

NAVIGATING SEVIS: ANALYZING CHALLENGES FACED BY  
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT THE  
UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

by

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A THESIS

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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Title: Navigating SEVIS: Analyzing Challenges Faced by International Students at the University of Oregon

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As international education continues to evolve in an increasingly globalized world, universities must confront the unique challenges faced by their international student populations. This thesis conducts an in-depth examination of the experiences of international students at the University of Oregon, with a particular focus on the complex dynamics surrounding the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), financial pressures, cultural adjustment processes, and emerging policies impacting their collegiate journeys.

Employing a mixed-methods approach integrating data analysis, surveys, and an extensive literature review, this research sheds light on the bureaucratic burdens, economic strains, cultural barriers, and systemic inequities that can hinder international students' academic success and overall well-being. Specific attention is also devoted to the disparate treatment of international student-athletes regarding name, image, and likeness compensation opportunities due to visa restrictions.

Beyond identifying these multifaceted challenges, the thesis delves into the University of Oregon's roles and responsibilities in cultivating an inclusive, supportive environment that embodies the core values of global education. Through comprehensive analysis, key institutional

factors and policy considerations are illuminated, paving the way for actionable recommendations at both the university and federal levels.

Underpinned by a commitment to promoting cross-cultural understanding, diversity, and equitable access to transformative educational experiences, this research endeavors to bridge the gap between the aspirations of international education and the lived realities of those at its heart. By giving voice to an often-overlooked community, the thesis serves as a call for universities to purposefully address the unique needs of their international students and uphold the highest standards of globalized academic experience.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

In an era defined by increased globalization and cultural exchange, international education has transcended its traditional boundaries, offering invaluable opportunities for academic, personal, and professional growth. The University of Oregon, nestled in the heart of Eugene, has long been a champion of this global perspective, welcoming students from diverse backgrounds and corners of the world. However, the journey for an international student has the potential to be fraught with challenges navigating the intricacies of a foreign academic system. This thesis embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the experiences and challenges faced by international students at the University of Oregon, particularly within the complex realm of the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS).

### *SEVIS: A Framework and Its Implementation*

At the core of this exploration is SEVIS, the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, a web-based platform established by the U.S. government. Its primary purpose is to track and monitor the activities of international students and exchange visitors studying in the United States. SEVIS was implemented as part of a broader national security response following the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Its inception aimed to ensure rigorous monitoring of individuals entering and residing in the U.S., with an emphasis on preventing abuse of the student visa system for purposes other than education (United States Senate, 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2005).

### *Financial Struggles and Realities*

For international students, the prospect of studying abroad can be a life-changing opportunity, but it often comes with a myriad of financial challenges. While pursuing higher education in a foreign land, they face the daunting financial hurdles of tuition fees, housing, healthcare, and daily living expenses. Additionally, as international students, they may have limited access to financial aid and scholarships, creating an additional layer of financial pressure. This thesis uncovers the financial realities that international students at the University of Oregon confront, exploring their experiences in managing expenses and the impact of these financial pressures on their academic journeys.

### *Cultural Adjustment and Identity*

Beyond financial challenges, international students face the intricacies of cultural adjustment and identity. They arrive on campus with diverse cultural backgrounds, languages, and traditions, which enrich the academic tapestry of the university. Yet, in adapting to a new environment, they grapple with the complexities of assimilation, seeking a balance between their cultural identities and the need to fit into their academic and social surroundings. This research delves into the cultural struggles encountered by international students, investigating the tensions and rewards in the pursuit of higher education.

### *International Student Athletics: Name Image and Likeness*

A unique challenge for international student-athletes lies in the realm of name, image, and likeness (NIL) compensation. While domestic student-athletes can now profit from their NIL, international students on F-1 or J-1 visas face significant restrictions due to their non-immigrant status (Auh, 2023; Johnson, 2023). These visa regulations prohibit certain types of



employment and income-generating activities, effectively barring many international student-athletes from benefiting from NIL opportunities in the same way as their domestic counterparts (Sellers, 2023). This disparate treatment creates financial inequities and raises concerns about fairness and inclusion in collegiate athletics.

### *A Broader Exploration: Diversity, Inclusion, and Global Engagement*

In addition to the focal themes of SEVIS, financial struggles, NIL, and cultural adjustment, this thesis widens the lens to explore broader topics of diversity, inclusion, and global engagement within the University of Oregon. These concepts go beyond the individual experiences of international students and delve into the institution's commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive academic community and its broader strategies for global engagement.

By examining the intersection of these themes, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by international students at the University of Oregon. The goal is not only to identify these challenges but to propose actionable recommendations for the university to better support its international student population, promote global engagement, and create an inclusive and enriching academic environments for all students. This thesis thus seeks to bridge the gap between the dream of international education and the tangible experiences of those who embark on this transformative journey.

## Significance

This research shines a light on an important but often overlooked segment of the university population - international students. While institutions tout the value of global citizenship and cross-cultural exchange, the lived realities of international students can diverge from those ideals. Too often, they find themselves part of a marginalized group, facing unique bureaucratic, financial, cultural, and social hurdles that their domestic peers do not experience (Mohamad & Manning, 2023). By giving voice to their struggles, this work represents a crucial step towards truly embodying the core principles of higher education - promoting understanding, dismantling barriers, and fostering an inclusive environment for all.

The presence of international students at universities is not merely an added bonus, but a fundamental necessity in today's globalized world. These students bring with them a wealth of cultural knowledge, diverse perspectives, and unique experiences that enrich the academic and social fabric of the institution. They challenge preconceived notions, spark cross-cultural dialogues, and prepare all students for the realities of an interconnected workforce and society. At the University of Oregon, a campus that prides itself on diversity and global engagement, the role of international students is particularly crucial. If the university truly seeks to live up to its stated values and mission, it must go beyond mere rhetoric and actively cultivate an environment where international students can thrive. This means addressing the systemic barriers and challenges they face head-on, from navigating complex visa regulations to overcoming cultural hurdles.

At its heart, the mission of universities extends far beyond imparting academic knowledge - it is about shaping globally minded citizens capable of navigating an interconnected

world. International students are vital to realizing this mission, as their diverse perspectives and experiences innately internationalize the campus and classroom discourse (Rao, 2017). They are not merely recipients of education, but active participants enriching the learning journeys of their domestic counterparts. Embracing and addressing the challenges they face is paramount to ensuring they can engage fully and thrive, enabling the cross-pollination of ideas that elevates the educational experience for all.

## Chapter 1: In Depth Analysis of F and J Visa Categories

The F-1 and J-1 visas represent the predominant pathways for international students to pursue higher education in the United States. However, these non-immigrant visa classifications come with a host of strict regulations that shape virtually every aspect of the international student experience. Understanding the intricacies of these visas is crucial for institutions like the University of Oregon to effectively support their international populations. Examining the trends in F-1 visa admissions over the past decade provides valuable insights into the evolving landscape of international student mobility and regulatory influences.

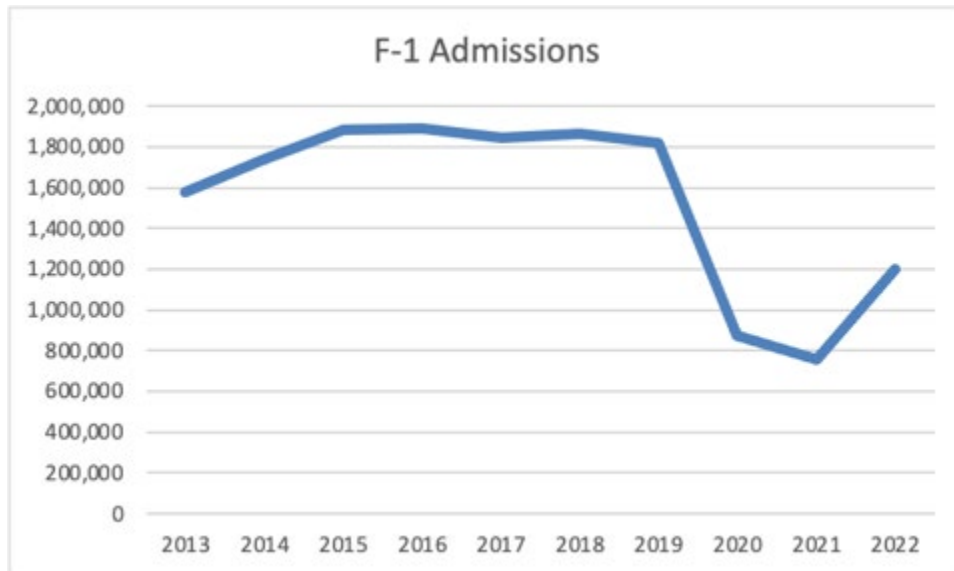


Figure 1. F-1 Visa Admissions to the United States between 2013 – 2022.

The data presented illustrates the fluctuating trends in F-1 visa admissions granted by the United States Department of Homeland Security from 2013 to 2022. A discernible pattern emerges, showcasing a steady increase in admissions until 2016, followed by a gradual decline in subsequent years. The substantial drop observed in 2020 and 2021 likely reflects the unprecedented challenges posed by the global COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring the dynamic nature of international student mobility.

Moreover, a comprehensive examination of F-1 visa admissions sets the stage for understanding the broader context of dependent visas, such as the F-2 visa category. While F-1 visas primarily facilitate international students' academic pursuits, F-2 visas extend to their accompanying dependents, offering insights into the familial dimensions of international student mobility.

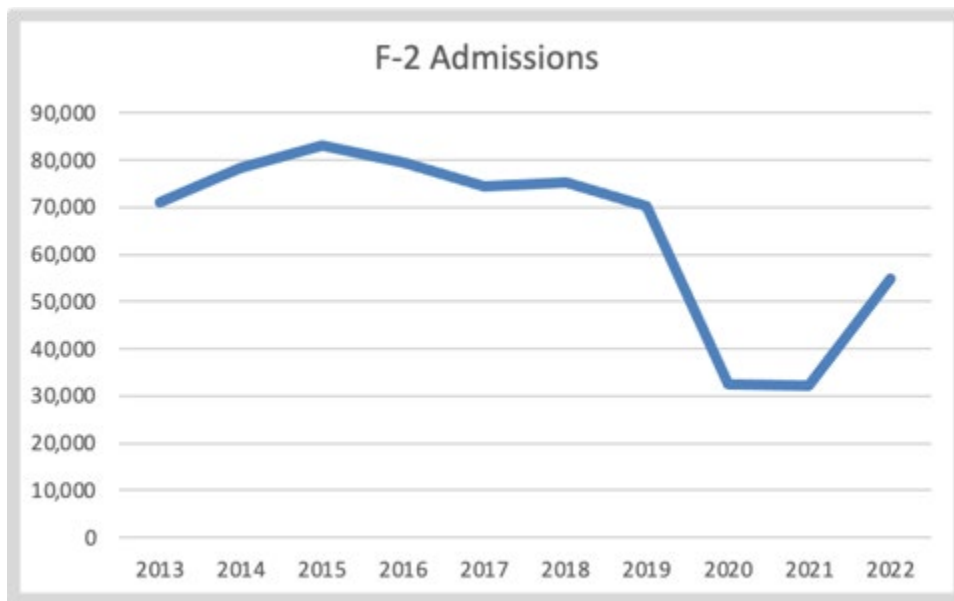


Figure 2. F-2 Visa Admissions to the United States between 2013-2022.

The provided data depicts the fluctuating trends in F-2 visa admissions granted by the United States Department of Homeland Security from 2013 to 2022. Similar to the patterns observed in F-1 visa admissions, the F-2 admissions exhibit a gradual increase followed by a notable decline in 2020 and 2021, likely reflecting the impact of global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic on international student mobility and accompanying dependents.

Transitioning from the analysis of F-2 visa admissions, it is imperative to consider the landscape of J-1 visa utilization among international students. Unlike F visas, which primarily cater to individuals pursuing academic programs, J-1 visas encompass a broader range of exchange visitor programs, including academic exchanges, research programs, and cultural exchanges. Understanding the distinctions between these visa classifications sheds light on the diverse pathways available to international students and underscores the importance of comprehensive visa data analysis in shaping institutional support strategies.

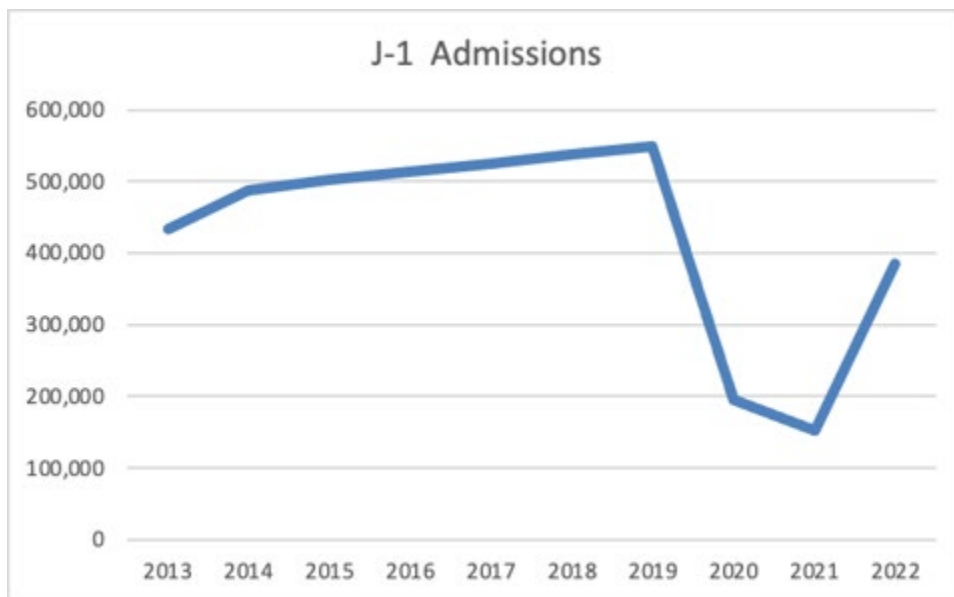


Figure 3. J-1 Visa Admissions to the United States between 2013 – 2022.

While the trends in J-1 visa admissions share similarities with those of F-1 visas, such as the notable decrease observed in 2020 and 2021, a unique aspect of the J-1 data lies in its broader scope, encompassing various exchange visitor programs beyond academic pursuits. The substantial increase in J-1 admissions in 2022, compared to the previous two years, suggests a potential resurgence in international exchange activities, highlighting its dynamic nature.

Exploring J-2 admissions offers a broader perspective on the accompanying family members of exchange visitors under the J-1 visa category. Seeing the trends in J-2 admissions enriches our understanding of the holistic impact of international exchange programs.

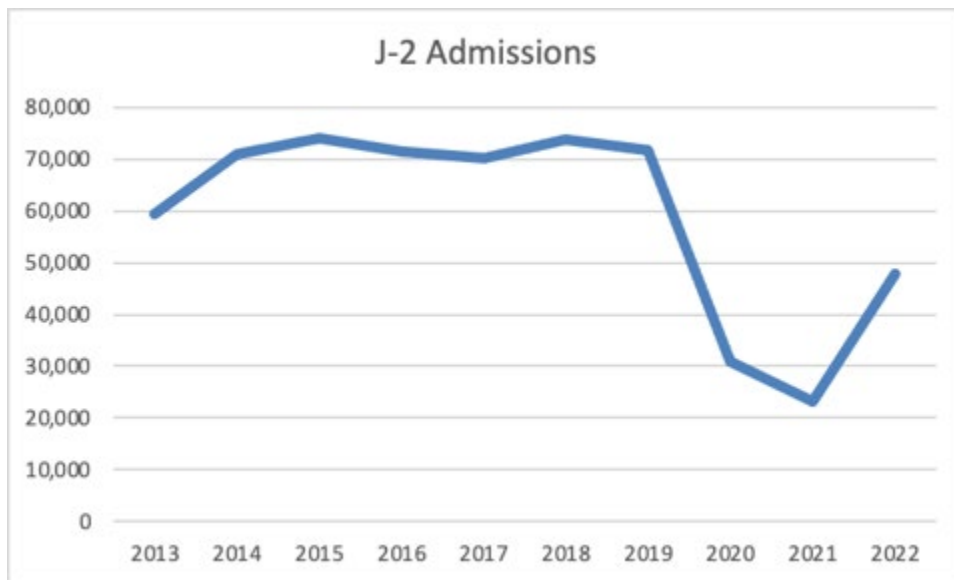


Figure 4. J-2 Visa Admissions to the United States between 2013-2022.

There is a consistent trend of J-2 visa admissions mirroring the overall patterns observed in international student mobility, the substantial decrease in admissions in 2020 and 2021, followed by a partial rebound in 2022, highlights the impact of external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic on family mobility trends as exists on the F Visa as well. These fluctuations underscore the importance of considering the broader context and external influences.

Central to the F-1 and J-1 student visa is the requirement to maintain full-time enrollment and normal academic progress toward completing a degree program. Failure to do so can potentially jeopardize one's visa status (Crumley-Effinger, 2024). Full-time status is generally defined as registering for at least 12 credit hours per term for undergraduate students, though definitions can vary across institutions and degree levels (USCIS F-1 Regulations). This underscores the immense academic pressures international students face beyond just excelling in their coursework.

Another key aspect is a limit on employment opportunities. F-1 students are only permitted to work on-campus for up to 20 hours per week while classes are in session (USCIS on Student Employment). However, exceptions exist for types of employment like curricular practical training directly related to one's field of study. This restriction on off-campus employment can exacerbate financial pressures many international students already face in terms of tuition, living costs, and limited access to external funding sources (Wilson et al., 2023).

J-1 exchange visitor visas, often used for visiting scholars and researchers, operate under similar constraints. While allowing employment within the boundaries of the cultural exchange program, such work opportunities remain limited and temporary in nature (USCIS J-1 Regulations). This further highlights how visa status can curb income prospects and career development trajectories.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic brought new complexities regarding online class formats and remote learning for F-1 visa holders. Temporary guidance allowed more online instruction than typically permitted, but uncertainty persisted around future policy adaptations (Lynch et al., 2023). Such disruptions exemplify the precarious situations international students inhabit when force majeure events prompt sudden visa regulation shifts.



Compounding these challenges are implications for post-graduation pathways. Opportunities like optional practical training that allow visa extensions for employment purposes are themselves governed by extensive regulations and eligibility criteria (Kim, 2022). International students must carefully navigate a labyrinth of visa policies that could significantly impact their academic journeys and prospects beyond the classroom.

Through this overview, it becomes evident that the F-1 and J-1 visa structures underpin many of the difficulties facing international students at institutions like the University of Oregon. The emphasis on continuous enrollment, restrictions on employment and income sources, sudden policy disruptions, and post-completion uncertainties coalesce into a formidable web of challenges. Fully grasping these visa dynamics is imperative for developing holistic strategies to create a supportive, equitable environment for this uniquely impacted population.

## **Chapter 2: Navigating the Landscape of International Student Monitoring**

The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) stands as a cornerstone of the U.S. government's efforts to monitor and track non-immigrant students and exchange visitors. Implemented in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, SEVIS was born out of a climate of heightened national security concerns and a drive to prevent potential abuse of the student visa system for nefarious purposes. At its core, the web-based platform aimed to "ensure rigorous monitoring of individuals entering and residing in the U.S." under the pretext of academic pursuits (Johnson, 2018). This marked a pivotal shift in the landscape of international education within America's borders.

The mechanics of SEVIS involve a stringent regime of record-keeping and reporting requirements imposed on international students and their host institutions. Each student is assigned a unique SEVIS identification number, and educational providers must diligently document everything from enrollment statuses and residential addresses to academic disciplinary actions (Crumley-Effinger, 2024). Even seemingly minor lapses in updating this information can potentially jeopardize a student's visa status, generating an environment of constant surveillance and scrutiny.

For international students navigating SEVIS, the system represents an ever-present administrative burden. As Smith (2020) elucidates, "Maintaining accurate records and updating information regularly can be time-consuming and stressful." This siphons valuable energy and attention away from their core academic pursuits and personal well-being. Moreover, the overarching climate of monitoring can foster feelings of marginalization and a tenuous sense of belonging within the campus community (Mohamad & Manning, 2023).

The genesis of SEVIS can be traced back to the searing events of September 11, 2001, which catalyzed a seismic shift in U.S. immigration and visa policies. In the wake of the attacks, concerns mounted over the potential exploitation of the student visa program by individuals with malicious intent (Senate Hearing, 2004). SEVIS emerged as a central plank in the government's strategy to fortify the integrity of the system and mitigate security vulnerabilities.

However, as the years progressed, SEVIS itself became a source of contention and debate. Critics argued that the intensified visa restrictions and surveillance mechanisms, while well-intentioned, inadvertently discouraged top international scholars and researchers from pursuing opportunities in the United States (Senate Hearing, 2012). This threatened to undermine the nation's ability to remain a preeminent global destination for academic excellence and innovation.

International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) offices and their counterparts play a pivotal role in managing the complex administrative landscape surrounding international students' visa statuses and academic progress. At the heart of this responsibility lies the meticulous tracking and updating of student records to ensure compliance with federal regulations and maintain the integrity of the institution's reporting obligations.

ISSS staff serve as the critical link between international students and the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). Through SEVIS, designated school officials input and monitor key data points related to each student's enrollment status, course load, employment authorizations, and any deviations from the standard academic plan. This includes processing requests for reduced course loads due to medical or academic reasons, updating work authorizations like curricular practical training or optional practical training, and recording changes in program dates or degree levels. By promptly and accurately reflecting these changes

in SEVIS, ISSS offices safeguard the institution's ability to sponsor international students and uphold the trust placed in them by federal authorities. Moreover, this diligent record-keeping allows ISSS to proactively identify and address potential issues before they jeopardize a student's visa status, serving as an essential safety net in an often-unforgiving regulatory environment. In essence, the ISSS's role in tracking and reporting through SEVIS forms the bedrock of a robust international student support infrastructure, ensuring both institutional compliance and student success.

Compounding these issues, the SEVIS framework has had to adapt to unforeseen disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic. As Crumley-Effinger's (2024) work explores, such seismic events necessitated rapid policy shifts that reverberated through the international student community, sowing confusion and psychological strain. The evolving nature of SEVIS underscores both its significance as a regulatory tool and the challenges of maintaining a balanced, stable environment for academic exchange amidst changing landscapes.

While SEVIS continues to be refined and debated, its impact on the experiences of international students remains profound. As this historical analysis illustrates, the system represents a complex intersection of national security priorities, immigration policies, and the facilitation of global education. As universities like the University of Oregon strive to foster inclusive, supportive environments, grappling with the nuances and implications of SEVIS will be crucial to empowering their international student populations.

### **Chapter 3: Unveiling the Financial Challenges**

For international students pursuing higher education in the United States, the financial hurdles can be daunting and far-reaching. Coming from countries with disparities in economic standing, many arrive on campus already facing significant monetary pressures (Wilson et al., 2023). This fiscal strain is then compounded by the very structure of the student visa system that governs their stay.

A core issue stems from the strict limitations on employment opportunities afforded to F-1 and J-1 visa holders. As previously discussed, F-1 students are restricted to on-campus work of no more than 20 hours per week while classes are in session (USCIS on Student Employment). This drastically curtails their ability to supplement the costs of tuition, living expenses, health insurance, and other fees through external income sources (Garcia, 2021). For those hailing from nations with comparatively weaker currencies, this deprivation of viable employment can render an already expensive U.S. education financially insurmountable.

To obtain a student visa, applicants must demonstrate their financial capacity to cover tuition and living expenses for a minimum of 12 months or the duration of their academic program if shorter. This proof of funding typically includes bank statements from the sponsor (or the student, if self-funded) and, in some cases, a comprehensive list of assets, as required by the university. While students are not obligated to pay for the entirety of their program upfront, it is crucial to establish sufficient financial resources without relying on employment opportunities in the United States during their studies.

Meeting this requirement of demonstrating full financial viability for at least 12 months can be an enormous challenge for many international students. Unlike their domestic

counterparts, who are not subject to such stringent financial scrutiny, international students must navigate a complex web of financial documentation and proof of resources. This added burden can be particularly daunting for students from countries with weaker currencies or those from less affluent backgrounds. Moreover, the inability to rely on employment in the United States during their studies further compounds the financial pressures faced by international students. While domestic students have the flexibility to work part-time jobs to supplement their income, international students are restricted by visa regulations and must secure sufficient funds before even setting foot on campus. This disparity in financial requirements highlights the unique challenges international students must overcome in pursuit of their educational goals and underscores the need for increased support and understanding from universities and policymakers alike.

Exacerbating this challenge is the limited access international students frequently encounter when seeking institutional financial aid, grants, or scholarships. Unlike their domestic counterparts, they are often ineligible for federal aid programs, leaving them heavily reliant on competitive, limited scholarship pools (Wilson et al., 2023). At the University of Oregon specifically, scholarship opportunities explicitly earmarked for international students remain scarce, placing an immense burden on their resource-constrained situations.

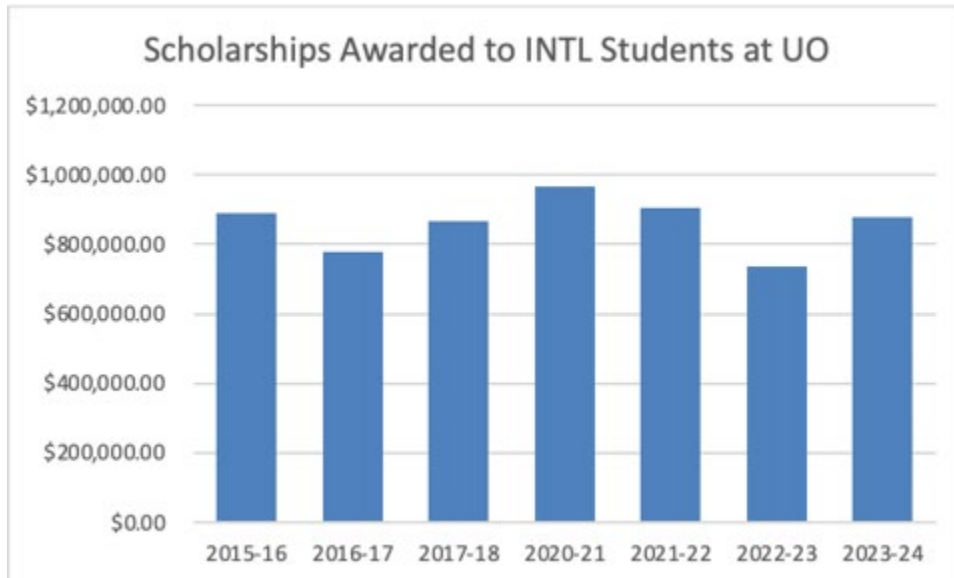


Figure 5. Scholarships Awarded to International Students at the University of Oregon from 2015-2024.

The International Students and Scholar Services Department plays a crucial role in financially supporting international students through scholarship awards. Over the past several years, the department has distributed substantial funds ranging from approximately \$737,000 in the 2022-23 academic year to over \$968,000 in 2020-21. While the amounts fluctuate annually, surpassing \$800,000 in most years, this data highlights the department's commitment to alleviating financial burdens and enhancing access to educational opportunities for international students.

However, despite the commendable efforts to provide scholarship opportunities, the rapidly increasing costs associated with attending the University of Oregon pose an ever-growing challenge. Over the past decade, tuition and fees have risen at an alarming rate, outpacing inflation and placing immense pressure on students and their families. For international students, this financial strain is compounded by additional expenses, such as visa fees, travel costs, and the absence of federal financial aid eligibility. As a result, many qualified and talented international scholars may find themselves priced out of the very opportunities that could unlock their full potential and contribute to the intellectual vibrancy of the university community.

## Undergraduate Tuition and Mandatory Fee History

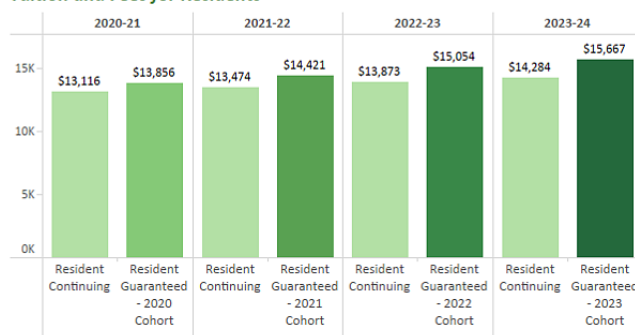
### Guaranteed Tuition and Fees

Year	Residency	Actual Dollars	CPI-adjusted
2020-21	Resident Continuing	\$13,116	\$15,397
	Resident Guaranteed - 2020 Cohort	\$13,856	\$16,266
	Nonresident Continuing	\$37,728	\$44,291
	Nonresident Guaranteed - 2020 Cohort	\$39,308	\$46,146
2021-22	Resident Continuing	\$13,474	\$15,330
	Resident Guaranteed - 2021 Cohort	\$14,421	\$16,407
	Nonresident Continuing	\$38,825	\$44,172
	Nonresident Guaranteed - 2021 Cohort	\$40,465	\$46,038
2022-23	Resident Continuing	\$13,873	\$14,570
	Resident Guaranteed - 2022 Cohort	\$15,054	\$15,811
	Nonresident Continuing	\$39,983	\$41,993
	Nonresident Guaranteed - 2022 Cohort	\$41,699	\$43,795
2023-24	Resident Continuing	\$14,284	\$14,284
	Resident Guaranteed - 2023 Cohort	\$15,667	\$15,667
	Nonresident Continuing	\$41,178	\$41,178
	Nonresident Guaranteed - 2023 Cohort	\$43,300	\$43,300

**Notes:**

1. Note: 2020-21 was the first year that the university established a continuing rate for existing students who were not eligible for guaranteed tuition.
  2. Figures are expressed in inflation-adjusted 2023 dollars. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) values are obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and represent the Urban-West annual CPI as of June 30, 2023.
  3. All of the costs presented in the table are annualized for the academic year. Tuition and fee rates correspond to a carrying load of 15 credit hours.
- Source: UO Office of Institutional Research.

### Tuition and Fees for Residents



### Tuition and Fees for Nonresidents

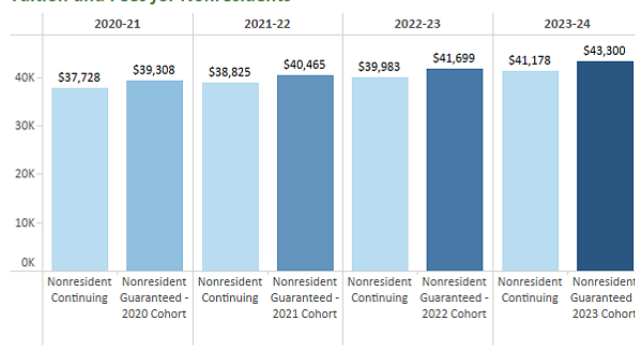


Figure 6. University of Oregon Undergraduate Tuition and Mandatory Fee History From 2020 – 2024.

The financial burden on international students attending the University of Oregon continues to escalate at an alarming rate. The data illustrates how just the cost of tuition and mandatory fees for new students has risen from \$39,308 in 2020 to a projected \$43,300 in 2023 - an increase of over \$4,000 in just three years (University of Oregon Tuition Data 2020-2023). However, tuition and fees represent merely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the true cost of attendance.

On top of those mandatory university charges, international students must also budget for substantial living expenses, which can add nearly \$16,000 annually to their total cost (University of Oregon Tuition and Housing Site, 2024). This staggering figure doesn't even account for



additional fees specific to international students, such as visa processing costs around \$400 and the mandatory \$3,300 per year health insurance required by the university - expenses that domestic students may be able to avoid by remaining on their parents' plans (U.S. DHS, and University of Oregon Health Services Site).

When factoring in all these components, the comprehensive annual price tag for a newly enrolled international student in 2023 could potentially exceed \$63,000. This exorbitant sum poses a formidable barrier to access, threatening to price out countless bright and talented scholars from around the world before they even have a chance to apply. Such a trajectory runs counter to the university's stated values of cultivating a diverse, global community of learners.

The economic turmoil wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic offered a sobering glimpse into the vulnerability of international students' financial standing. As Olatunji et al. (2023) document, disruptions to on-campus employment and funding sources created profound hardship, with many international students struggling to cover basic living costs and educational expenses. This underscores how external shocks can rapidly destabilize their precarious fiscal realities.

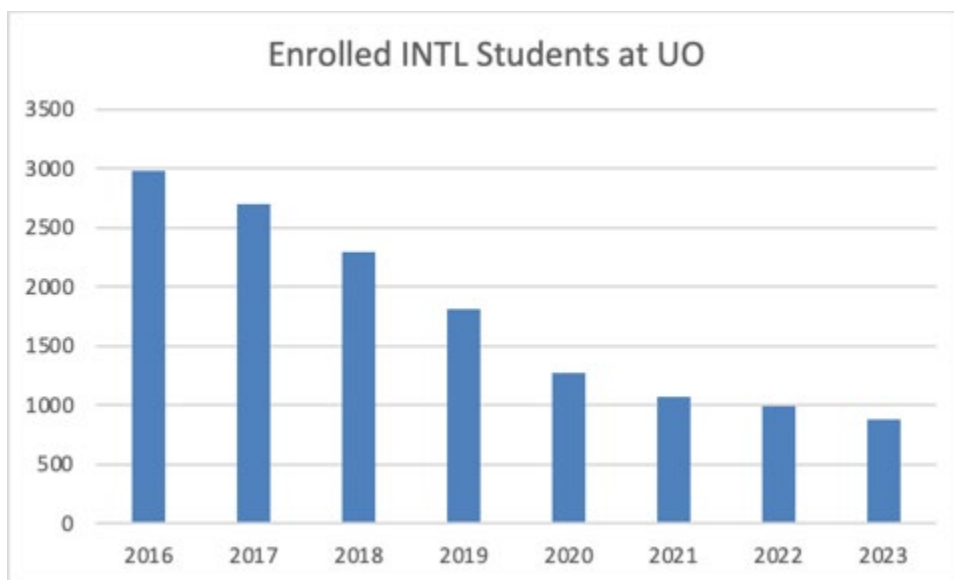


Figure 7. Enrolled International Students at the University of Oregon from 2016 – 2023.

The enrollment data reveals a stark and concerning decline in the number of international students at the University of Oregon over the past several years. After a peak of nearly 3,000 international students in 2016, the numbers have plummeted by almost 70% to just 877 projected for 2023. This precipitous drop not only represents a significant loss of the cultural and intellectual diversity that international students bring to campus, but also a substantial financial hit given the economic contributions of this student population.

The sharp decline in international student enrollment at the University of Oregon is undoubtedly multifaceted, with the COVID-19 pandemic playing an initial role. Travel restrictions and campus closures likely contributed to the dip starting in 2020. However, the persistently low numbers in 2022 and 2023 projections, failing to rebound in the same way national F and J visa issuances have, point to deeper underlying issues.

One key factor could be the substantial financial burden and lack of adequate scholarship support. As previously discussed, the costs of tuition, fees, health insurance, and living expenses continue to soar, potentially pricing out many international students. While scholarship funds are provided, they may not be keeping pace with the rapidly escalating expenses, leaving a widening affordability gap.

The university must critically examine whether its current financial aid offerings and strategies are sufficient to attract and retain international talent in an increasingly cost-prohibitive environment. Failure to do so risks long-term reputational and economic consequences as competitively priced peer institutions lure away this vital student population. Moreover, the enrollment decline also raises questions about the effectiveness of the university's outreach, recruitment, and retention efforts specifically geared towards international students. Do prospective students feel the university provides a sufficiently supportive and welcoming environment? Are there unaddressed concerns regarding resources for academic, cultural, or

social integration? A holistic evaluation of the lived experiences and feedback from current and past international students could illuminate potential areas for improvement.

Ultimately, regaining robust international student enrollment requires a multi-pronged approach that aggressively tackles issues of affordability while fostering an inclusive and enriching campus experience that appeals to global scholars. Leaving this challenge unaddressed risks perpetuating a discouraging pattern with profound cultural and economic ramifications for the University of Oregon.

For those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, the path to studying abroad is even more arduous. Without access to substantial familial resources or institutional backing, students may find themselves forced to delay or cancel their academic career in the United States. The psychological toll of such financial anxieties should not be underestimated, with research linking monetary stress to diminished mental health and academic performance (Wilson et al., 2023).

Yet, the irony persists that international students often subsidize the very institutions they attend through the premium tuition rates they are charged. Their contributions represent a vital revenue stream sustaining academic programs and resources (Gopal, 2016). This dichotomy of being monetarily crucial yet systemically disadvantaged speaks volumes about the need for equitable financial policies and supportive frameworks within U.S. higher education.

Through this investigation into financial difficulties, it becomes evident that economic barriers pose a formidable threat to international student success and representation on campuses like the University of Oregon. By illuminating these harsh realities, this thesis strives to catalyze meaningful dialogue and institutional reform to ensure the dream of international education remains attainable for talented scholars globally, regardless of their financial circumstances.

## Chapter 4: Exploring Cultural Dynamics in International Student Experiences

The journey of an international student extends far beyond academics and finances. Upon arriving at American universities like the University of Oregon, these students find themselves simultaneously enriching and challenged by cultural differences.

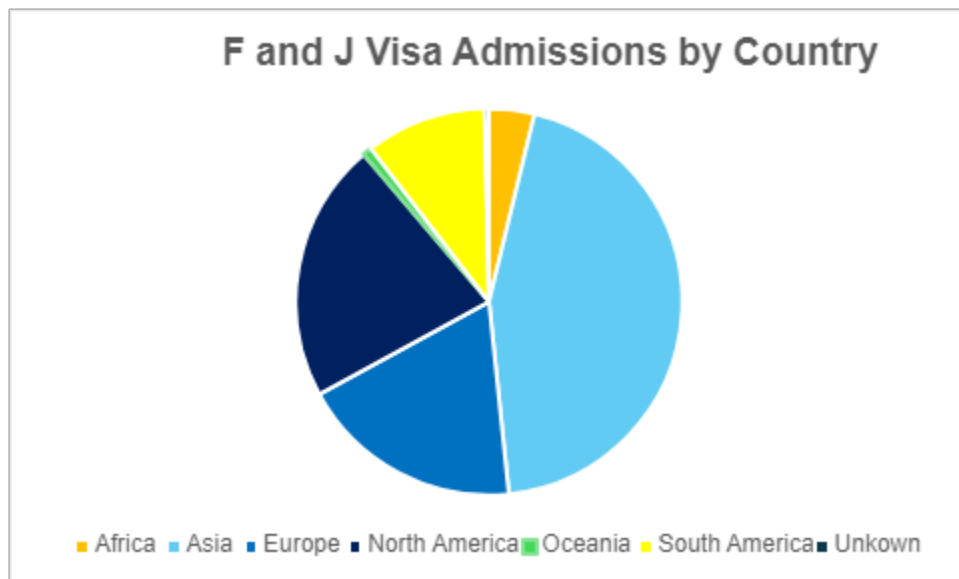


Figure 8. F and J Visa Admissions by Country in 2022

In 2022, 1,687,717 student and exchange visas were issued globally, with Asia leading in the number of visas granted, totaling 756,055. Europe and North America followed closely behind, with 317,648 and 368,265 visas issued, respectively. The data underscores the continued significance of international student and exchange programs, as evidenced by the substantial number of visas issued across regions during the specified year.

Despite the numerous opportunities international education affords, the cultural transition can be arduous for many students. An International Student Needs Survey that examined

International Students at three institutions revealed that 17% of respondents identified cultural barriers as one of the biggest obstacles they faced (Markedonova, Inch, Alonzo, 2023). This corroborates prior scholarly literature highlighting the profound challenges of adapting to new cultural norms, values, and expectations (Gray 2023). The dissonance between an international student's home culture and that of the host country can manifest in myriad ways, from interpersonal interactions to classroom dynamics, exacerbating feelings of alienation and distress.

Furthermore, the survey illuminated a concerning deficit in institutional support for cultural acclimation. A staggering 70% of respondents indicated that their respective campuses lack personnel explicitly tasked with discussing the nuances of American classroom culture to international students (Markedonova, Inch, Alonzo, 2023). Such deficiencies can further compound the cultural disorientation experienced by many international students, hindering their ability to seamlessly integrate into the academic grounds. As institutions strive to cultivate an inclusive environment, proactively addressing cultural disparities through targeted programming and resources emerges as a crucial imperative.

At the core of this cross-cultural experience lies the process of acculturation - adapting to the cultural environment of the host society while negotiating the preservation of one's heritage culture (Kim, 2019). For international students, this can manifest as an internal tug-of-war between assimilating enough to facilitate social integration and academic success, while maintaining a sense of cultural identity and the values instilled from their country of origin.

Language barriers present one of the most visible cultural challenges. Lack of English proficiency can hinder effective communication and full engagement with the academic discourse (Mohamad & Manning, 2023). This linguistic divide often extends beyond the

classroom, hampering the formation of meaningful social connections so vital to the student experience and overall wellbeing (Rao, 2017). The mere act of articulating one's thoughts and emotions becomes an added stressor.

Even for those with strong English skills, the nuances of American communication styles, norms of classroom participation, and interpersonal dynamics can induce culture shock. What may be considered respectful or appropriate in their home countries could inadvertently convey unintended meanings, sowing self-doubt and social discomfort (Lipson, 2008). The clash between individualistic and collectivistic cultural values often manifests in profound ways.

Compounding these linguistic and social challenges are the complexities of intersectional identities. International students of racial, ethnic, religious or other minority backgrounds may face double layers of marginalization, as they navigate not only their foreignness but also prejudices deeply rooted in American society (Madge et al., 2015). This intersection can further exacerbate feelings of isolation and non-belonging. Yet, amid these difficulties lies the transformative power of cross-cultural exchange and personal growth. By reconciling their multiple identities, international students can emerge as globally minded individuals equipped to thrive in an interconnected world (Rao, 2016). Their resilience in the face of cultural adjustment represents an invaluable form of experiential education.

International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) at the University of Oregon and similar offices at other institutions play a vital role in supporting international students as they navigate the complex process of transitioning to life and studies in the United States. These offices serve as a central hub for many services and resources designed to facilitate a smooth and successful acculturation experience.

At the forefront of their offerings are orientation programs that introduce international students to the academic expectations, cultural norms, and practical aspects of living in the U.S. These sessions cover topics such as culture changes, grading systems, academic integrity, and campus resources. ISSS staff also provide guidance on critical matters like visa regulations, employment options, and maintaining legal status. By equipping students with this foundational knowledge, ISSS helps mitigate the initial disorientation and uncertainty that often accompany the cross-cultural transition.

Beyond orientation, ISSS offices offer ongoing support throughout the student's academic journey. They organize workshops and events that promote cross-cultural understanding, foster social connections, and celebrate diversity. This can include conversation clubs to practice English skills, cultural festivals showcasing traditions from around the world, and peer mentoring programs that pair incoming international students with experienced ones. By creating spaces for intercultural dialogue and friendship, ISSS helps combat feelings of isolation and homesickness that can hinder academic success and overall well-being.

Moreover, ISSS serves as a crucial liaison between international students and various campus departments, advocating for their unique needs and ensuring they have access to the same opportunities as their domestic peers. This includes collaborating with academic advisors, working with housing services to find suitable accommodations, and connecting students with mental health resources to manage the stress of acculturation. By taking a holistic approach to student support, ISSS enhances the international student experience and contributes to the diversity and global engagement of the university community. In essence, ISSS is an indispensable asset in attracting top international talent, fostering cross-cultural competence, and preparing all students for success in an increasingly interconnected world.

Ultimately, comprehending the nuanced cultural challenges international students encounter is essential for institutions like the University of Oregon to cultivate an environment where diversity is not merely present, but embraced as a catalyst for intellectual discourse and mutual understanding. Only by creating space for these transcultural experiences can the full enrichment of international education be realized.



## Chapter 5: Name Image and Likeness

The realm of collegiate athletics has undergone a seismic shift with the advent of name, image, and likeness (NIL) policies that allow student-athletes to profit from their personal brands. However, for international students competing under the constraints of F-1 and J-1 visas, this new landscape is ripe with inequities and roadblocks that their American peers do not encounter. At the crux of this issue lies the fundamental limitations visa regulations impose on employment and income-generating activities for international students. As previously discussed, F-1 visa holders are restricted to on-campus work of no more than 20 hours per week while classes are in session (USCIS on Student Employment). Many NIL opportunities, such as endorsement deals or monetized social media content, would likely be classified as impermissible off-campus employment, effectively barring international student-athletes from reasonably accessing these revenue streams (Auh, 2023).

The legal ambiguities surrounding NIL only compound this challenge. As Sellers (2023) notes, "Universities must carefully navigate a complex web of state laws, NCAA regulations, and federal immigration policies" when it comes to NIL activities. For international students already grappling with visa complexities, this legal quagmire presents an additional layer of uncertainty and potential risk to their immigration status should violations occur.

The psychological toll of being relegated to the sidelines while domestic teammates capitalize on their personal brands cannot be overstated. Beyond the obvious financial implications, this disparate treatment can foster a deep sense of unfairness, resentment, and alienation within team environments (Johnson, 2023). The locker room dynamics are

fundamentally altered when a subset of players enjoys privileges and opportunities categorically denied to others based solely on their visa status.

Attempts to craft institutional NIL policies that provide more equitable pathways for international students have faced significant bureaucratic hurdles. Auh (2023) advocates for "carveouts in NIL regulations to remove compensation barriers," but acknowledges the legal and logistical complexities of such reforms. Universities like Oregon find themselves caught between a desire to support their international student-athletes and the stringent confines of federal immigration law. Yet, the urgency to address this issue cannot be overstated. Inaction risks not only disenfranchising talented international athletes but also jeopardizing the hard-fought progress toward fair compensation and economic empowerment that the NIL movement represents. An untenable dichotomy emerges where athletic programs profit from these students' talents and contributions, while systematically depriving them of the same opportunities afforded to their teammates.

The issue of name, image, and likeness (NIL) rights for college athletes has garnered significant attention, but the implications for international students are particularly concerning. This disparity is highlighted in the following quote from the North Carolina Law Journal:

“ESPN describes international athletes as existing “in a legal no man’s land” when it comes to NIL. International college athletes comprise more than 12 percent of college athletes and are generally unable to benefit from the NIL rules because of visa status” (Haneman, Weber, 2023)

Addressing this "legal no man's land" will require a nuanced and collaborative approach from universities, governing bodies, and policymakers. Potential solutions could involve

lobbying for legislative changes to student visa regulations, exploring alternative compensation models that align with existing rules, or developing educational and entrepreneurial resources to help international students navigate the NIL landscape within legal bounds. Regardless of the specific strategies employed, it is incumbent upon institutions to ensure that all student-athletes, regardless of nationality, are afforded equitable opportunities to capitalize on their talents and hard work, both on and off the field.

Furthermore, this issue extends beyond just monetary considerations. The ability to build one's personal brand and marketability through NIL activities is becoming increasingly valuable in today's digital age, providing a vital springboard for future career opportunities. By denying international student-athletes access to these avenues, they are effectively being deprived of a competitive advantage that could prove pivotal in their professional trajectories after graduation.

As the NIL landscape continues to evolve, it is imperative that policymakers, educational institutions, and athletic governing bodies work collaboratively to craft solutions that uphold the principles of equity, inclusion, and fairness. Only by dismantling these barriers can the true spirit of amateur athletics be honored for all student-athletes, regardless of their nation of origin or visa status.

## Summary of Challenges

The path of an international student in the United States is one fraught with a multitude of challenges that span financial, legal, cultural, and personal domains. This research has illuminated the profound ways in which these obstacles can pervade every aspect of the international education experience, hampering academic success, personal growth, and overall wellbeing.

On the financial front, international students confront a perfect storm of hurdles. They often hail from nations of lesser economic standing, leaving them already financially disadvantaged (Wilson et al., 2023). Yet, upon arriving at institutions like the University of Oregon, they encounter a harsh reality - exorbitant tuition costs coupled with limited access to financial aid, scholarships, and employment opportunities due to visa restrictions (Garcia, 2021; Olatunji et al., 2023). The psychological toll of such monetary stresses cannot be overstated, with research linking it to diminished mental health and academic performance (Wilson et al., 2023).

The very visa structures governing their stay, F-1 and J-1 classifications, represent a bureaucratic maze. Continuous enrollment requirements, rigid employment limitations, and the ever-present threat of status violations loom large, sowing an environment of perpetual uncertainty (Crumley-Effinger, 2024; USCIS Regulations). This precarious existence is only exacerbated by sudden policy shifts catalyzed by events like the COVID-19 pandemic (Lynch et al., 2023).

Using a survey of international students from three different institutions of higher education across the United States and follow-up focus groups, the researchers gathered feedback directly from current international students on the practices, policies, and areas for

improvement in supporting their studies. Although generally satisfied with the support from their international student offices, participants identified several key needs, emphasizing practical assistance with housing, navigating processes like obtaining social security numbers, fostering meaningful friendships across student groups, and ensuring support for mental/emotional health in addition to academic progress. As evidenced by the survey results:

“The survey asked respondents to identify the biggest barrier they had faced, revealing a multitude of challenges confronting international students: "Respondents identified having encountered a variety of barriers. When asked to identify the biggest barrier they had faced, respondents were about evenly split between financial (n = 26, 20%) and housing related issues (n = 25, 19%). Another 17% (n = 22) listed cultural barriers, 16% (n = 21) identified language barriers, 12% transportation (n = 15), and 10% academic (n = 13) barriers. Additional barriers listed by respondents included mental health issues, legal issues, and challenges finding courses to meet the requirements of their visas" (Markedonova, Inch, Alonzo, 2023).

This quote encapsulates the very nature of the obstacles international students must navigate, extending far beyond just academic or financial concerns. The near equal split between financial and housing issues as the primary barriers highlights the fundamental challenges many faces in securing basic needs like affordable living accommodations. Without a stable living situation, students' ability to focus on academics is significantly compromised. Moreover, the survey underscores how cultural differences, language proficiency, transportation access, and mental health all intersect to create unique hurdles that can derail an international student's success. The myriad legal complexities surrounding visa requirements and course listings further

compound these issues. Collectively, these findings illustrate how international students contend with a formidable confluence of linguistic, cultural, logistical, psychological, and bureaucratic barriers that can undermine their overall well-being and educational pursuits.

Institutions must move beyond merely addressing academic or financial matters, implementing initiatives that foster community building, cultural exchange, accessible transportation, and robust mental health resources. By adopting a more panoramic view of the challenges faced, universities can cultivate an environment where international students feel empowered to overcome obstacles and thrive personally, socially, and academically. Failure to recognize and address these intersecting barriers risks perpetuating cycles of isolation and distress that undermine the immense value international students bring to campuses. Ultimately, the survey serves as a call for institutions to reexamine and bolster their frameworks of support, ensuring international students have equitable opportunities to navigate barriers and unlock their full potential.

For international student-athletes, an added layer of inequity emerges through the realm of name, image, and likeness (NIL) opportunities. While domestic teammates revel in newfound economic empowerment, visa restrictions effectively prohibit most international athletes from reasonably accessing similar revenue streams (Auh, 2023; Sellers, 2023). This disparate treatment can poison team dynamics and represents a stark contradiction to the principles of fair play and amateur competition (Johnson, 2023).

Ultimately, this comprehensive exploration reveals that the international student experience is a nuanced, multidimensional journey replete with obstacles at every turn. Financial precarity, visa constraints, cultural chasms, and athletic inequities coalesce into a formidable gauntlet that tests resilience, perseverance, and the very dream of global education itself.

By giving voice to these lived realities, this research serves as an urgent call for stakeholders to dismantle barriers, drive meaningful reform, and uphold the highest ideals of an inclusive, supportive academic environment for all.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This comprehensive research into the experiences of international students at the University of Oregon has shed light on the multitude of challenges this population faces across financial, legal, cultural, and personal domains. The findings paint a picture of a community that enriches the academic fabric of the institution, yet continually confronts formidable systemic barriers to their success and well-being.

At the core lies a perfect storm of financial hardships stemming from soaring tuition costs, limited access to aid and scholarships, and visa restrictions curtailing employment opportunities. This economic precarity represents not just a fiscal burden, but a psychological one that can profoundly impact mental health and academic performance. The data reveals how international students often subsidize the very institutions they attend through premium tuition rates yet are deprived of equitable financial support structures.

The legal constraints imposed by visa categories like F-1 and J-1 emerged as overarching obstacles shaping every facet of the international student journey. Rigid enrollment stipulations, employment limitations, and complexities surrounding policies like SEVIS cultivate an environment of relentless scrutiny and uncertainty. Abrupt shifts catalyzed by events like COVID-19 only magnified this tenuous existence.

For international student-athletes, the findings highlighted a particularly egregious inequity through emerging name, image, and likeness (NIL) regulations. While enabling domestic peers to capitalize on their personal brands, visa rules overwhelmingly barred international competitors from reasonably accessing similar economic benefits, sowing resentment and undermining team dynamics.



The research also illuminated the immense cultural obstacles international students must navigate. Language barriers, acculturative stress, and the reconciliation of multifaceted identities emerged as profound personal challenges with far-reaching academic and social ramifications. This obstacle lies at the heart of the international educational experience.

Ultimately, this thesis's findings represent an impassioned call for stakeholders at every level to prioritize and address the unique needs of international student populations. Only through substantive reform can the highest aspirations of a truly globalized, equitable, and inclusive academic environment be realized.

#### Federal Policy Recommendations:

- Conduct a comprehensive review of visa policies and SEVIS regulations to strike a balanced approach that prioritizes national security while facilitating a welcoming environment for international academic exchange and collaboration. Provide contingency frameworks for visa adjustments during rapidly-changing events.
- Reexamine employment restrictions to expand legal pathways for international students to supplement tuition costs and living expenses through on-campus work, curricular training, or regulated off-campus opportunities.
- Establish centralized guidelines and legal frameworks to consider visa exemptions or alternative credentialing paths to foster participatory parity in earning NIL funds.

## University Recommendations:

- Enhance recruitment and fundraising efforts to expand need-based and merit-based scholarship opportunities explicitly for international students.
- Implement comprehensive training and workshops for faculty, staff, and domestic students to build intercultural competence. Foster an environment of empathy, understanding, and mutual respect for diverse backgrounds and experiences.
- Advocate at regional and national levels for regulatory reforms that create a more equitable landscape for international student participation, NIL involvement, and post-graduation career pathways aligned with their immense contributions.

By implementing a harmonized suite of policy adjustments at federal and institutional levels, the University of Oregon and its counterparts can pave the way toward an international educational experience that embodies the highest principles of empowerment, fairness, and cross-cultural celebration.

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