adopt data-informed decision-making practices—continuously assessing and improving services and programs across campuses. Effective data collection and feedback mechanisms, including surveys, focus groups and testimonials, provide insight into the students' lived experiences, identifying gaps in support and finding opportunities for enhancement (Pfeifer & Dolan, 2023). Benchmarking against peer institutions allows institutions to best determine goals and best practices in the industry (Kirtane, 2023). It is critical to work closely with institutional research offices to monitor international student data related to enrollment, retention, and student success. Data can also be found through national databases, such as the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and organizations such as NAFSA and the annual Open Doors Report.

Cecil et al. (2022) discuss how strengthening support services for international students facilitates a smoother transition, leading to better mental health and a greater sense of belonging. While arriving in a new country and navigating a new education system and culture can be overwhelming, when international students feel supported and are aware of the useful, intentional support services and programs available to them, it leads to increased engagement, both academically and socially. This results in increased persistence and overall satisfaction.

Conclusion

The role of international students in U.S. higher education is not only significant but also increasingly vital as institutions face changing demographic trends, economic challenges, and the ongoing effects of shifting immigration policies. While the U.S. remains among the top destinations for international

students, competition from countries such as Germany, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom is growing. In this context, U.S. universities can no longer take their position for granted. To maintain their global reputation as leading destinations for higher education, they must go beyond academic excellence. This requires sustained and intentional investment in the overall student experience. With stringent immigration policies and a lack of a national strategy, the United States is bound to lose its status as one of the most desired destinations for international students. To ensure a sustainable future for international education in the United States, there should be a coordinated effort from both the government and institutions to create an environment that is supportive of international students from the start of their academic programs to life after graduation.

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X☐ ***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

This article incorporates content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools. The sections where AI tools were employed are [specify sections if applicable]. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards. (Please modify this sample acknowledgment text as needed whether you used it or not while writing your manuscript).

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