Cultural Influences and International Students

Understanding Academic Experiences in US Higher Education

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List of Abbreviations

AI (Artificial Intelligence): The simulation of human intelligence processes by machines.

APA (American Psychological Association): A widely used style guide for academic writing, particularly in the social and behavioral sciences.

CPT (Curricular Practical Training): A temporary employment authorization for F-1 student visa holders while pursuing education to gain practical experience directly related to their major field of study, which is an essential part of their curriculum.

F-1 Student: A non-immigrant visa status for students pursuing academic studies and language training programs in the United States.

GPA (Grade Point Average): A numerical measure of a student's academic performance, usually calculated by dividing the total number of grade points earned by the total number of credit hours attempted. A grading system native to the US.

H-1B (Specialty Occupation Visa): A non-immigrant visa category that allows US employers to hire foreign workers in specialty occupations temporarily, often three years, with the opportunity to extend. The H-1B visa program is subject to an annual cap, usually requiring a lottery for selection.

IIE (Institute of International Education): A nonprofit organization focused on international education and exchange, known for its Open Doors Report and accurate statistics on international student mobility.

IELTS (International English Language Testing System): A standardized test of English proficiency for non-native speakers, typically taken to gain admission to a college or university in an English-speaking country. IELTS is a must for countries such as the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, and some parts of Europe.

MLA (Modern Language Association): A widely used style guide for academic writing, especially in the humanities.

NAFSA (NAFSA Association of International Educators):	The world's largest nonprofit organization dedicated to international education and exchange.
OPT (Optional Practical Training):	A temporary employment authorization allowing F-1 student visa holders to gain practical experience directly related to their major, after their academic program is concluded.
PhD (Doctor of Philosophy):	The highest academic degree awarded in many fields, requiring original research and a dissertation, often referred to as a terminal degree in many fields.
PWIs (Predominantly White Institutions):	A term referring to higher education institutions in the US where the student demographic composition is mainly white students.
STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics):	An umbrella term for these academic disciplines focusing on various science, technology, engineering, and mathematics-related fields.
TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language):	A standardized exam to assess the English proficiency of non-native speakers aiming to enroll in English-speaking universities.
TPB (Theory of Planned Behavior):	A social-psychological model linking beliefs and actions, suggesting that a person's intention to perform a behavior is the most immediate predictor.
UIS (UNESCO Institute for Statistics):	The statistical office of UNESCO and the UN's repository for global data in education, science and technology, culture, and communication.

Preface

In 2010, at the age of nineteen, I began a journey from a small town in India to a university in the United States, filled with a mix of excitement and nervousness. My family, unfamiliar with international travel and the ticket booking process, found the system somewhat confusing due to a lack of proper guidance. After a tiring 38-hour flight across three time zones and two long layovers, I arrived in Denver, Colorado. As per the regulations, anyone travelling from outside the US has to go to customs and border patrol with their luggage. Note that this was not only my first flight but also my first experience in an entirely new world.

Instead of a warm welcome, I faced suspicion. At the immigration desk, my slight build and four large suitcases seemed to attract extra scrutiny, and Homeland Security officers questioned me for hours. This initial encounter in this new, unknown, foreign country was far from friendly; it felt like I was being judged. This uncomfortable and isolating experience profoundly influenced my early years in the US, marking my first encounter with being "othered," a silent challenge many international students face but rarely speak about. My undergraduate journey began with a shy approach, yet it was marked by a firm determination, despite the rocky start. However, difficulties continued in several ways. In classes, some instructors showed a lack of understanding of students' diverse accents and dialects. Comments like, "Since English is your second language, you probably do not know how to write a proper paper," chipped away at my confidence and created barriers to success, making it challenging to participate in conversations with faculty members and peers alike.

Outside class, I dealt with complex visa rules, language barriers, racial discrimination, and obstacles most local students may never have faced. Tasks that should have been straightforward often became primary sources of stress due to various barriers, including vague guidelines, discriminatory explanations of education-related questions, and a convoluted system of credit hours that was never part of the education system back home. Still, I pressed on. Despite a plethora of self-doubt and the challenges of finding resolutions to numerous hurdles, I completed a dual bachelor's degree. With dedication and determination, I further gained two master's degrees. The light at the end of the tunnel for me was ultimately earning my PhD in Health Education. Each achievement was hard-won, fueled by resilience, persistence, and unwavering effort.

This book offers a glimpse into my journey, serving as a testament to the resilience of international students navigating the US higher education system. It explores the emotional challenges of cultural adjustment, language barriers,

discrimination, and the ever-going search for belonging. Using a mix of personal stories, research, and lived experiences, this work aims to foster understanding and inspire positive change towards the overall health and well-being of international students. By the end of this book, educators, institutions, and readers alike will be encouraged to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students, especially those who have traveled thousands of miles to pursue their education.

Regards,

Kruti S. Chaliawala, PhD, CHES

(Note: In my culture, my middle initial, S., honors my father, whose wisdom and unwavering encouragement empowered me to face the world bravely. He passed away in 2020 from non-COVID complications, a profound loss that left me, an international student, unable to return for his funeral due to pressing visa issues and border closures. This book is dedicated to his enduring spirit and the sacrifices, seen and unseen, that international students often make to pursue their goals, demonstrating extraordinary resilience and perseverance in carving out their paths.)

Disclaimer: I acknowledge that I have used the AI-based tool Grammarly to assist with grammar checking, language refinement, and paraphrasing during the manuscript preparation process. No AI tools were used to generate original content.

Chapter One
Introduction
The Cultural Context of Education

Every year, millions of students undertake a significant life change, moving abroad to pursue higher education. As Shapiro et al. (2014) note, these individuals undertake a significant relocation to engage with colleges or universities in a host nation. In the United States (US), this population is officially recognized by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) as non-US citizens enrolled in higher education institutions who are neither immigrants (permanent residents) nor refugees (USCIS, 2015). The very designation "international student" is a temporary identity, applicable only while one is actively pursuing education abroad. Once academic pursuit concludes or their visa status shifts, this particular identity ceases to exist (Bista & Foster, 2016). However, despite this widely accepted legal definition, the precise classification of international students can surprisingly change depending on the countries and institutions. For instance, a Malaysian student attending a local branch of an Australian university may be considered both a regional and an international student, depending on the specific institutional context and classification (de Wit, 2016). Indeed, the global education landscape uses a diverse range of terms to describe these individuals, including non-immigrant, foreign, transnational, non-resident alien, and inbound/outbound students (Filomeno & Brown, 2022). These varied classifications underscore the inherent complexity of international student mobility and the continuously evolving nature of global higher education policies, which often shape, and sometimes fundamentally limit, the lived experiences of those they define. This academic framework, however, usually overlooks the profoundly personal and disorienting reality that students like me face.

When I first stepped off the plane in the US in 2010, I was just 19 years old, brimming with hopes to start a new chapter as an international student from India. I had no idea about the term 'alien' that people used in official paperwork, an official label that, even then, felt tinged with an uncomfortable sense of "otherness." The first few days in this new country were riddled with an overwhelming sense of fear. Everything was unfamiliar, new, and confusing, and I constantly felt like I was being watched. Simple errands, like getting a Subway sandwich, became an ordeal where I was too scared to go alone,

continually worried about how I would be perceived. Strangers in the community often approached me with curiosity, and sometimes unsettling questions about whether I was from the Middle East or Mexico. Their questions made me feel even more out of place, as if I did not belong anywhere. I was here with one goal: to focus on my studies and build a better future. However, these interactions chipped away at my confidence and deepened my sense of isolation and lack of belonging. I felt incredibly alone, more than I ever had before, in a place that was supposed to be full of opportunities, new experiences, and beginnings.

1.1 Global Trends in International Student Mobility

The lasting presence of international students greatly enriches academic, social, political, and cultural discussions across countries (Wang & Sun, 2022). Worldwide, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand consistently emerge as the top destinations for these mobile scholars (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021). A mix of global factors, such as ongoing economic globalization, rapid technological advancements, and the perceived quality of educational systems in host countries, mainly drives the increasing trend of international student mobility. In particular, globalization has fundamentally transformed the academic landscape, as the rising interconnectedness of economies and the expansion of multinational corporations have created a highly competitive global job market.

In this changing landscape, international students emerge as highly valued talent. They gain invaluable cross-cultural skills, develop broad global perspectives, and acquire specialized knowledge, making them highly attractive to employers worldwide. Technological advances have greatly supported this trend by improving communication, making information more accessible, and simplifying the study-abroad application process. At the same time, the exceptional quality of education in top destination countries acts as a strong draw. Reputable institutions known for research excellence and innovation, especially in the United States, Canada, Australia, and parts of Europe, are consistently ranked among the best in the world. Attending these prestigious universities offers more than just respected academic credentials; it also opens doors to vital professional opportunities, enriches internships, and provides invaluable networking within global industries. Moreover, strong economic reasons often drive these educational choices; studying abroad can lead to better job prospects, higher earning potential, and an increased chance of obtaining permanent residency or work opportunities after graduation.

Despite the occasional fluctuations driven by external factors, global trends unequivocally reveal a consistent upward trajectory in international student mobility over recent decades, a phenomenon robustly evidenced by UNESCO

Institute for Statistics (UIS) data. Although traditional strongholds like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia remain immensely popular, Asia has rapidly emerged as a pivotal source region for migrating students. China, India, and South Korea are among the top countries known to send the highest number of students abroad, fueled by powerful aspirations for higher-quality education, specialized training, and accelerated global career advancement.

1.2 Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on International Student Enrollment

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted international students and disrupted their academic schedules. Many students faced uncertainty about their study plans, with some delays or abandoning their goals due to financial issues, visa problems, and health concerns. Online learning became the main alternative, but it brought challenges such as time zone differences, limited access to campus resources, and difficulties staying engaged academically. The lack of face-to-face interaction also increased feelings of isolation and cultural disconnect among international students. Governments and universities around the world implemented various measures to address these challenges. Some institutions offered tuition discounts, extended application deadlines, and adopted hybrid learning models to accommodate students unable to travel.

Additionally, policy changes like visa relaxations and post-study work options were introduced in several countries to attract and keep international students amid declining enrollments. As pandemic restrictions eased, international student numbers gradually recovered. Many students who had postponed their plans resumed their applications, leading to increased enrollments. The shift back to in-person classes has renewed interest in studying abroad, driven by the desire for immersive academic experiences and global career opportunities.

1.3 Comparative Analysis: International Students in the US vs. Other Countries

The experiences of international students vary considerably, heavily influenced by their host country's policies, culture, and institutional systems. In the US, for example, international students often face high financial costs, strict visa regulations, and tough social integration challenges (Bista & Foster, 2016). This differs from countries like Canada and Australia, which have more flexible immigration policies aimed at supporting post-graduation work opportunities and residency (Bozdogan & Comeaux, 2007). Each country's unique approach significantly shapes the international student attitude.

United States: The US continues to attract a large number of international students, mainly because of its world-renowned universities and unmatched

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