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From Welcome to Surveillance: Intersecting Experiences of Visibility and Vulnerability Among International Students in the United States.

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ABSTRACT

International students are often celebrated as symbols of diversity and global excellence in U.S. higher education, yet their experiences reveal a more precarious reality. This paper examines how they navigate the contradictions between institutional inclusion and systemic surveillance, shaped by visa status, accent, race, and national origin. Drawing on intersectionality, it explores how structures of immigration control, racialization, and linguistic expectations produce a form of hypervisibility one that demands cultural performance while enforcing compliance. Students from the Global South or with racialized accents often face heightened scrutiny and limited support, leading to emotional labor and self-censorship. By situating these experiences at the intersection of welcome and control, this paper calls for reimagining belonging and inclusion in higher education as issues of justice rather than adjustment.

Keywords: International students, intersectionality, higher education, visa surveillance, cultural belonging, accent discrimination, hypervisibility, racialization, global inequality, U.S. universities

In the global landscape of higher education, international students have become emblematic of academic excellence, cultural diversity, and economic vitality. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2024), the United States hosts more than 1.1 million international students, making it the leading destination worldwide. This figure represents roughly one-quarter of the world's approximately four million globally mobile students. Although other countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, China, and Canada have also expanded their international student populations, the United States continues to attract the highest number of degree-seeking students from abroad. The steady increase in these numbers underscores not only the enduring global appeal of American higher education but also the complex motivations and structures that sustain it.

Despite relatively high tuition and living expenses compared to peer destinations, the United States remains the preferred study location for international students (Acar, 2024). This preference is driven by several key factors. First, the United States is home to many of the world's top-ranked universities, which offer cutting-edge research facilities, interdisciplinary programs, and strong global reputations. Second, the U.S. higher education system offers opportunities for experiential learning and professional development through programs such as Optional Practical Training (OPT), which allows graduates to gain temporary work experience related to their field of study. Third, the country's diverse social and cultural environment provides exposure to multiple perspectives and fosters a sense of global citizenship among students. Finally, the United States' large and resilient economy provides students with opportunities to form professional networks that often influence their long-term career trajectories (NAFSA, 2023).

From an institutional perspective, international students are highly valued contributors to both campus culture and the national economy. Their diverse linguistic, cultural, and academic backgrounds enrich classroom discussions and foster intercultural understanding (Glass et al., 2015). Universities also recognize the significant financial contributions international students make through tuition, housing, and daily expenditures. The U.S. Department of Commerce (2023) reported that international students contributed over $40 billion to the U.S. economy, supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs in education and related industries. These contributions extend beyond economic terms, as institutions also rely on the symbolic capital that diversity brings to their global image and accreditation narratives. Thus, international students are often celebrated as evidence of global inclusion and institutional success.

However, beneath this narrative of welcome lies a parallel structure of control (Brunner, at al 2025). The same systems that invite international students into the academic community also subject them to surveillance through visa regulations, bureaucratic monitoring, and institutional compliance mechanisms. International students in the United States must navigate a complex legal framework that includes F-1 visa regulations, the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), and ongoing reporting requirements. These mechanisms are designed to maintain immigration compliance but also operate as instruments of observation and discipline. These mechanisms serve dual functions: they support students' academic success while ensuring adherence to federal policies and legal boundaries (Anderson, 2020).

This paradox of inclusion and control positions international students in a uniquely precarious situation. On one hand, they are celebrated as global ambassadors, enriching the university with their cultural and intellectual diversity. On the other hand, they are regulated subjects whose legal status depends on continuous institutional and governmental monitoring. The celebration of their presence is therefore inseparable from the mechanisms that police their mobility and visibility. This dynamic reflects what scholars of migration and education describe as the "governance of mobility" (Robertson, 2013), where the movement of individuals across borders is both enabled and restricted by intersecting institutional and political systems.

The tension between welcome and surveillance extends beyond administrative procedures and shapes students' everyday academic and social experiences. International students' visibility in classrooms and on campus often exposes them to linguistic and cultural scrutiny. Accents, mannerisms, and differing cultural communication styles can mark them as outsiders, reinforcing stereotypes and marginalization. Research on linguistic discrimination in higher education has shown that non-native English speakers frequently experience assumptions about their competence or participation, which can undermine their confidence and belonging (Zhou & Cole, 2017). This intersection of linguistic visibility and racialization can create what the present paper terms "hypervisibility" a state in which international students are noticed not merely for who they are but for what they represent: diversity, difference, and foreignness.

At the same time, international students' vulnerability is compounded by their legal precarity. Their ability to remain in the country depends on maintaining full-time enrollment, academic standing, and continuous compliance with federal immigration rules. Even minor administrative oversights such as failing to update an address or dropping a course below the required credit threshold can have severe consequences, including loss of status or deportation risk (Lee, 2007). This constant need to comply reinforces a form of emotional and psychological labor that is often invisible to domestic peers and faculty. International students must not only excel academically but also manage the bureaucratic anxieties tied to their legal existence. Thus, the "welcome" extended to them is conditional and fragile, bound by the surveillance systems that define their legitimacy.

In response to these contradictions, this paper investigates how international students experience both visibility and vulnerability within U.S. academic and social systems. It adopts an intersectional framework to analyze how race, nationality, visa status, and language collectively shape their lived experiences. By doing so, it seeks to move beyond simplistic narratives of diversity and instead foreground the structural and emotional realities of being an international student in a system that simultaneously celebrates and surveils them. The analysis emphasizes four interrelated themes: (a) hypervisibility and the symbolic expectations of diversity, (b) legal precarity and bureaucratic surveillance through immigration systems, (c) linguistic and accent-based discrimination as a form of cultural control, and (d) the emotional labor required to navigate these overlapping pressures.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Visibility

Understanding international students' experiences in the United States requires a theoretical framework that captures the complexity of their identities and the structural forces that shape their daily realities. Two interrelated frameworks intersectionality and visibility/surveillance theory provide the analytical foundation for this study. Intersectionality, originating from the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), illuminates how multiple social identities such as race, gender, class, and legal status intersect to produce unique forms of privilege and oppression. Theories of visibility and surveillance, informed by Michel Foucault's concept of *panopticism* and Sara Ahmed's phenomenology of perception, further explain how being seen or being hypervisible functions as both a

mechanism of inclusion and control. Together, these frameworks reveal the paradoxical position of international students who are celebrated as symbols of diversity yet constrained by the regulatory and perceptual boundaries of the academic and social systems they inhabit.

Intersectionality: Mapping Overlapping Identities

Crenshaw (1989) developed the concept of intersectionality to critique the limitations of single-axis frameworks that analyze identity solely through one lens such as race or gender. She argued that systems of power and oppression, including racism, sexism, and classism, intersect to create overlapping structures of disadvantage. Intersectionality thus enables a more nuanced analysis of how individuals experience inequality not as isolated forms of discrimination but as interconnected and mutually reinforcing systems. In the context of international students, intersectionality provides a critical lens through which to understand how visa status, race, gender, class, and accent collectively shape students' experiences of belonging, visibility, and vulnerability.

International students occupy a distinctive position within higher education institutions because their legal identity as noncitizens intersects with other aspects of their social identity. Visa status, for example, governs nearly every dimension of their lives. Unlike domestic students, F-1 visa holders must maintain full-time enrollment and achieve satisfactory academic progress to remain in lawful status (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2024). They cannot legally reduce their course load, interrupt their studies, or engage in unauthorized employment without risking severe consequences, including visa termination and deportation. This lack of flexibility transforms what might seem like routine academic decisions into high-stakes legal matters. The requirement to maintain continuous compliance underscores how immigration status functions not merely as a bureaucratic label but as a form of structural constraint that shapes students' academic agency and psychological well-being.

Intersectionality also highlights how race and nationality interact with legal status to influence how international students are perceived and treated. Students from the Global South, particularly those who are racialized as nonwhite, often face implicit biases or overt discrimination that intersect with assumptions about their language proficiency and cultural competence (Lee & Rice, 2007). For example, an African or Middle Eastern student may be simultaneously exoticized as a representative of diversity and marginalized as linguistically or culturally deficient. This dual positioning being both visible and excluded illustrates how intersecting identities generate contradictory social expectations.

Visibility, Surveillance, and the Politics of Being Seen

Theories of visibility and surveillance provide a complementary framework for understanding how international students' experiences of intersectionality are governed by systems of observation and control. Michel Foucault's concept of *panopticism*, introduced in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), describes how modern societies maintain order not through overt coercion but through continuous observation. The panopticon a circular prison design where inmates can be observed at any time without knowing when they are being watched serves as a metaphor for disciplinary power. In this model, individuals internalize surveillance, regulating their behavior out of fear of being monitored.

This framework aptly describes the conditions under which international students navigate U.S. higher education. The *Student and Exchange Visitor Information System* (SEVIS), for instance, functions as a digital panopticon that tracks each student's enrollment, attendance, address, and employment activities. Designated School Officials (DSOs) serve as intermediaries between the student and the state, reporting any deviation from compliance. While the system is presented as an administrative necessity, it produces a disciplinary effect: students self-regulate to avoid triggering suspicion or jeopardizing their visa status. The constant awareness of surveillance fosters a form of self-discipline that extends into academic and social life. For instance, students may avoid political engagement, limit travel, or refrain from challenging institutional authority to avoid perceived risk (Anderson, 2020). Thus, visibility becomes both a privilege and a liability students must remain "seen" to be recognized as compliant yet invisible enough to avoid scrutiny.

Representation and Regulation: The Paradox of Inclusion

When intersectionality and theories of visibility are combined, they reveal the deep tension between representation and regulation that structures international students' experiences. On one hand, students are represented as symbols of global diversity and institutional prestige. Their presence in classrooms and promotional materials affirms universities' commitments to multiculturalism and global citizenship. On the other hand, their daily lives are regulated through immigration laws, institutional oversight, and social expectations that restrict their autonomy. This paradox exemplifies what Foucault (1977) describes as the productive nature of power it does not merely repress but actively shapes subjects into compliant, visible, and useful bodies.

The intersectional experience of international students thus entails navigating multiple and sometimes contradictory expectations. They are expected to contribute to the academic and social environment, enriching campus life through diverse perspectives and intercultural dialogue. Simultaneously, they are learning from the environment, absorbing new cultural norms, pedagogical practices, and social values. Yet this reciprocal exchange occurs within asymmetrical power relations: while universities benefit from their contributions, students must continually prove their legitimacy through performance, compliance, and adaptation. Their participation in "diversity" initiatives or classroom discussions may be celebrated, but their voices are still filtered through assumptions about foreignness, proficiency, or privilege.

Moreover, the intersection of surveillance and visibility exposes how representation can become regulation. The very structures that claim to include such as international offices, diversity programs, and promotional campaigns also function as technologies of governance. They make international students visible in ways that reinforce institutional control, ensuring both compliance and symbolic diversity. As Ahmed (2012) notes, diversity work often involves managing difference in ways that sustain, rather than disrupt, existing hierarchies. For international students, this means that inclusion is conditional on their ability to embody the "right kind" of diversity visible enough to signify global openness but disciplined enough not to challenge institutional norms.

International Students and Institutional Power

Research on international students has long centered on adjustment and mobility, often framing learners as individuals navigating cultural transitions, language acquisition, and academic socialization. Seminal work documents discrimination and campus-climate challenges especially for students racialized as non-White showing how "neo-racism" positions nationality, culture, and accent as bases for exclusion alongside race (Lee & Rice, 2007). This line of inquiry has illuminated interpersonal and cultural dynamics but has paid less attention to structural forces such as immigration policy, compliance infrastructures, and the political economy of international education. Consequently, while rich in accounts of adaptation, the literature has been comparatively thin on analyses of surveillance regimes and institutional power that shape these experiences.

A second major body of research examines globalization, mobility networks, and internationalization. Scholars have mapped flows of students and theorized how global hierarchies of prestige and policy frameworks determine destinations and opportunities (Marginson, 2012; Stein, 2017; Sarkar, 2025). This work situates international students within neoliberal globalization, where universities cultivate global reputations while leveraging international enrollments for strategic and financial goals. Yet, much of this research remains at the macro level, linking policy rhetoric to global markets rather than to the everyday compliance systems that structure student life.

Building on these foundations, a growing critical strand interrogates neoliberal university logics particularly the financialization of internationalization and the commodification of student mobility. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) introduced the concept of "academic capitalism," explaining how institutions pursue revenue through market-oriented practices, including differential tuition rates. More recent studies extend this critique to internationalization discourse itself, contrasting mainstream celebratory narratives with critical approaches that foreground power, race, and coloniality (Bamberger & Morris, 2024; Ahmed, 2012; Vráblíková, 2021). These works reveal how diversity rhetoric can operate as representational inclusion while simultaneously preserving regulatory infrastructures and extractive financial models an intersection that links representation with regulation.

Across these literatures, a key gap has emerged: limited attention to structural surveillance as a constitutive element of international student life. While adaptation research meticulously documents psychological and cultural stressors, few studies emphasize how systems such as the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) embed surveillance into daily academic routines. Recent scholarship argues that these infrastructures form a durable governance architecture, expanded in the post-9/11 era and sustained through routine bureaucratic practice (Allen & Bista, 2022; Crumley-Effinger, 2022). Federal tracking systems, reporting obligations, and institutional intermediaries normalize panoptic oversight that students internalize shaping course loads, employment choices, travel decisions, and even participation in political or social activities. The constant possibility of being monitored compels self-discipline and risk aversion, illustrating how surveillance functions not only as state control but also as an institutionalized habitus.

Data from the Department of Homeland Security's SEVP program further illustrate this field of control. Annual reports outline enrollment patterns, program classifications, and institutional certifications, revealing how compliance metrics turn universities into both support providers and regulatory agents. International student advisors and Designated School Officials occupy a dual role: helping students succeed academically while enforcing immigration law. This duality produces the paradox at the center of this paper students are celebrated as contributors to global education while being continuously audited through administrative mechanisms.

Intersectional and identity-based analyses have begun to bridge the gap between adaptation and surveillance frameworks. Recent work demonstrates how race, gender, class, and visa status intersect to shape belonging and engagement (Glass et al., 2022). Accented speech, for instance, can mark students as outsiders and restrict

participation. Visa-dependent rules such as mandatory full-time enrollment and restrictions on off-campus work limit flexibility and heighten vulnerability. These studies show that what has often been described as "personal adjustment" is, in fact, the lived expression of structural governance. The constraints that define international students' academic and social possibilities are legally and institutionally produced.

Overall, the literature suggests three central insights. First, research on international students must center structural surveillance not only interpersonal discrimination if it is to capture the full texture of visibility and vulnerability. Second, institutional narratives of global diversity cannot be separated from the financial and regulatory infrastructures through which they are realized (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Bamberger & Morris, 2024). Third, intersectional and critical perspectives are essential to link macro-level policies with micro-level lived experience, clarifying how representation (celebration of diversity) coexists with and is often sustained by regulation (visa control, compliance monitoring, and data tracking).

This synthesis positions international students as both contributors to and learners within U.S. academic and social environments. Their presence enriches classrooms and communities, yet their participation is continuously negotiated through systems of surveillance, regulation, and institutional dependency. Understanding this tension between inclusion and control is vital for any serious engagement with the politics of international education.

Defining and Regulating the International Student

At the federal level, the F-1 Nonimmigrant Student Visa (8 CFR § 214.2 (f)) legally defines an international student as a non-U.S. citizen enrolled full time in an academic program at a Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) certified institution. Every clause of this regulation is infused with prescriptive terms "must," "maintain," "report," and "authorized" that transform learning into a tightly managed legal condition. Students must sustain full-time enrollment, update their address within ten days of any move, and seek explicit authorization for work or reduced course loads. These requirements cast international students not simply as learners but as conditional subjects, whose right to remain in the country depends on continuous compliance with immigration law (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2024).

The SEVIS database operationalizes this system of observation. It records every student's enrollment, travel, and employment activity and links university officials directly to DHS. Government publications describe SEVIS as a mechanism to "ensure national security and regulatory compliance." In contrast, university websites translate this language into the softer lexicon of care, telling students that SEVIS "helps you maintain your visa status." This reframing of surveillance as "support" exemplifies how discourses of inclusion and control are fused through bureaucratic euphemism.

Institutional Discourses of Diversity and Responsibility

University policy pages further reflect this dualism. The University of California system defines international students as those "temporarily present in the United States on an F-1 or J-1 visa," then promises, "We are committed to your success and legal compliance" (University of California Office of the President, 2023). The phrase pairs *success* and *compliance* as inseparable values, signaling that academic achievement and legal obedience are co-requirements of belonging. The same page features imagery of students smiling in multicultural settings, visually evoking cosmopolitan inclusion while textual content focuses on deadlines, reporting rules, and visa procedures.

At New York University, the Office of Global Services states that international students "must maintain lawful status by collaborating with your Designated School Official" (New York University, 2024). Recruitment brochures, however, highlight "world-class diversity" and "global learning opportunities." Together, these contrasting materials construct the international student as both brand ambassador and legal entity, simultaneously contributing to institutional prestige and subject to state oversight.

Florida State College at Jacksonville's International Student Services page similarly juxtaposes obligation and care. It reminds students that "failure to maintain status may result in termination," followed immediately by reassurance that "our office is here to help you maintain your legal status" (Florida State College at Jacksonville, 2024). The shift from disciplinary to supportive language demonstrates how universities internalize federal enforcement tasks while attempting to humanize them. Support and monitoring thus appear as two sides of the same institutional mission.

Support as Surveillance

Universities present compliance not as coercion but as *care*. Advising offices describe their purpose as "helping students maintain status," "guiding you through immigration regulations," or "ensuring your success." Such phrasing merges emotional and administrative labor: the same office that provides cultural transition workshops also reports enrollment data to DHS. Through this linguistic framing, surveillance becomes naturalized as part of

academic mentorship. Students learn to internalize bureaucratic vigilance as personal responsibility, reinforcing Foucault's concept of self-discipline within the panoptic gaze.

This synthesis of support and oversight also produces emotional tension. International students must trust advisors who are, simultaneously, institutional gatekeepers. The friendly tone of outreach emails beginning with "We're here to help" conceals the asymmetrical power relationship in which one party holds the authority to terminate a SEVIS record. What appears as guidance functions as governance.

From Diversity to Compliance: The Discursive Pattern

Content across federal and institutional texts reveals a recurring pattern linking four dominant themes: global citizenship, academic excellence, compliance, and security. These themes define the "ideal" international student as culturally enriching, high-performing, law-abiding, and transparent to oversight. The first two qualities diversity and excellence offer representation; the latter two compliance and security enforce regulation. Together they form a discursive system that celebrates international presence while circumscribing autonomy.

Universities thus depend on international students for cultural and financial capital yet must act as agents of the state in regulating their mobility. The language of inclusion conceals the infrastructure of monitoring that makes inclusion possible. When "support" and "compliance" become interchangeable, belonging itself becomes conditional a privilege sustained by continuous administrative visibility.

From Symbolic Inclusion to Ethical Responsibility

Universities frequently highlight their international populations in promotional materials, framing global diversity as evidence of institutional excellence. Yet the lived experiences of these students often reveal a more conditional belonging shaped by visa regulations, financial precarity, and continuous compliance obligations (Lee & Rice, 2007; Allen & Bista, 2022). Inclusion, therefore, risks becoming performative a visible but shallow commitment that reinforces rather than dismantles hierarchical structures. To reimagine inclusion ethically, institutions must acknowledge their complicity in maintaining surveillance infrastructures and strive for relational rather than regulatory engagement.

An *ethics of responsibility* would center human dignity over bureaucratic efficiency. As Ahmed (2012) argues, diversity work cannot merely "add color" to the institution; it must transform the conditions that make exclusion possible. This transformation entails transparency in visa reporting practices, participatory decision-making with international students, and professional development for faculty and staff on intercultural empathy and legal constraints. Such measures would replace the current transactional model where compliance equates to care with a transformative model in which care itself becomes a practice of justice.

Conclusion: From Policy to Possibility

International students occupy a complex and often contradictory position in U.S. higher education welcomed as symbols of diversity and global engagement yet subjected to structures of surveillance and control. This paper has traced how universities, federal policies, and public discourses construct the international student identity through both celebration and regulation. The findings show that the experience of inclusion is always conditional, mediated by visa restrictions, institutional monitoring, and social perceptions. To move from policy to possibility, higher education must reimagine inclusion as an ethical and humanizing practice grounded in transparency, care, and shared agency.

International students' contributions to the United States are undeniable and multifaceted. Economically, they represent a vital component of the higher education system. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce (2023), international students contribute over $40 billion annually to the national economy through tuition, housing, and daily expenditures. Their presence sustains academic programs, research labs, and local communities that rely on their engagement and spending. Yet their indirect contributions are often even more profound. Many international graduates join the U.S. workforce through Optional Practical Training (OPT), filling critical gaps in science, technology, and innovation sectors (NAFSA, 2023). Others return to their home countries carrying with them not only advanced knowledge but also deep transnational ties that strengthen America's global partnerships, trade, and diplomacy. These enduring intellectual and cultural connections demonstrate that international education is not merely transactional it is transformative.

Despite these benefits, the lived reality for many international students remains fraught with emotional, bureaucratic, and social challenges. Navigating visa renewals, maintaining legal status, and fulfilling complex reporting requirements impose continuous stress and vulnerability (Allen & Bista, 2022). Beyond the paperwork, students often face cultural isolation and linguistic bias, which can compound feelings of invisibility or hypervisibility in academic spaces (Lee & Rice, 2007). Recognizing these struggles both technical and emotional is a moral imperative. Universities cannot claim to champion diversity while neglecting the systems that undermine

the dignity of those they recruit and celebrate. Humanization must become central to institutional practice, ensuring that international students are seen not as compliance risks but as individuals contributing to the collective intellectual and moral life of campuses.

Transparency also plays a crucial role in building trust. When universities openly communicate how immigration data is managed, what compliance entails, and what rights students hold, they foster a sense of psychological safety. Transparency transforms authority into accountability, making students feel included in, rather than subjected to, institutional systems. As Ahmed (2012) reminds us, genuine inclusion emerges not from symbolic gestures but from the everyday labor of making space for those historically marginalized. Similarly, care and openness convert abstract policy commitments into relational practices that affirm belonging.

Ultimately, international students are not guests but partners in shaping the future of higher education and global society (Tavares, 2021). They are here to contribute to science, culture, innovation, and human connection. Their journeys, whether they remain in the U.S. workforce or return abroad, extend the influence of American education beyond national borders. Recognizing their value means more than celebrating diversity; it means embracing justice. The path forward demands that universities see international students not through the lens of policy, but through the possibility of shared humanity a vision where global mobility and belonging coexist with dignity, transparency, and trust.

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Ethical Statement

This study is based on theoretical analysis, critical interpretation of existing literature, and publicly available sources. It did not involve human subjects, interviews, surveys, or the collection of identifiable personal data. As such, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required for this research.

Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Author Contributions

The author solely conceptualized the study, developed the theoretical framework, conducted the literature review, analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript.

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