

Research Article

Beyond Recruitment: How International Students Navigate Institutional, Financial, and Immigration Regimes in U.S. Higher Education

Alexandria Rose Wiesel-Brown* 

Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, United States

Abstract

International students are often celebrated as symbols of global engagement and institutional diversity in U.S. higher education. Yet behind these narratives lie restrictive immigration policies, rising tuition, limited employment opportunities, and uneven institutional support that shape students' educational experiences and future opportunities. This qualitative study examines how former F-1 international students experienced and responded to intersecting institutional, financial, and immigration systems while enrolled at a private performing arts college in the United States. Using a transformative framework and Critical Policy Analysis, the study draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 former international students who completed their degrees between 2015 and 2023. Thematic analysis identified key patterns in participants' narratives about their educational trajectories, financial challenges, institutional interactions, and immigration-related concerns. The findings revealed four major themes: (a) constrained choices and trade-offs shaped by financial and legal pressures, (b) ongoing financial and legal precarity, (c) emotional strain and fractured senses of belonging, and (d) inconsistent institutional support offset by peer-based networks of care. Participants described how visa restrictions, tuition burdens, and unclear institutional processes limited their options, increased their stress, and often made them feel like conditional members of the campus community rather than fully included students. The study challenges dominant narratives of internationalization that emphasize recruitment, diversity, and student mobility while overlooking the structural inequalities that international students face. By highlighting legal violence, conditional inclusion, and epistemic injustice, the findings suggest that institutions must move beyond symbolic commitments to internationalization and instead adopt more equitable policies, coordinated support systems, and inclusive practices that better reflect international students' realities.

Keywords

International Students, Internationalization of Higher Education, Immigration Policy, Critical Policy Analysis, Belonging, Legal Violence, Conditional Inclusion

1. Introduction

Across U.S. campuses, international students are often seen as proof of successful internationalization and global engage-

ment. They appear in recruitment ads, strategic plans, and diversity reports, frequently portrayed as both cultural assets

*Correspondence: Alexandria Rose Wiesel-Brown (wiesel@usc.edu)

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and sources of revenue. However, these positive stories coexist with strict visa rules, high tuition costs, and uneven institutional support that influence international students' opportunities during and after their studies [1, 7]. The gap between symbolic inclusion and economic precarity raises questions about what internationalization truly means in practice. If internationalization is judged only by mobility Figures, branding, and revenue, institutions risk hiding how their policies and practices interact with immigration laws, creating instability for the very students they claim to welcome [1, 25].

This article draws on a qualitative study of 10 former F-1 visa students at a private performing arts college in the United States. The study asks: How do international students experience and respond to institutional, financial, and immigration systems in U.S. higher education? Using Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) and a transformative framework, the study centers participants' narratives as policy knowledge and examines how institutional decisions, financial structures, and legal rules shape their trajectories.

By situating these findings within the broader literature on international higher education, the article advances understanding of how internationalization is both theorized and practiced. It challenges deficit narratives that primarily view international students through lenses of adjustment or resilience and instead highlights how legal violence, conditional inclusion, and epistemic injustice influence their experiences [11, 17].

2. Internalization, Mobility, and the Conditions of Participation

Internationalization has shifted from mainly focusing on student exchanges to a wider agenda that includes transnational partnerships, English-medium programs, and fierce competition for global talent [1, 8]. Institutions in high-income countries often pursue internationalization to enhance their global reputation and diversify revenue, especially through full-fee-paying students. Critical scholarship warns that this approach can turn international students into commodities and strengthen geopolitical hierarchies. Marginson [16] argues that international education is not just about cross-border learning but also about "self-formation" within unequal global systems, where students' choices are limited by their national background, class, and visa policies. Yao and Viggiano [25] show how interest convergence leads institutions to accept international students when their presence supports financial or political goals, even though their long-term security and rights remain secondary.

Beyond just mobility Figures and partnership deals, scholars have shown that internationalization increasingly aligns with market forces and institutional rivalry. Universities attract fee-paying students to stabilize their budgets, enhance their prestige, and demonstrate global relevance, even when public funding decreases or local enrollments decline. In this

framework, international students serve as both symbols of cosmopolitanism and sources of revenue, with their tuition helping to subsidize other institutional priorities. These dynamics are especially evident in private colleges and arts-focused schools that depend heavily on income from enrollment. Therefore, internationalization is not merely a neutral response to globalization; it is a political and financial venture that shifts risk and responsibility onto students and their families, while enabling institutions to extract the symbolic rewards of engaging globally.

Research shows that international students experience discrimination, social isolation, and status-based exclusion even as institutions promote "global diversity" [2, 15, 23]. A sense of belonging, meaningful interactions with faculty and peers, and supportive campus environments are linked to academic success and well-being [12, 22, 26]. However, international students are often expected to adapt individually to institutional norms without corresponding institutional changes [6, 13].

While this body of work has documented important patterns, less attention has been paid to how international students themselves understand and navigate these intersecting systems. Many studies focus on adjustment, satisfaction, or specific challenges like language, academic expectations, or discrimination. Far fewer focus on students' interpretations of the institutional, financial, and legal regimes that organize their lives, especially in specialized settings like performing arts colleges. This study addresses that gap by highlighting former F-1 students' narratives as a form of policy knowledge. By examining how students together made sense of and responded to institutional rules, financial demands, and immigration regulations, the study links everyday experiences to the broader effort of internationalization.

Financially, many international students pay full tuition, lack access to federal aid, and face work restrictions that limit their ability to reduce costs. Bailey and Yin [3] show that students use complex coping strategies, including unauthorized work and relying on family debt, to manage expenses. Immigration policies also shape their paths: work authorization is limited, status depends on full-time enrollment, and post-graduation options are uncertain [7, 24]. Overall, this literature indicates that the "global campus" is shaped by overlapping financial, institutional, and legal systems.

3. Conceptual Framework: Critical Policy Analysis, Legal Violence and Conditional Inclusion

This study is based on Critical Policy Analysis (CPA), which views education policy as a space where power, race, and global hierarchies are created and challenged, rather than as neutral technical solutions [10]. CPA focuses on how policies are understood in practice and how marginalized communities experience those interpretations.

Using CPA in the context of internationalization means viewing international students not only as individuals adjusting to new environments but also as policy subjects whose lives are shaped by decisions made in distant boardrooms and legislatures. Instead of assuming that policies “work” as written, CPA examines how rules are interpreted, where they are unclear, and whose voices are prioritized when issues emerge. For F-1 students, the border does not end at the airport; it reappears in enrollment deadlines, tuition bills, work authorization forms, and the discretionary judgments of advisors and officers. This framework therefore enables participants’ stories to be interpreted as critiques of how internationalization has been shaped and as suggestions for more equitable arrangements, even when they are not formally presented as policy recommendations. These dynamics can also be understood through a Gramscian lens, where institutional practices function as forms of cultural and ideological hegemony that normalize unequal conditions while maintaining the appearance of opportunity [14].

Three concepts guide the analysis:

- 1) Legal violence. Menjivar and Abrego [17] define legal violence as harm caused by laws and policies that, although legally sanctioned, create ongoing insecurity, anxiety, and limited access to rights. For international students, visa rules, employment restrictions, and post-graduation deadlines can generate persistent fear and restricted decision-making.
- 2) Conditional inclusion. Ben-Porath [4] describes it as temporary or conditional membership that depends on conforming to prevailing norms. International students may be rhetorically welcomed as contributors to diversity but remain contingent members, whose presence is continually reassessed based on academic performance, financial ability, and visa compliance.
- 3) Epistemic injustice. Fricker [11] argues that marginalized groups often face systematic devaluation of their knowledge and experience. As policy subjects, international students’ insights into institutional and immigration systems are frequently overlooked, even though they live at the intersection of these regimes.

These ideas, along with research on belonging and student engagement [12, 22], shape how participants’ stories are interpreted as critiques of how internationalization is organized in practice.

4. Methods: Research Design

The study employs a qualitative design with semi-structured, in-depth interviews to examine how former F-1 visa students experienced and responded to institutional, financial, and immigration systems. This approach aligns with transformative qualitative traditions that aim to reveal inequities and highlight participants’ agency and critique [18, 19].

4.1. Site and Participants

The research was carried out at a private, accredited four-year performing arts college in a major U.S. city. International students make up about 10 percent of the student body, twice the national average, and pay nearly \$250,000 in tuition and fees over four years, with limited access to institutional aid. The institution emphasizes global diversity in recruitment materials but operates within the broader constraints of U.S. immigration law.

Ten former international students took part in the study. All completed their degrees between 2015 and 2023 and studied on F-1 visas. Participants came from diverse regions, including Latin America, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, and pursued a variety of majors within the performing arts. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Participants were recruited using a mix of institutional records, social media outreach, and snowball sampling. Initial invitations were sent to alumni who had studied on an F-1 visa, completed a program at the institution, and had been out of full-time student status for at least six months. Respondents were encouraged to share the invitation with peers who might be interested. This method enabled the study to reach graduates pursuing various post-graduation paths, including work on Optional Practical Training, further education, and careers outside the U.S. Although the sample is not statistically representative, it reflects the diversity of the institution’s international student body in terms of gender, region of origin, and program of study, and it highlights voices often missing from institutional reports on internationalization.

4.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews lasting 60–90 minutes, conducted via secure video conferencing. The interviews invited participants to share their educational journeys, from decision-making and arrival through graduation and post-graduation transitions. Questions explored experiences with tuition and funding, interactions with institutional offices, visa and work authorization processes, and feelings of belonging on campus.

The semi-structured interview protocol was designed to encourage participants to share detailed, layered stories rather than brief survey-style responses. This approach aligns with established qualitative interviewing methods that prioritize depth, meaning-making, and the reconstruction of lived experience over time [21]. Questions followed a chronological order, starting with pre-arrival decision-making, then moving through on-campus experiences, and ending with post-graduation transitions. For example, participants were asked how they first discovered the college, what influenced their decision to enroll, how they financed their education over time, and how they understood key immigration milestones like visa renewals or OPT applications. Follow-up prompts encouraged them to describe specific interactions with staff, faculty, and peers, and to reflect on moments when institutional policies

felt supportive, confusing, or harmful. This approach allowed participants to connect individual episodes to broader patterns, aligning with the study's emphasis on institutional, financial, and legal systems.

Interviews were audio-recorded, professionally transcribed, and checked for accuracy. Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts and clarify or add to their responses, which increased credibility and provided them with more control.

The study received ethical approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, and all participants provided informed consent.

4.3. Data Analysis

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's [5] six-phase approach to thematic analysis: familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and naming, and the production of the analytical narrative. Codes were both deductive, informed by the conceptual framework (e.g., legal violence, conditional inclusion, belonging), and inductive, emerging from participants' language and stories.

Throughout the analysis, CPA and the guiding concepts were used to link individual narratives to broader structures and highlight the policy implications of participants' experiences. Analytic memos and reflexive journaling supported ongoing focus on positionality and interpretation [18].

4.4. Trustworthiness and Data Quality

Several strategies were employed to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. First, member checks involved inviting participants to review their interview transcripts and clarify or expand on sections that seemed incomplete or misrepresented. Second, analytic memos documented emerging interpretations and were revisited during the coding process to explore how the conceptual framework influenced the researcher's understanding of the data. Third, patterns were compared across participants from different regions, programs, and post-graduation paths to identify both commonalities and differences. Finally, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflexive work regarding her own positionality as a former faculty member at the institution, including discussing initial themes with colleagues who had different perspectives on internationalization. These steps do not eliminate subjectivity but help make the interpretive process more transparent and rooted in participants' accounts.

4.5. Researcher Positionality

As a former faculty member at the research site, the researcher has extensive experience in teaching and advising international students. This insider perspective provided valuable knowledge of institutional policies and practices, along with long-standing relationships with international alumni. At the same time, it required careful attention to power dynamics

and potential bias. The researcher approached interviews as opportunities to learn from participants' expertise, used open-ended prompts, and clearly explained that participation was voluntary and would not influence any institutional relationship.

4.6. Findings

Four themes outline how participants perceived and reacted to institutional, financial, and immigration systems.

Theme 1: Constrained Choices and Trade-offs

Participants' decisions to study in the United States were motivated by hopes for artistic growth, global mobility, and long-term stability. However, their choices were constrained by visa regulations, institutional offerings, and family finances. Many mentioned selecting programs not only for academic compatibility but also for perceived visa advantages, such as access to Optional Practical Training (OPT) or locations in cities with larger immigrant communities.

Once enrolled, participants consistently balanced artistic goals, financial needs, and visa requirements. Some took jobs or roles less aligned with their artistic interests because they offered more stable income or were perceived as safer under visa regulations. Others avoided internships that could have advanced their careers due to fears of risking their visa status. Participants' descriptions challenged common assumptions that international students freely "choose" U.S. higher education from a menu of global options. Instead, they framed their decisions as constrained negotiations among limited information, family expectations, and unclear policies. Several emphasized that they did not fully understand how restricted their work options would be or how difficult it would be to change institutions after arriving. Others noted that they had little room to question recruitment promises because their families had already invested heavily in application fees, test prep, and deposits. What appeared as choice in institutional reports often felt, from students' perspectives, like a series of narrowing paths where each decision limited their options instead of expanding them. These trade-offs show how legal and institutional systems restrict students' options and force them to continuously weigh which sacrifices to make.

Theme 2: Financial and Legal Precarity as Everyday Reality

Participants' stories highlighted the serious financial and legal instability underlying their education. Tuition payments were described as "overwhelming" and "terrifying," especially when family finances fluctuated or when sponsors' circumstances unexpectedly changed. Several participants recalled moments when a delayed payment or miscommunication with the bursar's office nearly caused registration holds that could have resulted in status violations.

Visa regulations worsened this instability. Students faced restrictions on the hours they could work on campus, often holding low-paying jobs, and most found it difficult to access off-campus work without complicated approval processes.

Participants described constantly monitoring their enrollment status, work hours, and expiration dates. One participant explained this situation: “I felt like any mistake, even a small one, could cost me my whole life here.”

These experiences connect to the idea of legal violence, where laws that seem neutral still foster ongoing fear, instability, and vulnerability [17]. For participants, legal violence showed up through strict deadlines, confusing rules, and the constant threat of removal.

Financial and legal insecurity also influenced how participants understood everyday campus interactions. Tuition reminders, registration holds, or emails about policy changes were rarely seen as simple administrative matters; instead, they were interpreted through the lens of “What does this mean for my ability to stay?” Several participants described avoiding contact with certain offices because previous encounters had made them feel blamed for situations beyond their control, such as sudden currency devaluation or delayed wire transfers. Others recounted spending hours searching government websites or online forums to verify information received from institutional staff. These stories show that the administrative burden of internationalization is shifted onto students, who must constantly translate bureaucratic language into strategies for survival.

Theme 3: Emotional Toll and Fractured Belonging

Despite their contributions to campus diversity, many participants described feeling like “guests” rather than full members of the campus community. Some faced overt discrimination from peers or community members, while others experienced subtle forms of exclusion, such as assumptions about their language skills or cultural knowledge [15].

Financial and visa pressures influenced their emotional lives. Participants described feelings of anxiety, shame, and isolation tied to their uncertain status. The expectation to constantly show gratitude for the “opportunity” to study in the United States sometimes made it hard to express criticism or ask for help. This pattern illustrates conditional inclusion, where students are reminded that their presence depends on ongoing compliance and performance [4].

Participants described moments of genuine connection with faculty and peers that fostered a sense of belonging and validation. Courses that encouraged students to draw on their home cultures, or faculty who acknowledged the stress of immigration, helped counteract epistemic injustice by recognizing international students’ knowledge as valuable rather than peripheral [11, 12].

At the same time, participants were cautious about sharing their critiques within institutional spaces that praised internationalization as an unqualified good. Some feared that expressing frustration would be seen as a lack of gratitude or as evidence that they did not “fit” the institution’s culture. Others discussed carefully choosing what they shared with faculty or staff, revealing only the parts of their experiences that felt safe, such as homesickness or academic stress, while hiding concerns about immigration status or family finances. This self-

ensorship can be understood as a form of emotional labor that upholds institutional narratives of welcoming global campuses while concealing the underlying uncertainty many international students face daily.

Theme 4: Uneven Institutional Support and Peer-Based Networks of Care

Institutional support was described as inconsistent and dependent on the person. Some offices provided clear, proactive guidance, while others gave contradictory information or responded slowly to urgent questions about visas or finances. Participants recalled being redirected between departments and warned that even small paperwork errors could have serious consequences, which increased their stress.

In response, international students created peer-based networks of care. They exchanged information about visa policies, housing, and jobs, translated institutional emails, and accompanied each other to appointments. These networks served as informal advising systems and emotional support networks, often filling gaps left by the institution.

Participants highlighted specific staff or faculty members who acted as advocates, leveraging their institutional knowledge to interpret policies, negotiate deadlines, or connect students to resources. These relationships demonstrate the potential of relational, humanizing practices within otherwise strict systems, but they also reveal the inequity of a support model that relies on chance rather than policy.

These peer networks also acted as informal labs for understanding policy. Participants talked about sharing email templates with advisors, comparing responses from different staff to similar questions, and working together to figure out how new rules might apply to their cases. In doing this, they created knowledge that exceeded what any single office could provide, blending institutional rules, immigration guidance, and personal experience into useful advice. This work was often unseen by leaders, but it was crucial for making internationalization work in practice. By seeing international students as contributors to policy knowledge rather than just service recipients, institutions are challenged to reconsider whose expertise influences decisions about internationalization.

5. Discussion

This study expands on internationalization scholarship by highlighting how international students experience the overlap of institutional, financial, and immigration systems, rather than viewing these areas separately. Participants’ stories confirm previous research on discrimination, financial struggles, and the significance of belonging [2, 3, 12, 15, 22]. They also build on this work by illustrating how legal violence and conditional inclusion are embedded in the structure of internationalization.

Within research on internationalization in higher education, this article broadens discussions in two key ways. First, it focuses on a performing arts college, a type of institution often overlooked in comparative studies that typically emphasize

research universities and large public systems. Second, it connects micro-level experiences such as budgeting, advising appointments, and classroom interactions to macro-level questions about how internationalization is funded and managed. By highlighting the intersection of institutional, financial, and legal systems, the study complements work examining student mobility patterns, institutional strategies, and internationalization at home, while also calling for greater attention to the everyday infrastructure that enables or hinders those strategies for students.

First, the findings challenge narratives that portray international students as mainly responsible for their own adjustment. Participants' "choices" were continuously influenced by visa regulations, tuition policies, and institutional timelines. When internationalization is pursued as a revenue strategy without equal commitments to financial fairness and legal literacy, institutions risk reproducing the very inequalities they claim to address [1, 25].

Second, participants' experiences show how international students act as policy interpreters and informal advisors, not just as policy beneficiaries. Their peer networks convert institutional and legal language into practical strategies. Seeing international students as policy actors, rather than only service recipients, can change how institutions view internationalization and accountability.

Third, the study emphasizes the importance of epistemic justice. When international students' knowledge about the systems that affect their lives is neglected, institutions miss chances to identify policy gaps and develop more equitable practices collaboratively. Including international students in decision-making bodies, advisory councils, and program design processes can help shift internationalization from mere marketing to a shared-governance approach [13, 16].

Framing international students as policy interpreters also creates new opportunities for institutional learning. Participants in this study regularly identified ambiguities, contradictions, and gaps in institutional communication that were not obvious to staff who designed those systems. Instead of viewing these observations as individual complaints, institutions could see them as diagnostic data about how internationalization policies work in practice. Establishing structured ways for international students to share what they have learned about navigating tuition deadlines, work restrictions, and visa paperwork, and rewarding them for that expertise, would not only enhance services but also shift epistemic authority. Such actions would show that internationalization is not something done to students, but a project built with them.

Implications for Policy and practice

Institutional Policy and Advising

Institutions should invest in visa-literate, coordinated advising systems that acknowledge immigration as a core, not a secondary, part of internationalization. This includes:

Training academic advisors, financial aid staff, and administrators in fundamental immigration literacy and referral pathways.

Establishing cross-office teams that regularly review how institutional policies (e.g., payment deadlines, course load requirements) intersect with visa rules.

Offering clear, multilingual guidance on work authorization, tuition payment options, and post-graduation paths.

Such efforts shift advising from reactive troubleshooting to proactive, equity-focused support.

Financial Commitments

If institutions rely on international tuition as a revenue source, they also have a responsibility to mitigate financial precarity. Options include:

Targeted scholarships, emergency grants, and flexible payment options for international students.

Data-driven assessments of how tuition hikes and fee policies disproportionately impact students from various regions and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Partnering with external organizations to develop paid, legally compliant experiential learning programs.

These steps align financial policy with the ethical aspects of internationalization [3].

Campus Climate and Belonging

Institutions can handle conditional inclusion by:

Integrating international perspectives throughout curricula instead of limiting them to special events.

Helping faculty create assignments that incorporate students' transnational experiences and knowledge.

Establish ongoing forums where international students can influence programming and policy, rather than just sharing cultural performances.

Such practices see international students as co-creators of institutional knowledge and culture, aligning with research on belonging and engagement [12, 22, 26].

Advocacy Beyond the Institution

Finally, institutions can leverage their collective influence to promote immigration policies that enhance the stability and contributions of international students. Through professional associations and policy networks, institutional leaders can demonstrate how current laws create uncertainty and advocate for reforms such as expanded work authorization, clearer post-study pathways, and shorter processing delays. Aligning internationalization rhetoric with advocacy can help transform the broader policy environment in which students decide where to study and build their futures.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study examines a single private performing arts college and a relatively small group of graduates who completed their programs successfully. It does not include perspectives from students who left early, were unable to maintain their status, or studied at other types of institutions. Future research could use multi-site comparative designs, longitudinal studies, or mixed methods to explore how international students experience policy and institutional changes over time.

Additional work could also examine how intersecting identities, such as race, gender, class, and nationality, influence ex-

periences of legal violence and conditional inclusion, especially for students from the Global South or historically marginalized racial groups [9, 20, 23].

6. Conclusion

International students are key to modern internationalization efforts, yet their experiences highlight a gap between what institutions say and what they face. The participants in this study came to the United States hoping to improve their artistic work and build long-term stability. Still, they faced challenges such as financial hardship, legal uncertainties, and inconsistent institutional support.

By applying Critical Policy Analysis along with concepts of legal violence, conditional inclusion, and epistemic injustice, this article reframes international students not as passive recipients of policy but as knowledgeable actors whose experiences reveal the fault lines of internationalization. Aligning institutional policies, advising practices, and advocacy efforts with the insights of international students is crucial if internationalization is to advance beyond mere recruitment and toward a more equitable, genuinely global higher education.

Abbreviations

CPA	Critical Policy Analysis
F-1	Student Visa Classification
IRB	Institutional Review Board
OPT	Optional Practical Training
U.S.	United States

Author Contributions

Alexandria Rose Wiesel-Brown: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

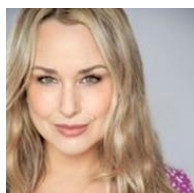
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Alexandria Rose Wiesel-Brown is an educator and researcher affiliated with the USC Rossier School of Education. She earned her doctorate in Educational Leadership and studies international students, higher education policy, immigration, and equity in arts education. She has taught at AMDA College of the Performing Arts and California State University, Northridge. Her research focuses on how institutional, financial, and immigration policies shape the experiences of international students in U.S. higher education.

Research Field

Alexandria Rose Wiesel-Brown: International student experiences, Higher education policy, Educational leadership, Immigration and education, Arts education equity, Education finance policy, Critical policy analysis, Student belonging and identity, Institutional governance, Qualitative research methods