

Title: Self-Reflective Comparative Narratives of Two International Student Experiences at a U.S. Hispanic-Serving Institution

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Executive Summary

This paper highlights the often-overlooked experiences of international students at a Hispanic Serving Institution in the United States, based on our journeys at Florida International University. As the national conversation on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion continues to grow, we have noticed that international students are frequently left out, even though we face unique challenges beyond cultural adjustment.

Our experiences — Laura Guerrero from Colombia and Ahmer Siddiqui from Pakistan — show how immigration rules, financial stress, and emotional distance from home deeply affect our academic lives. These pressures influence everything from career planning to day-to-day life. Laura found comfort in Miami’s Hispanic culture, while Ahmer faced isolation due to language and cultural differences.

We also encountered major barriers in accessing internships and research opportunities. Many options were unavailable because of our visa status. Ahmer was rejected from positions simply for needing sponsorship, while Laura had to add a second major just to qualify for a work opportunity. These were decisions made out of necessity, not choice.

Although there are campus offices meant to support us, we often found more helpful advice from peers. At times, we felt like we had to figure everything out on our own. Still, we adapted. “I forged an identity,” Ahmer shared. “Being international made me become an adult faster,” Laura said.

To better support students like us, we recommend the following:

- Train professors and advisors on how immigration status affects academics and career planning
- Redesign academic programs and internships so international students can access them without changing majors
- Offer financial support, including scholarships and help with work authorization paperwork
- Create mentorship programs connecting international students with peers who have navigated campus life
- Include international students in diversity and inclusion efforts
- Invest in mental health services that understand the emotional toll of being far from home

This paper is not just a reflection of our stories, but a call to include international students in the vision of a truly inclusive university.

1. Introduction

International students make up a vital part of higher education in the United States. In the 2023–2024 academic year alone, more than one million international students were enrolled in American colleges and universities, with many pursuing degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) [1]. These students bring academic talent, diverse cultural perspectives, and a global mindset to university campuses. Despite their contributions, international students continue to face distinct challenges that are often left out of institutional equity conversations.

At Hispanic Serving Institutions like Florida International University (FIU), where diversity and inclusion initiatives often focus on domestic students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, international students frequently remain invisible in programming and student support. While this focus is important and necessary, the absence of international student voices and needs from justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) efforts leaves a critical gap. Immigration status introduces additional barriers such as employment restrictions, financial constraints, legal complexity, and cultural dislocation—all of which affect international students' ability to succeed academically and socially [2].

For students in STEM, these challenges are even more pronounced. Many internships, research assistantships, and post-graduation opportunities require U.S. citizenship or permanent residency. International students on F1 visas are often ineligible for these roles, even when they are highly qualified, creating unequal access to the hands-on experience that is essential for STEM career development [2]. In addition to academic barriers, international students also face social isolation and emotional hardship. Research has shown that these students often struggle with mental health concerns, language anxiety, and a sense of cultural alienation in the absence of support systems designed for their needs [3][4].

Although there has been increasing awareness around equity and inclusion in higher education, international students continue to be overlooked in both the data and the responses. While many universities have offices such as International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS), these are often under-resourced, focused primarily on legal compliance, and disconnected from the broader campus climate. As a result, international students are left to navigate systemic and personal challenges without proper guidance or acknowledgment [3].

This white paper was created to begin addressing that gap. As international undergraduate students studying biomedical engineering at FIU—Laura Guerrero from Colombia and Ahmer Siddiqui from Pakistan—we felt the need to document our lived experiences and reflect critically on how our academic, social, and emotional journeys have been shaped by our status as international students. Through a collaborative autoethnographic approach, we have compared our experiences, highlighted shared and individual challenges, and identified areas where the university can do better.

Our purpose is to raise awareness and share reflections that may help faculty, staff, and campus leaders better understand and support international students. We hope this work can offer

insight into what students like us experience, and open up space for more meaningful inclusion in everyday academic life.

In this project, we used a self-reflective narrative approach to better understand what it has meant for each of us to be international students in a STEM program at a Hispanic Serving Institution. After writing about our individual experiences, we came together to discuss them openly. This allowed us not only to compare our stories but also to understand how our backgrounds, identities, and the university environment shaped the way we experienced our time at FIU.

To guide our reflections, we drew from two main frameworks: intersectionality and social constructivism.

We used an intersectional lens to think about how different parts of who we are—such as our nationality, race, gender, language, and immigration status—come together to influence how we experience university life. These aspects don't exist in isolation, and by looking at how they overlap, we were able to better understand both the opportunities and challenges we've faced. As Núñez [5] explains, intersectionality in education helps show how identity and context together shape students' access to support and their sense of belonging.

We also leaned on social constructivism [6][7], which helped us look at how our personal growth and understanding developed over time, through our experiences and the people around us. This framework reminds us that learning and identity aren't just internal processes, they are shaped by our relationships, environments, and day-to-day interactions. Recent research by Kaya [8] highlights how social constructivism can help explain how international students adjust and find belonging in unfamiliar educational systems.

We started by reflecting on our experiences individually. We used open-ended prompts to write about different parts of our academic and personal lives—our motivations, challenges, turning points, and what we've learned along the way. Once we had each written our reflections, we sat down to talk through them together. This conversation helped us recognize patterns and differences in our stories and made it easier to identify what had the biggest impact on our time at FIU.

2. Guided Reflection Questions

Rather than analyzing our stories using formal coding or rigid categories, we focused on personal voice and open discussion. Our goal was to stay true to our own perspectives while learning from each other. To support our self-reflective narrative approach, we each responded to a set of open-ended questions designed to explore the academic, cultural, emotional, and institutional aspects of our experiences as international undergraduate students. These questions served as the foundation for both our individual reflections and our shared discussion.

2.1. Personal and Cultural Background

1. What motivated you to study in the United States, and why did you choose FIU?

2. How did your cultural background influence your expectations and approach to higher education?
3. What personal or family values shaped your decision to study abroad?

2.2.Academic Journey

4. How did you experience the academic environment at FIU compared to your previous education?
5. What challenges or surprises did you face in adapting to the U.S. education system?
6. How did your immigration status impact your access to internships, research opportunities, or professional development?

2.3.Social and Cultural Integration

7. How easy or difficult was it for you to connect with peers and build community?
8. In what ways did language, religion, or cultural differences affect your sense of belonging?
9. Did you find any spaces or relationships that made you feel understood and included?

2.4.Institutional Support

10. What support services did you use, and how effective were they in meeting your needs?
11. Were there moments when you felt the university didn't understand or recognize your experience as an international student?

2.5.Personal Growth and Identity

12. How has your experience at FIU changed your sense of identity or future goals?
13. What strengths or forms of resilience have you developed as a result of being an international student?
14. What advice would you give to a new international student entering FIU?

3. Key Findings

Through individual reflection and shared discussion, we explored the different and overlapping ways in which being international students has shaped our academic journeys, personal growth, and sense of belonging at Florida International University. Despite coming from different countries, cultures, and religions, we found many common threads in our experiences. These findings are organized around the key areas of inquiry that guided our reflections.

3.1.Background and Motivations

Our motivations for studying biomedical engineering at FIU were shaped by family influence, academic goals, and a desire to build futures we believed were unavailable in our home countries. Laura reflected, "I chose FIU because I wanted to be in Miami, and I chose

Biomedical Engineering because it was what I found closest to medicine at FIU.” She added, “My father missed several professional opportunities due to not knowing English... all my life I heard him talk about the importance of knowing a second language.” This shaped her decision to study in the U.S. and see English not only as a tool, but as a bridge to global opportunities.

Ahmer’s story also began with family. “I chose FIU as my cousin graduated from FIU with a Mechanical Engineering degree half a decade ago, and I decided to follow in his footsteps,” he wrote. While his parents were supportive, being the youngest child made the transition more emotional: “What made it difficult for them and for me was that I was the youngest and last child to leave the house. After me there was no one.”

Though he was not a first-generation college student, Ahmer noted that his father’s love for Western culture subtly guided his path. “Being exposed to Western culture my whole life thanks to my father, who used to listen to the Beatles and watch Hollywood movies, pushed me in the direction to pursue a career here.”

3.2.Academic Experiences and Challenges

Both of us found the academic system in the U.S. to be dramatically different from the systems in our home countries. Laura described the change in classroom culture: “Courses with 200 people was something I had never experienced before... attendance isn’t mandatory, giving the sense that people learn as much as they want to learn.” While she adapted over time, this shift initially made learning feel less personal and more isolating.

Ahmer reflected on the transition from rigid structure in Pakistan to the flexibility of American academics. “Back home, the structure is much more rigid with little room for flexibility... it’s either you succeed or you don’t, which can place a lot of stress on a young student’s life.” He added that the online learning environment at FIU came with unexpected frustrations: “The reliance on everything online, such as doing homework on iPads and giving exams on Honorlock, was something I was never used to. Paying money to give an Honorlock exam was something I thought was not fair when I had paid a good amount to study in the first place.”

Immigration status deeply affected our access to academic and career-building experiences. Laura noted, “Most of the opportunities are limited to U.S. citizens and green card holders.” She declared a second major she didn’t want to pursue just to gain CPT eligibility: “Am I going to pursue it? No, not really, but who cares?” Ahmer echoed this systemic frustration: “Every single [internship] rejected me bar one... the CPT process had changed, and finding a new way to get approved made it 10 times harder.” He described visa status as a constant constraint: “International students... have to navigate life here with one hand tied behind their back.”

3.3.Cultural and Social Integration

Our reflections revealed striking differences in how we experienced cultural adaptation—primarily shaped by language and regional familiarity. For Laura, Miami offered cultural comfort: “Miami’s culture is very similar to Colombia... almost everybody speaks Spanish.” This helped her build friendships quickly and reduce feelings of dislocation.

Ahmer's experience was almost the opposite: "There was a BIG cultural difference in the U.S., especially in Miami compared to Karachi, Pakistan." He shared a specific memory: "Going to get Subway on campus became a challenge as the staff there exclusively spoke Spanish during my freshman year." His adjustment was not only linguistic, but also social and spiritual: "Coming from a conservative country... it took me time to get adjusted to the more secular, free-flowing nature of the United States."

Social isolation was a recurring theme. Laura found solidarity among other international students: "There's an unspoken connection. We understand each other even if we come from different countries." Ahmer described his loneliness in freshman year: "I wasn't paired with other Honors College kids, so I struggled to form any meaningful connections with anyone." Later, becoming a Resident Assistant helped him "feel like I had a part to play on campus."

We both recognized how exposure to diverse cultures and faiths deepened our perspectives. Laura noted, "Being exposed to multiple religions has definitely broadened the way in which I make decisions." Ahmer appreciated the openness of U.S. society: "There is definitely a looseness which I appreciated, as it allowed me to practice my faith while also enjoying how life goes."

3.4. Financial and Institutional Barriers

Laura spoke candidly about the high cost of international tuition: "Even after knowing that local in-state students pay one-third of what I pay... I still believe it is worth it, but I had to apply to 20 jobs just to get one." She emphasized that limited employment eligibility and lack of funding options made it harder to sustain herself financially.

Ahmer shared that while he received scholarship support and covered housing through his Resident Assistantship, financial challenges still existed. "We pay insurance every year... and paying almost \$500 for OPT post-graduation is also something international students go through." Changes to FIU's payment plans made finances more stressful: "They used to allow monthly payments but switched to two lump sums per year, which made financial life harder."

Both of us expressed disappointment in institutional support. Laura said, "The conventional methods, places and resources you would seek support from are not actually providing what an international student like myself requires." Ahmer described going to ISSS for help with taxes, only to be referred to someone who no longer worked with the university. "The most support I have gotten is through international students themselves," he said.

3.5. Career and Future Aspirations

Both of us described feeling boxed in by our immigration status. Laura reflected, "I don't feel entitled to choose for myself... I'm forced to take whatever is available." Ahmer shared similar frustrations: "I often feel compelled to seize any opportunity that comes my way, regardless of my personal aspirations." He added that facing rejection after rejection made him feel like he wasn't skilled enough—even though he knew that was not the case.

For Ahmer, even job listings acted as barriers: “Seeing jobs have a requirement listed saying that they don’t offer sponsorship made me realize... we have to navigate life here with one hand tied behind our back.” He also acknowledged that identity factors could influence hiring decisions: “Being a Muslim man... there might be some pre-existing biases... a company would rather hire a U.S. citizen than go through that whole process.”

3.6. Personal Growth and Resilience

Despite the challenges, both of us experienced profound personal transformation. Laura said, “Being an international student made me become an adult way faster than I expected... I became my own support system.” Ahmer echoed this: “In the United States, there is a sense of independence that was absent back home. Here, I cook by myself, clean my room myself... I lacked an identity when I moved here... but I forged one.”

We developed resilience not only through necessity, but through conscious coping strategies. Laura leaned on her cultural identity and social connections in a familiar environment. Ahmer turned to religion and cultural grounding: “Listening to childhood songs, watching Pakistani movies, and getting involved in the Pakistani Student Association made me feel like I was at home again.”

When asked what advice they would give to new international students, Laura’s story itself is an example of resilience through resourcefulness. Ahmer offered: “The going is tough, but it always gets better. The more you put yourself out there, the more you get comfortable with the whole experience.”

4. Discussion

Though we come from different countries, speak different native languages, and practice different faiths, our experiences as international students at FIU reveal shared systemic gaps. Our reflections show that immigration status significantly impacts not just our academics and finances, but our sense of self and belonging. We discovered resilience in each other’s stories, found strength in peer networks, and learned how critical it is for institutions to not assume that “diverse” means “inclusive.”

By sharing our journeys, we hope to give voice to the broader international student community and encourage universities to look more closely at how they support—or overlook—students like us.

Laura’s academic adjustment was smooth in some ways, but not without challenges. “Courses with 200 people was something I had never experienced before,” she noted. In Colombia, classroom sizes were small and attendance was mandatory, so FIU’s self-directed learning culture was new. “Attendance isn’t mandatory, giving the sense that people learn as much as they want to learn.” Despite the shock, she adapted quickly thanks to her prior exposure to international academic standards.

Ahmer, by contrast, found the academic transition more difficult. “The loose nature of assignment submissions... made adjusting tricky,” he admitted. Coming from a rigid system in Pakistan where success was binary—either you pass or fail—he struggled with the ambiguity and independence of American higher education. “Paying money to give an Honorlock exam was something I thought was not fair when I had already paid tuition.”

Both students also felt the sting of exclusion due to their visa status. Laura often found herself disqualified from academic opportunities: “Most of the opportunities are limited to U.S. citizens and green card holders.” Ahmer echoed this, stating, “Every single one rejected me bar one.” The inability to participate in internships or paid research due to immigration restrictions led to frustration and a feeling of academic isolation.

Laura’s cultural integration into FIU and Miami was eased by the city’s majority-Hispanic population. “Miami’s culture is very similar to Colombia... almost everybody speaks Spanish.” She found it easy to make friends, navigate the city, and maintain her cultural identity. But this familiarity did not mean complete comfort—interacting with students from vastly different cultures prompted important moments of reflection. “Being exposed to multiple religions has definitely broadened the way in which I make decisions.”

Ahmer, on the other hand, was surprised by Miami’s dominant Spanish-speaking environment. “Even getting a sandwich on campus was a challenge my freshman year,” he said. As someone who expected English to be the dominant language, the linguistic mismatch made him feel like an outsider. This was compounded by his struggle to form early friendships: “I wasn’t paired with other Honors College kids so I struggled to form any meaningful connections.”

He also noted that his accent and speech patterns made communication difficult. “I had to slow down and develop a more American accent.” Despite these hurdles, Ahmer found growth. “There was a looseness which I appreciated,” he said, reflecting on the cultural freedom in the U.S. compared to his home country.

While Laura’s cultural familiarity allowed her to navigate more comfortably, Ahmer’s experience highlights the unique isolation faced by students from non-Hispanic or non-Western backgrounds, even at so-called “diverse” institutions.

For both students, financial strain and institutional rigidity added another layer of difficulty. Laura emphasized the steep cost of international education: “Even after knowing that local in-state students pay $\frac{1}{3}$ of what I pay for tuition, I still believe it is worth it.” Her belief in the value of education didn’t negate the emotional weight of the financial burden. “I applied to 20 jobs in order to get one,” she shared, highlighting how difficult it was to find legal, on-campus employment.

Ahmer, who had a more secure financial footing through scholarships and a Resident Assistantship, still found institutional fees and restrictions unjust. “We pay insurance every year... paying almost \$500 for OPT post-graduation is also something international students

go through.” He expressed frustration that international students often pay more but receive less.

Both students felt underserved by institutional resources. Laura said, “The conventional methods, places and resources you would seek support from are not actually providing what an international student like myself requires.” Ahmer experienced this firsthand: “I went to ISSS to ask how to file taxes, and they gave me a card of someone who didn’t even work at FIU.” These experiences reveal a broader issue of misalignment between institutional services and international student needs.

Both Laura and Ahmer spoke of career aspirations not as dreams but as logistical puzzles constrained by immigration law. Laura shared, “I don’t feel entitled to choose for myself. As an international student you’re forced to take whatever is available.” Her choice to declare a second major, not out of interest but out of necessity for CPT eligibility, speaks volumes: “Am I going to pursue it? No, not really, but who cares?”

Ahmer, despite applying to over 30 positions, found himself disqualified due to his visa status. “Rejection after rejection made me feel like I wasn’t skilled enough... The question—‘Would you now or in the future require sponsorship?’—has defined what jobs, roles, companies and opportunities I am eligible for.”

This legal filter forces international students to make decisions based not on potential or passion, but on visa eligibility. Their career paths become limited, strategic exercises in survival rather than meaningful planning.

Despite these structural challenges, both Laura and Ahmer described tremendous personal growth. Laura reflected, “Being an international student made me become an adult way faster than I expected.” She described building a support system, learning to advocate for herself, and managing all aspects of life independently. “If I didn’t know how to do something, I would let my parents deal with it. Yet, here, I have to solve everything on my own.”

Ahmer’s growth journey was similarly profound. “Back home, everything was done for me. Here, I had to cook, clean, and care for myself.” He admitted feeling lost upon arrival: “I lacked an identity when I moved here... but I forged one.” He credits his time at FIU for making him more resilient, introspective, and independent.

Their growth stories reveal that while the international student experience can be isolating, it also offers profound opportunities for character development, self-reflection, and empowerment.

Though Laura and Ahmer come from different parts of the world, their stories are deeply connected. Laura said, “There’s an unspoken solidarity among international students—we understand each other even if we come from different countries.” Ahmer echoed, “I never really fit in with the Pakistani people but I was too new to fit in with American people.”

Their reflections show that international students, regardless of background, face similar challenges: social disconnection, academic hurdles, financial insecurity, and restricted opportunity. Yet they also share strengths: adaptability, determination, and the capacity to grow in foreign environments.

Laura's story illustrates how cultural proximity can ease some transitions, while Ahmer's highlights the profound isolation and adaptation required when there is no cultural overlap. Together, their narratives offer a compelling argument for more inclusive, responsive, and human-centered institutional support.

5. Implications and Actionable Recommendations

Looking back on everything we have experienced and talked about in this paper, one thing feels very clear to both of us: international students face challenges that are often invisible to the rest of the university. These challenges are not always dramatic or obvious, but they shape how we live, how we learn, how we work, and how we plan for our futures. We wrote this hoping that the right people across the university might read it and understand a little more about what this journey is like. And more importantly, that something could change to make it better for the students who come next.

Here are some suggestions we think could make a difference for different groups on campus.

5.1. For CEC and FIU leadership

Recognize that immigration status impacts equity just as much as race, gender, or socioeconomic background. Right now, international students are not really included in most equity efforts, even though our legal status directly limits our access to jobs, internships, scholarships, and even mental health resources. Bring back a clear path for CPT approval. The co-op class used to make this easier. Now that it is gone, students are left confused and forced to find complicated workarounds, like changing their major just to be eligible. Offer some kind of financial support specifically for international students. We know we do not qualify for federal aid, but that does not mean we do not need help. Even a small scholarship or OPT fee subsidy could make a real difference. Have at least one advisor in each college who is trained to support international students. Not all faculty or staff understand the visa rules we are living under. A single informed person could help so many students make better academic decisions.

5.2. For faculty and advisors

Take the time to understand how immigration status affects what students can do. It can be really frustrating to be offered an amazing opportunity only to realize we are not legally allowed to take it. On the flip side, when someone takes our situation into account and helps us find a workaround, it means everything. Be thoughtful about how you teach and advise. Many of us come from school systems that are very different. Having clear instructions, regular feedback, and a little patience can go a long way. Invite us into your labs or projects, even if we cannot be paid. Most of us

just want to learn and gain experience. When you include us, we feel like we matter and that we belong.

5.3. For international student services

Keep your resources up to date. There were times when we asked for help and got outdated or unclear information. That only adds more stress. If something is not offered anymore, be transparent and guide us to other options. Build a peer support program. Most of the help we got came from other international students. A formal program that pairs new students with someone who has already been through the process could really help people feel less lost. Offer more sessions throughout the year, not just during orientation. One welcome session is not enough. We need help understanding how to manage U S classroom culture, what we are allowed to do, and how to deal with things like taxes or health insurance.

5.4. For student organizations and peers

Reach out and include us. Some of us only found community late in our time at FIU. If we had felt that support earlier, the transition would have been so much smoother. Intentional outreach matters. Work together on shared goals. Domestic and international students both benefit from more inclusive policies and programming. Advocacy is more powerful when it is done together.

6. Challenges and limitations

This is based on the experiences of two people. That makes it personal and deep, but it also means we cannot speak for everyone. International students come from many countries and have very different experiences depending on their race, gender, religion, field of study, and whether they are undergraduate or graduate students.

We focused on storytelling, not data collection. We did not run a survey or analyze statistics. That was not our goal for this project. But we think this kind of reflective work is valuable in a different way.

We did not include input from faculty or administrators. It would have been helpful to understand their perspective too. Maybe they are facing barriers we are not aware of. That could be something to explore in the future.

Our own identities shape how we see things. Laura's experience as a Hispanic international student in Miami is different from Ahmer's experience as a South Asian Muslim man. We share a lot, but we also recognize that our reflections come from our own lenses.

7. Future directions

This type of project could be expanded to include more voices. If other international students from different backgrounds wrote and reflected together, it would show a much wider picture of what is happening. It would also be really powerful to collaborate directly with faculty, staff, or international advisors to co-create solutions. That way, we are not just sharing our stories,

we are helping build something better. Finally, this kind of work could be connected to institutional data. For example, how many students get CPT each year? How many graduate with job offers? Combining that data with real stories could help FIU and other universities see where support is really needed.

At the end of the day, we believe that listening to students is the first step. This project is not the full story, but it is a piece of it. And we hope it opens a door for more conversations, more support, and more understanding. Because international students are not just passing through. We are part of this community, and we deserve to be seen.

8. Conclusion

This project began as a personal reflection. We wanted to better understand our own experiences as international students and to give voice to realities that are often left out of conversations about equity, inclusion, and student life. Our goal was not to speak for every international student, but to share our stories honestly and highlight the things we wish someone had understood when we first arrived.

Through this process, we discovered that although we come from very different places and cultures, there were many moments in our journeys that felt strikingly similar. We both faced uncertainty, loneliness, and barriers that had nothing to do with our motivation or capability. We both had to grow up quickly and learn to rely on ourselves. And despite the obstacles, we found strength, community, and resilience along the way.

What became clear is that many of the challenges we faced were not just part of being international students. They were the result of systems that were not built with us in mind. While we understand that universities cannot control immigration policy, they do have the ability to shape the student experience in powerful ways. The choices institutions make—about advising, financial support, job readiness, and community building—can either create more obstacles or open doors.

We hope that this reflection contributes to a growing understanding of what international students go through and what we need in order to thrive. More than anything, we hope it encourages educators, staff, and fellow students to pause and ask, What does support really look like for students who are far from home? What small changes could make a big difference?

This paper is just beginning. Our stories are two of many. But if they can spark a conversation, influence a decision, or help one international student feel seen and heard, then the effort has been worth it. We believe that when institutions listen carefully to the voices of their students especially those who are often overlooked, they become stronger, more inclusive, and more human.

Because international students are not just visitors. We are part of this university, part of its classrooms, its research, its community, and its future, we deserve to be supported as such.

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