Federal Immigration Policy Changes’ Affect on International Students’ Stability

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American federal policy affects all who reside in the United States, but recent international policy changes directly affect international students and the college or university that hosts them. This subpopulation balances the typical stresses most college students experience as well as language barriers, cultural differences, and extreme distance from family members (Fischer, 2020a). Now, these concerns exist parallel to the uncertainties of fluctuating student visa policies, housing and food insecurities, and their safety regarding the Covid-19 virus. International student academic advisers must accompany and support their advisees through these unexpected trials by staying updated regarding relevant federal policy changes. Student advocacy now commonly involves creating and facilitating enrollment in online or hybrid classes that will ensure international students qualify for their visa renewal. Advisers must update their understanding of policy to support their advisees through explanation of relevant changes, identifying plans of action, and connecting students to relevant departments when necessary.

# 2020 Presidential Election and the Coronavirus Pandemic

## Highlighting Polarized International Policies

The U.S. presidential election was anxiously followed by international students because the visa and immigration policies of the two candidates, President Trump and now Presidential-Elect Biden, are so polarized. Trump values tightening America’s borders and has “put into place more than 400 executive actions or rules related to immigration” during his 2016-2020 presidency (Fischer, 2020c, para. 9).On the other hand, Biden values globalization and many of his first priority actions involve reversing these executive orders. For example, President Trump enforced, “new restrictions on H-1B visas that would make it more difficult for international graduates to stay in the United States and for colleges to hire foreign-born professors and researchers” (Fischer, 2020c, para. 13). On the contrary, Biden plans to pursue policies that will retain highly trained workers through awarding green cards to foreign graduates of a U.S. doctoral program. Biden also plans to support the current international students by awarding them emergency Covid relief grants (Fischer, 2020c).

Foreign nationals do not qualify to vote in American elections, so the lack of control surrounding this election made many international students feel helpless, nervous, and unwelcome. One student stated, “with Biden, I feel an increased sense of inclusion in American society and feel more valued than I did before” (Fischer, 2020c, para. 21). Another student stated, “I feel relaxed, as in the near future I feel no unexpected ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] restrictions are going to be announced…Oh the relief! Now I can go back to focusing on my research” (Fischer, 2020c, para. 18).

The Covid-19 pandemic forced restrictions on international and domestic travel. Businesses, factories, and schools were temporarily closed worldwide to show the rate of viral infection. Domestic students could return to their hometowns, but unfortunately, most international students did not have this luxury (Fischer, 2020a). Instead, many international students had to remain on campus to live in university housing and attend hybrid classes to maintain their visa status. Many have fronted the cost of unexpected summer and now Christmas holiday room and board. International students are isolated, struggling financially, and facing increased xenophobia resulting from the imported nature of the coronavirus (Fischer, 2020a) (Fischer, 2020b).

## The Impact of International Policy Change on Universities

Congruent to the increasing growth rate in the preceding seven years, the 2014-2015 academic year reflected a 10% increase in foreign students. Unsurprisingly, more restrictive immigration policies instated between 2016-2020 have reflected a sharp decrease in this growth rate (Vasquez, 2020). Now, coupled with the pandemic related restrictions, new international student enrollments have decreased by 43% (Vasquez, 2020). Many students are unable to travel from their home countries to America, so they have been forced to defer their enrollment or abandon their studies altogether. Although these numbers seem dire, 40,000 students have elected to defer enrollment which reflects “pent-up demand” (Fischer, 2020e, para. 6). Many higher education institutions are hoping to take advantage of this demand through adapting their recruitment to offer live chat services with an admissions officer any time of the day or night. These officers can answer questions and provide the human connection that is so vital for effective recruitment. Admissions officers have reported that although most students ask the expected questions about admissions requirements and roommate matches, they have noticed increased logistical questions regarding class loads and other academic inquiries (Fischer, 2020d).

Physical distance is not the only barrier between U.S. universities and the recruitment of new international students. May students are now choosing to study in Britain, Australia, Canada, or universities in their home countries rather than studying in America. This could be due to competitive tuition prices and more socially welcoming environments (Fischer, 2020d). Recent surveys of potential and current international students in the U.S. have reflected increasing concern regarding safety, fear of exclusion, xenophobia, and neo-racism (Glass et al., 2014) (Fischer, 2020a).

Furthermore, international students provide a substantial financial contribution to U.S. colleges and universities with the majority of international students paying full tuition without any financial assistance. Certainly, U.S. colleges and universities appreciate this source of revenue. In fact, “NAFSA: Association of International Educators estimates they contribute $41 billion to the American economy” each year (Fischer, 2020d, para. 4). Fortunately, all hope is not lost when it comes to recruiting more international students. “In the days since [Biden’s] election, international college-search websites have reported an uptick in searches for American colleges” (Fischer, 2020d, para. 17).

# Challenges and Opportunities for International Student Advisors

## Challenges

Academic advisers directly communicate with international students and likely this involvement did not begin with the Covid-19 pandemic or as a result of recent uncertainty regarding policy. Advisers are a consistent presence in students’ lives and serve as the university’s liaison for personal support, guidance, and gentle correction. Therefore, Advisers are positioned to embody the university’s mission as they provide practical and personal support for their advisees (Portland Community College, 2018). In July, President Trump announced that student visas would not qualify for renewal if the students were only enrolled in online courses (Comp & Oldford, 2020). Although this policy was quickly reversed, international academic advisers served as the first responders in dealing with this crisis. This response required current policy knowledge so they could create courses that could facilitate safety for the instructor, students, and university while also allowing the students to legally remain in the country for their planned course of study. Additionally, these advisers surely provided emotional support to the affected students both directly and indirectly through connecting them with corresponding services.

## Opportunities

One instance of an advising office’s individualized support for international students is illustrated at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Anastasia Fynn, director of international student and scholar services, identified the need to personally communicate with isolated international students (Fischer, 2020a). As the university hosts 1,700 international students, they enlisted “staff members from other offices, professors, and even alumni as part of the effort. If students didn’t pick up, callers sent an email. Soon, students were emailing back, asking to set up a second call. ‘They were just hungry to talk’” Fischer, 2020a, para. 30). Other universities facilitated similar efforts by recruiting local churches and organizations to help reach the students as well. This situational triage in March blossomed into a connected community of international students and the local organizations. It increased interpersonal communication, forged friendships, fostered a welcoming environment, and even opened doors to provide mental health counseling to traditionally reluctant populations (Fischer, 2020a).

Academic advisers act as the face of the university in providing timely and professional support to the international students and upholding the university’s mission. They are truly both university and student advocates. Therefore, advisers who value establishing a safe, supportive, welcoming environment for their international students reflect the university as prioritizing this as well. Ultimately, the university’s treatment of international students will become known and likely attract more international students who are seeking a similarly supportive university culture.

# Personal Reflections

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The fluctuating international policies surrounding the presidential election and the Covid-19 pandemic have introduced greater challenges to the community of international student advisers and students. I am amazed by the support and perseverance both students and advisers have exhibited. For example, higher education professionals have collaborated from across the nation through a Facebook group “International Higher Education and Study Abroad and COVID-19” with now more than 1,100 members. Members ask questions, post news updates, and provide timely answers to many pressing concerns. This increased real-time collaboration began as a response to changing student visa policies, but will surely continue to be a lasting resource for international student advisers (Alfaro, 2020).

## Future Actions

Federal policy that directly affects international students will likely continue rapidly changing in the coming months. Academic advisers must continue to serve as the university’s representation to international students. They must also continue advocating for students’ logistical and personal needs. Although challenging, increasing collaboration within and between institutions is vital to restore a sense of stability, safety, and trust to the university’s international students.

The university must also decide if international students are a priority. As higher education opportunities have increased around the world, the universities in America need to modernize and proactively prepare an environment that can support the international students of the future. The international student advisers will also need additional support and resources to create this environment.

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