

# **International Students, Immigration Policy, and Perceived Internal Support: Student Reactions to the ‘Travel Ban’**

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*This study explores international students’ interpretations of the President Trump’s controversial 2017 immigration policies and their university’s response to them. Findings suggest the students’ experiences could be profoundly affected by political rhetoric. While an educational institution could distance itself from the rhetoric and students may be reluctant to terminate their enrollment, their educational experiences, career plans, and recommendations they pass on to potential enrollees may remain unaffected by the university’s efforts. The study highlights the necessity of studying such topics as educational experiences and political communication effects in concord, underscoring the fluidity and interconnectedness of aspects of our lives.*

*Keywords: international students, travel ban, political communication, college experience, in-depth interviews*

## **INTRODUCTION**

‘Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!’ cries she with silent lips. Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door (Lazarus, 1883).<sup>1</sup>

In early 2017, newly elected President Donald J. Trump extended his campaign rhetoric regarding protecting the United States borders and limiting immigration by implementing new controversial policies by executive order.<sup>2</sup> The policies targeted immigrants from specific countries and left many current and potential international visitors to the U.S. wondering about their status and whether existing or pending visas of all types would be honored. International students, a substantial<sup>3</sup> and important<sup>4</sup> part of the American student population, were one group potentially affected by the new travel regulations and related political discourse. As universities faced potential declines in international student enrollment and

challenges to international scholars on faculty and staff, their voices were added to the rhetoric with messages specifically directed to this unique international population. This paper explores the meaning, international students at an internationally diverse university, gave to immigration-related political discourse in traditional and social media, and to their university administration's response to the new travel policies.

This study was conducted during the Spring Semester of 2017 at the main campus of a small private university in the Southeast region of the United States of America. In the 2016-2017 academic year, the university had the highest national percentage of international students, as ranked by U.S. News and World Report (2017). One-third of its student body came from outside the United States, which made the institution a prime target for the study on international students' experiences and reactions.<sup>5</sup>

Many factors impact international students' enrollment at an American university, including acculturation, finances, grades, personal or family member health issues, change in personal aspirations, etc. (Hazen and Alberts, 2006, p. 201). This study focuses on the socio-political atmosphere of the international student experience (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood, 2017) as it relates to their news consumption and university communication about political issues directly affecting them. Specifically, the research provides insight on how students on temporary student or work visas perceive their school's communication efforts in a time of uncertainty regarding immigrant status (Bhattacharyya, 2017; Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood, 2017, p. 1).

The research was conducted using qualitative methods and analysis, specifically, in-depth interviews and textual analysis (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; McCracken, 1998; Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013). International students enrolled at the university's main campus voluntarily participated in individual, one-on-one, interviews. The details of the research process, findings, and discussion follow the background and literature review.

## **BACKGROUND, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

President Trump's travel ban affected migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and green-card holders and created concern among immigrants with Temporary Protective Status (TPS), and students and scholars at U.S. universities (Morello and Reardon, 2017, pp. 13-14; Spiegel and Rubenstein, 2017, pp. 679-680). Some of the scholars and international students were warned not to leave their home country, others were stranded at airports or were prevented from entry, and many of their visa requests were delayed (Fain, 2017; Reilly, 2017).

Data suggest the election outcome and subsequent executive orders had an immediate impact on the international student population – both those currently enrolled and prospective students. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) website showed that in 2011, the United States led OECD countries with 17% international student enrollment (OECD, 2013, p. 2). After the policy implementation, university officials around the country cited 'anti-immigrant rhetoric' as the reason for 'a 30% decline in applications' from international students (Mervis, 2017). The Institute of International Education (IIE), a U.S.- based, not-for-profit educational and cultural exchange organization reported international student enrollment was down by two percent compared to its 2017 projections for 112 U.S. colleges (Childs, 2017, para. 2).

Those students already in the U.S. likely turned to media for more information about the situation. Media have long been identified as a means through which immigrants adapt and acculturate to their host countries (Alencar and Deuze, 2017; see also Chaffee, Nass, and Yang, 1990; Walker, 1999). Peters and Schröder (2018) note, 'as people navigate through the media ecology they live in, they regularly use a variety of media—including, but not limited to journalism - in order to meaningfully fulfill their needs for information and diversion' (p. 1082). Immigrant populations use a variety of media forms to 'to assimilate the culture, politics and language of the host society' while 'using home and foreign news websites for being informed about the events and current affairs of both host and home countries' (Alencar and Deuze, 2017, p. 163).

Amid the flurry of media coverage of the new president and his immigration policies, universities were scrambling to distribute messages of reassurance to their international student populations. University leaders communicated via official statements to convey their support of international students and scholars (APLU, 2016). The national academic community quickly adopted the #YouAreWelcomeHere hashtag movement started by Temple University; many university officials communicated with their campus communities directly.

### **[The University's] Response to the Travel Ban**

In January 2017, when newly inaugurated President Trump signed the original Executive Order, [the University] administration made an effort to reassure international students of the university's support. Via a mass e-mail to the '[University] Family,' in addressing 'President Trump's executive order concerning immigration,' the university's president emphasized, '... we are a university that embraces diversity and strives to prepare students for global citizenship' (personal communication, January 30, 2017). When interviewed on the syndicated public radio program *On Point*, the school's president further underscored the university's position on welcoming international students to campus (Ashbrook, 2017). He emphasized that inclusion of international students presented an opportunity to not only influence students' knowledge base, but also, their attitudes toward America and American culture. Additionally, the university president stressed the importance of the cultural interaction and exchange that occurred on campus among international students originating from 120 countries. In a March 2017 interview, the university's International Scholar and Student Services (ISSS) Director reinforced the message (personal communication, March 28, 2017). She also emphasized ongoing efforts to strengthen the university president's original statement through continuous communication with the international student population. ISSS had also started using the #YouAreWelcomeHere to inform the international students on the university's stance.

The ISSS office assists international students in transitioning into and adapting to the university community. A sense of belonging is an important factor in establishing continued affiliation with the university (Glass and Westmont, 2014, p. 116). Glass and Westmont (2014) suggest universities incorporate 'cultural events, leadership programs, and community service' experiences to enhance a sense of belonging among international students (p. 106). Participation in such events also provides avenues for interaction, which tend to reduce the level of racism international students encounter and provides a 'secure base for the exploration of cross-cultural relationships' (2014, p. 106).

The ISSS website states, 'ISSS prides itself in providing international students services you need to be happy and successful at [the university]' ('The Office of International Student and Scholar Services welcomes you...' n. d., Mission section, para. 3). In this capacity, ISSS is the primary point of contact for disseminating up-to-date information to the university's international students regarding the latest U.S. national policies pertaining to immigration, employment, and travel requirements (ISSS Director, personal communication, March 28, 2017). ISSS is largely responsible for ensuring international students' needs are met, so students can focus on their education. Through various acculturation programs, ISSS attempts to ensure international students encounter a positive lived experience during their tenure at the university.

When students complete their degrees, they may apply for the federal Optional Practical Training (OPT) program, extending their stay in the U.S. and gaining valuable work experience. Employers may then choose to convert the OPT participant to a full-time employee and sponsor the individual's application for an employment visa. A 2015 study by the Institute for International Education (IIE) indicated a growing trend of international students not returning to their home country after having studied abroad. According to an earlier study by Hazen and Alberts (2006), the eventual decision for international students who decided to immigrate to the United States was typically a result of professional pull, whereas family circumstances promoted a return home (2006, p. 201).

The Spring 2017 immigration policies implemented by President Trump created an environment of uncertainty for international students who were not sure how the policies would impact them as students, or as they entered the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program, or hoped for employment options upon graduation. Some were making decisions on whether they would stay in the U.S. and continue studies at

the university. Meanwhile, applications from prospective international students were declining across the country (Mervis, 2017). Based on this lived experience, this exploratory study focused on the following primary research questions:

*RQ1: What are the students' backgrounds and sources for political discussions?*

*RQ2: How did international students interpret the new federal policy?*

*RQ3: How did international students interpret the university's response?*

*RQ4: How did international students perceive the U.S. policy would affect their short- and long-term decisions regarding staying at the university or in the U.S.?*

## **METHODS**

Multicultural environments yield a range of responses that cannot easily be placed into discrete categories. Qualitative inquiry and analysis reveal complex interactions among disparate groups within an institution (Beitin, 2012, p. 243; McCracken, 1998; Patton, 2015, p. 471; Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013). Fourteen students participated in in-depth interviews in which participants answered questions about their sources for political news, their interpretations regarding the new federal policy, the university's messages about the policy, and how they thought the policy would affect them. The volunteer participants gave 'in-depth, individualized, and contextually sensitive' information (Patton, 2015, p. 7).

This study focused on international students actively enrolled at the school's main campus and familiar with President Trump's political discourse on immigration. All participants were 18 years of age or older. Based on the narrow scope of the study, 'purposeful sampling' through screening questions limited participant recruitment to students who met the study criteria (Seidman, 2013, pp. 55-57). The rationale for the purposeful sampling approach was to obtain 'information rich' insight into a very specific group of potential interview candidates (Patton, 2015, p. 46). Participants were recruited through email (approved by the university's ISSS office for mass distribution through the campus listserv); flyers posted on campus announcement boards and distributed in classrooms; and direct recruitment by the primary researcher. One participant was recruited through snowball sampling when those students who self-selected and met the criteria to participate provided names of other potential participants (Singleton and Straits, 2005, p. 138). The number of participants was determined when a data saturation point had been achieved. This was done by pursuing a line of questioning until there was no further merit in continuing (Francis et al., 2010, p. 1229). Saturation was based on the scope of the study and the information sought and provided by the voluntary participants (Francis, et al., 2010, p. 1230).

The majority of the interview sessions were held at the university library; two were held in private conference rooms on campus. Although interviews were scheduled for a 1-hour session, several interviews went beyond the scheduled timeframe. A few of the interviews required a second session to complete. Consistent with the qualitative research approach and goal to gain depth and detail, an interview guide served as a point of reference and interviews were flexible (Singleton and Straits, 2005, p. 320). In each interview, participants' answers led to questions not expressly stated in the interview guide (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p. 37; Seidman, 2013, pp. 94-95). With participant permission, the interviews were audio recorded. Each interviewee was identified with a pseudonym throughout the interview and subsequent analysis.

Interviews were transcribed for analysis and read multiple times for clarity, context, and content. Through immersion in the data the individual interviews were contextualized into collective themes using common threads and key words (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). In finding the common threads, quotes were reduced to support the evolving analysis. The themes were then coded in context with the research questions. This process was then repeated to correspond with each of the research questions.

## FINDINGS

All 14 study participants were international students enrolled at the university's main campus, including 10 undergraduates, one master's student, and three doctoral students. The students' majors were predominantly in science and engineering fields, consistent with the university's focus on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Three participants were female. Most of the students were between 20 and 22, but ages ranged from 20 to 36 years.

The volunteer participants represented 10 countries across four continents. Based on their own home-country political circumstances, countries will not be identified. Pseudonyms were randomly assigned to the study participants and used to attribute quotes in the following discussion of findings. Findings and their discussion are grouped by corresponding research questions.

### **RQ1: What Are the Students' Backgrounds and Sources for Political Discussions?**

It quickly became apparent this group of students volunteered to participate in this study because they were active consumers of news media, both local (for the U.S. and their home countries) and global news. The students reported obtaining information online and listed CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, and The New York Times, The Washington Post, and USA Today as news media accessed daily. BBC International and BBC services for respective regions, as well as The Guardian and Al Jazeera, were among more popular sources of news as well. Participants utilizing Al Jazeera as a source were not necessarily from Al Jazeera's home region. Several accessed this source to compare to information reported by Western media.

Interviewees expressed a necessity to acquire information from several sources in order to negate what they deemed as news media bias. They said they wanted to educate and formulate their own opinions. As such, having described a diverse diet of news sources consumed as a part of his daily routine (including CNN, MSNBC, CBS, Flipboard, New York Times and The Guardian), Gary stated:

On my *Yahoo* page, I see news and then I follow links. So, sometimes I just spend hours trying to read because I try to have a variety of opinions on any specific issue, so that I can then form my own opinion as opposed to just going with someone else's viewpoint on issues.

Similarly, Jared suggested that, 'if you listen to different sources the average is not biased.' Jared's response supports the recurring theme throughout this line of questioning whereas students discussed the need to access multiple news sources to pursue objectivity and arrive at their own conclusions.

Frank disclosed that '... using Facebook I keep try to keep my newsfeed really not partial.' Students consistently indicated the value of seeking impartial political information, however, the quantity and quality of effort students put into the pursuit of the 'average' unbiased middle is not necessarily supported by their media choices. Gary, for example, in his pursuit of a 'variety of options,' does not reach very far into the more conservative news market and illustrates the variety with CNN, MSNBC, CBS, The New York Times. Gary's definition of diverse, unbiased, average news coverage could be very different from that of Frank, who follows Trump, Rubio, Obama, and Clinton on Twitter, or from those of Harry and Jared, who made sure to list both Fox News and CNN among their daily news sources. While, almost without exceptions, students brought up the issues of objectivity and accuracy of political news, and used very similar language to describe these issues, their understanding of this language and actual behavior in pursuit of the values it describes merit additional research.

Aside from news media bias, another recurring thread was a notion that participants referred to as 'media hyping.' Study participants felt the social-media information they received was often sensationalized, 'the more hype, the more viewers.' As Jack stated:

I don't really just rely on just one channel because there's a lot of hype about how Fox News just obliterates everything ... back home news is heavily controlled ... unlike the

free media here. I think it's a bit too hyped up at the moment, especially because of current president and his Twitter usage.

Similarly, Andy believed that '... nowadays, due to the social media and everything, everything's getting hyped.'

In further exploring their idea of media hyperbole or sensationalized news reporting by the U.S. media, students expressed the sentiment that their countries' leaders no longer had to exploit the idea that the United States was against them. Their leaders no longer had to submit to hyperbolic propaganda against the United States. Students expressed that by the very nature of President Trump's daily vitriolic rhetoric [divisive, derogatory, nationalistic, anti-Islamic, anti-immigrant, misogynistic, chauvinistic, racist, etc.], as regularly reported by the U.S. news media, the people [in their home countries] could see for themselves that the United States was, in fact, against them. Their countries' regimes no longer had to emit anti-American propaganda. President Trump's anti-immigration and anti-Islamic rhetoric represented American sentiment toward those countries. Essentially, President Trump was bringing about a sense of unity within their country, an 'us versus them' stance. According to Edgar, the extremists in both his country and in the United States are seeking the same endgame. As Edgar explained, '... in [my country] normal people would be desire[d] to believe that United States is the first enemy and that is very good for extremists.'

In addressing the 'extremists' perspective, students stated that because Americans elected Trump president, the United States had moved from an outward looking, globally involved position to an inward looking, nationalistic mindset. This is an interesting dynamic, some interviewees observed, as it was the United States that pushed for globalization by initiating world trade agreements and modernizing technology, which was then marketed and distributed across the globe.

In contrast to their American and global news diet, some students expressed frustration over the lack of resources in their home country, particularly over access to independent news. As a result, they thought, people bought into the bias, as expressed by Frank:

CNN is the only one [independent TV channel] available in my country, they only have that bias, they don't really see the other side of the story about the perception that other news have about the same story.

Some students, whose home-country news media is government-controlled, said that they have gone as far as using unauthorized virtual private networks (VPN) to access news media sites and social media directly when they are in their home countries. As Jared put it, 'everybody uses [Facebook and Twitter] illegally, actually uses VPNs.' Most study participants are active social media users, some of them follow Donald J. Trump, Barak Obama, Bernard Sanders, as well prominent politicians and officials from their home countries. Despite the reservations some of them have about the objectivity of content on social media, they found it worth the effort.

Among other uses for social media, students researched information about the United States as they prepared for enrollment at a U.S. university. They stated they were interested in formulating their own opinions in contrast to the information being provided about the United States by their home country. Ian, who had also accessed U.S. political news via a VPN prior to travelling to the United States, stated:

I always use like VPN to enter Google and [...] to watch CNN, or [the] New York Times [...] and to watch some international news because they will be more real ... media will be more neutral.

When asked whether they thought the political information they received from U.S.-based news media sources was comparable to the news media sources from their home country, Gary stated:

CNN for example, they have people on ground back home that do the reporting and so what they provide is sometimes accurate compared to what I read within from other [home

country] sources, but other times ... I would say not accurate, but because sometimes we have issues in [country] of people mismanaging the facts, facts as I would describe it. They don't have a complete story, when they present the first story, so I would say yes for the most significant amount of information that they carry is what I also get from the local media sources.

In contrast, Ben provided the following insight from when he had an opportunity to travel to New York City. Ben found himself comparing U.S. news media to home-country counterparts with a fellow countryman who was now living in New York City. Ben's reasoning for the difference in information provided by his home-country government-controlled news media and U.S. news media was that 'every media is supported by some company [...] and they need to say something they like.'

These students are tuned into political news coverage and social media, and reported discussing political topics with their peers and families. Among their peers, American students and faculty are not mentioned very often. Gary, for example, prefers to chat about politics with housemates from his home continent, Edgar finds his American colleagues 'disinterested' in the topic, and Charlie prefers to bring politics up with 'friends that live in Europe, friends on campus and friends back home.'

Research shows that interaction with higher numbers of host-country peers makes international students feel less homesick, more content and satisfied (Hendrickson, Rosen, and Aune, 2011). Social connectedness and social support satisfaction have been shown to be reliable predictors of stress in international students (Yeh and Inose, 2003). If the desire to avoid political discussions (perhaps because they were highly polarizing even among U.S. students) prevents international students from including more host-country peers in their networks, the negative fallout of the divisive political discourse may be profound in the quality of international student experience at the university and other American institutions.

The second research question asks about students' interpretations of the federal immigration policy. However, answering this question requires an initial discussion about the international students' perspectives on the 2016 U.S. Presidential election results, which serve as a foundation for interpretations of President Trump's executive orders. The international students interviewed stated they thought themselves to be in a unique position to personally participate in U.S. political discourse during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Most of the interviewed students believed Hillary Clinton would be the clear winner and it came as a surprise to them that on the day after the presidential election (November 9, 2016), upon returning to campus, their American peers were seemingly unaffected by the election results. Jared described his experience, 'I came to the campus just a day after election [laughter], I was expecting everybody talking about the election last night, but it was not like this, people were working.'

The students expressed that they found it interesting that the election results were not a primary focus of discussion on campus. The students who were not from democratically ruled countries expressed a particular interest in attempting to comprehend the seamless transition of power between President Barak H. Obama and the newly elected, Donald J. Trump. They tried to absorb this experience while contemplating the fact that Hillary Rodham Clinton had won the popular vote and yet, had lost the election. The students expressed concern over their own personal welfare as they attempted to understand the American mindset in having elected Trump. Based on Trump's continued divisive political discourse, what was going to happen to them? If Trump was anti-immigration and anti-Muslim, and the American people had elected him, how was this American sentiment that had previously only been in the fringes, going to reflect on them as international students? Irene described this sentiment as she shared a personal experience from election night:

... even I know of a person from one of the seven countries that I was with him the night that elections happened, so this is before travel ban ... so it was almost like the fear was already there... I was with him [her friend] the night of the elections and this ... really stayed with me because ... in passing, he said, 'let me walk you home tonight because I don't know if I'll be able to do that tomorrow'. He said, 'I don't know how people are going to react to the fact that he [Trump] is saying these things openly about my country

or [...] these things about people.’ Cuz he’s also gay, so that might be added to it ... so I guess it was scarier to him because of religion, because of sexual preference, because of nationality than it was for me, for me it was just the fact that one, I’m a female and ... it was also a color thing for me ... again it’s ... instilling a lot of fear, a lot of, what’s the right word would it be, apprehension.

These students were trying to understand the election outcome. When the students were asked which candidate, they would have selected had they been eligible to vote, eight of the 14 stated they would have voted for Clinton; four students would have voted for Trump; and two students (from the same non-democratic country) would have abstained. Harry, who stated he would become a Republican as soon as he became a naturalized citizen, defended Trump’s position:

So I think there are people who are kind of misinformed about it, and are quick to give their opinions on it, so someone that hears ‘oh Trump is going to build a wall’ and they think he’s crazy or they hear Trump is banning Muslims and they think he’s racist, and I don’t think they necessarily take the time to analyze or actually read through the news, to actually understand what’s going on. Just recently ... I got into a huge argument over Trump because the fact that he’s putting up with the media ... I don’t think there’s any reason to fight with the media, but so yeah that was one discussion ... I think people are quick to hate him and I think honestly, I don’t really see how relevant their opinion is to U.S. politics either, I think each country has the right to elect their own president, so I don’t think that the citizens’, of other countries, opinions should really matter in U.S. domestic politics.

Of the four students who indicated they would have voted for Trump, three were from the same continent. One of these three agreed with the ‘clear the swamp’ rhetoric that Republican candidate Trump had repeatedly stated during his campaign rallies. This student also stated ‘voting for Trump was the lesser of two evils, as [he did] not trust Hillary.’ The other two students from different countries on the same continent were both pro-Trump because of his professed business acumen. Both these students claimed to be of Republican orientation in their political philosophy. Three of the four students came from wealthy families who had ties to political parties within their home countries.

The diverse reactions to the election provide the backdrop for discussing the second research question.

## **RQ2: How Did International Students Interpret the Federal Policy?**

All fourteen students expressed some concern over the presidential executive orders. Their reactions ranged from Danny’s resolute statement, ‘it’s the President of the United States. It’s his order. I mean we have to follow him or listen to him,’ to Edgar’s attendance at a protest against the travel ban. While some concerns were about the immediate effects, a larger theme emerged and reflected fear about public perceptions of international visitors and how that would impact their lived experience in the U.S. Nevertheless, students also talked about the support they received from their American colleagues.

All the students had been affected by the travel ban to varying degrees. Frank said he did not fear the order because he had come to the U.S. through proper channels, yet had to respond to a friend who told him, ‘‘Trump is going to deport you.’ ... I don’t feel like I should be afraid of what Donald Trump is gonna do because I came to the United States through the correct routes and I’m going to remain here in the United States as long as I keep the correct legal status,’ he said.

Jared was affected immediately and personally. He had been expecting a visit from his parents, whom he had not seen for four years, since leaving his home country to study in the United States. His parents’ trip was cancelled when the executive order was signed just three days before their visit. But, within 12 hours after a judge in Seattle cancelled the executive order, Jared’s parents were on a flight to see him.

In the small university setting, students are acquainted and often friends with others from around the world. Gina focused on how the policy was affecting her colleagues from the specifically banned countries:

‘... actually, I feel bad ... because I have a lot of friends from the country that has been mentioned ... like Yemen ... Oman. I have a lot of friends.’

Edgar attended an anti-executive order rally at an international airport. He contrasted his experience at the protest to that of his own country:

I went to the rally against Trump’s executive orders and I saw some Americans that are shouting against the president and the police is protecting them... For sure the police or the cops are over there [his home country] to protect the regime, not protect people.

Jack expressed concerns about public sentiment, but amid those fears saw reason for hope. Like Edgar, he observed American’s supporting international visitors:

If you are an immigrant or not it doesn’t matter ... with the travel ban ... I think people’s fears are slowly becoming a reality and I think it was just coming up to a point that people want some support from people in the United States ... that was interesting in the media, watching people in New York airport, people [Muslims] were praying in public and everyone else was cheering them on which I think ... was just something quite surprising and lifting.

Several of the students expressed concerns similar to Jack’s but focused on the president’s lead in setting the standard of behavior toward immigrants. Although, Charlie was one of the four students who stated he would have voted for Trump, he nonetheless expressed a concern over Trump’s behavior:

I’m worried, I’m more concerned with how he expresses himself. I feel like for someone who has been such a successful businessman, he says things in very, from my perspective, insensitive ways or not thought-through ways. And I worry about it not just from an international-student perspective but just from a perspective in general that he’s gonna piss someone off, put a lot of people at risk that wouldn’t otherwise be in that situation.

Gary had a similar interpretation to the public discourse:

...the rhetoric was just scary for us ... it wasn’t welcoming and we talked about how it made us feel. We joked about how we would be sent back home and [laughter] and ... they’re coming for you in 2 days and so just pack your bag so [laughter] jokingly, jokingly, but just also there was an... yeah fear.

As Gary pointed out, this is an especially scary situation when students are considering the possibility of potential deportation. The idea of possible deportation without the opportunity to complete their degree, along with the financial implications after having committed several years to pursuing a specific degree plan was stressful for these students. While they acknowledged their F-1 student / legal status, the travel ban had made an emotional impact even if their home country was not on the banned list. Additionally, moving forward whether trying to determine future travel plans and deciding to purchase airline tickets or not purchase airline tickets meant either they headed home for the upcoming summer break and reconnected with family and friends; or if they opted to remain in the United States and not risk being able to return to continue their studies, they were now faced with additional financial costs in acquiring a place to reside over the summer. As the students explained, based on their F-1 visa status, they are not able to obtain employment in the United States. Remaining in the U.S. while not attending classes would add an additional financial burden.

The students went as far as questioning the seven countries on the list, as stated by Anne:

And he only banned those countries where the United States doesn’t have any business interests. He didn’t ban Saudi Arabia, he didn’t ban Dubai [United Arab Emirates], he didn’t ban Qatar, he didn’t ban all of those countries because he has business there.

In contrast to the executive orders' exclusionary effect, Edgar, who is from one of the seven countries on the list, shared his experience on the feedback he was given by American friends and international colleagues:

The people from the United States try to be nice and say okay, don't worry if there's something let us know, these things will pass and such, from international students, the people who from other countries, not the six [other] countries, most of them are telling me that it doesn't make sense, nobody can do this to you, and this is a country that I think, mostly supportive, most supportive.

### **RQ3: How Did International Students Perceive the University's Response?**

International students received a reassuring message directly from the university's president soon after the executive order was announced, through a mass email to the entire university community. The university president also participated in a news radio forum expressly stating support for the academic community and expressing concern over the impact the travel ban would have on the national university system.

The message had a positive impact on the students interviewed. Charlie's reaction is reflective of most of their responses:

... our school is supportive of our international community and will continue to do our best to support it at all times ... I thought it was a good thing. I thought it was a very supportive message from our president.

Consistent with those students from non-democratic countries, Danny did not expect to receive a message from a university official seeming to question the country's leadership.

For Irene, the day the university president released the email to the student body, a friend of hers had been subjected to a denigrating remark and her 'white' friend had not spoken up on her behalf. Irene felt the email was very timely:

... it was that same day that he [University President] said that [sent the email] ... it was more like a relief, like okay if things are not as bad as we are thinking they are in case [the University] will not just abandon you if that makes any sense ... so that's how that came out to me when I read it and I think I also thought that it was very strategically worded to not just include minority ... so I like thought about it ... yes it was very inclusive.

Irene said the message made her feel 'better ... just simply better about the situation.' Similarly, Jack concluded the discussion on his perception of the message from the university, 'In one word, it made me feel assured.'

The students expressed appreciation for the university president's actions in standing up for them. A couple of the students did look at the message as strategic, based on economic necessity, but most of the students simply acknowledged a sense of gratitude in knowing they were supported by the school's administration in a time of high anxiety.

The fourth research question was an attempt to determine if the travel ban would affect the international students' decisions about remaining in the United States to continue their current enrollment at the university and their participation in post-graduation training opportunities, like OPT.

### **RQ4: How Did International Students Perceive the U.S. Policy Would Affect Their Short- and Long-term Decisions Regarding Staying at the University or in the U.S.?**

All 14 students stated, given the opportunity, they would continue their studies at the university. This response was partly due to a sense of belonging, but more acutely due to the potential loss of credit and financial equity invested in the courses already taken at the university. It is not easy to transfer from one

university to another without losing credits or having to take additional courses to meet another university's graduation requirements. Financially, it is much better to stay the course.

Out of the 14 students, only two indicated they would not choose to remain in the United States post-graduation. One of the two, Irene had enrolled at the university to participate in a very specific program for which she had employment waiting for her in her home country. Anne gave conflicting answers, but ultimately did not think she should have to apply for the OPT program. Ian described a commonly stated source of optimism about the security of continued enrollment:

I learn now from here, there is no discrimination here and I still believe that most of the Americans they do not discriminate the foreigners, they do not discriminate the immigrants and cuz you know some of the people they discriminate the immigrants they are kind of stupid and they unemployed and are not educated as so they blame their ... unemployment to the immigrant I think that stupid actually I think most of Americans they still they're smart, [they] still care.

Andy was concerned the Trump administration would start changing some of the policies regarding international students' opportunities in the U.S. after graduation. He cited online news sources that were forecasting potential changes: '[I]t could be that Trump says OPT should be reduced for students, he could make it a year. It is two years now, but he may make it a year.'

In light of President Trump's election and divisive political discourse on immigration, these students stated they were constantly concerned for their future – their future enrollment at the university, their future employment. If given the opportunity, most of these students would prefer to remain in the United States to seek employment post-graduation.

## DISCUSSION

This study found the responses of the 14 students interviewed to be largely consistent across research questions. Participants were screened and included in the study only if they were knowledgeable about the immigration issue. They were highly engaged and informed about current events related to U.S. immigration policy, particularly President Trump's executive orders banning citizens from certain countries from entering the U.S. These students consumed news from a variety of U.S. media outlets, media from their own countries, and other international sources. This finding is consistent with conclusions made by Alencar and Deuze (2017), who found immigrants used their host country's news media deliberately 'to assimilate the culture, politics and language of the host society,' while 'using home and foreign news websites for being informed about the events and current affairs of both host and home countries' (p. 163).

Students' interpretations of the policy went beyond the immediate, practical effects on themselves, their friends and family members. Participants expressed anxiety about the potential for President Trump's policies and attitudes toward immigrants to permeate American society in such a way as to make them feel unwelcome and unsafe. Such anxiety is not without merit, as 'rightly or wrongly, immigrants have been a popular scapegoat for society's ills throughout history' (Orrenius and Zavodny, 2012, p. 948). Each student had clearly had conflicting experiences with both Americans and other international students. For example, even as Gary talked about joking with friends about deportation, he clearly stated the fear behind the jokes.

Yet, despite the fear, the students were also optimistic. Acknowledging the university's self-interest in retaining the international student population, they were also heartened by the school's messages of support. Positive personal experiences seemed to temper the global anxiety as they expressed a sense of safety because of their connection to the university and community of supporters. They had observed, either in person or via media, Americans rallying against President Trump's immigration policies, peaceful protests, and supportive acts by individuals.

Their plans and hopes for the future reflected this optimism, as all but two expected to seek opportunities to stay in the U.S. for at least some time post-graduation.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The politics surrounding U.S. immigration policies are complex and affect a wide range of people coming to the country with disparate objectives and needs. The current study had a very narrow scope of a particularly unique group of immigrants to the U.S. – students with F-1 visa status. Based on the information from the university's International Student and Scholar Services, over 4.5 percent of active student visa holders affiliated with the university fall under J-1 (commonly exchange students) or M-1 (vocational studies) categories. While not necessarily pursuing a degree from the university and often arriving for shorter periods of time, these students may have different concerns, experiences and perceptions of the political discourse in the United States. Additionally, none of the respondents in the current study spoke of families accompanying them in the United States for the duration of their studies. While there is one person on a dependent visa status for every seven F-1 visa holders and each J-1 student would on average have four dependents with them, the presence of family in the country adds another dimension to the student experience, which the present study does not capture. Future study recruitment efforts will have to address these considerations.

A follow-up quantitative research effort would be necessary to assess quantities of international students affected by President Trump's rhetoric, as well as the prevalence and propagation of various effects of political communication on student experience. There are many areas in which this study can be quantified and catalogued. For example, dimensions between gender-related responses, country or region of origin, and distinctions among different degrees (disciplines) pursued. It appeared in the exploratory analysis that students from more 'not free' political regimes, as described by the Freedom House (Puddington and Roylance, 2017), were more likely to support President Trump and his policies. This is reflective of the latest Gallup Poll data on U.S. leadership approval around the world (Ray, 2018). While political communication on an American campus could play a crucial role in shaping and changing international students' perceptions and affecting their educational experiences, their previously acquired, often culturally driven views and attitudes should be factored into the analysis.

As this study was a snapshot in time, a follow-up study with participants could provide insight into the long-term effects of the political discussion, societal responses, and shifts in attitude toward the host country and host institution (university). For the university, working research questions into entry and exit surveys would create a valuable tool for assessing students' attitude adjustments during their time at the school. It would be useful to the university to determine where and if improvements can be made regarding acculturation of students. A comparison of attitudes, perceptions, socialization patterns, and post-graduation intentions between international students and their American counterparts would greatly inform future research efforts, highlighting issues affecting students universally and international students specifically.

An interdisciplinary effort is necessary to describe with any certainty the reach and extent of political communication's impact on international student experiences. This study's findings underscore the need for such research effort and highlight the necessity for both in-depth qualitative inquiries and quantitative correlational analyses of potential negative factors in international student experience (which may include interpretation of and communication on current political discourse).

### **ENDNOTES**

1. This partial inscription was penned by Miss Emma Lazarus in 1883 to help raise funds to build the pedestal upon which the Statue of Liberty would rest. It was added to the statue in 1903 (National Park Service, 2017).
2. Although subsequent executive orders on this subject have been signed by President Trump, at the time of this study Executive Order No. 13769, 2017 and Executive Order No. 13780, 2017 had thus far been executed.
3. According to the Institute of International Education (2017), international students represented over 5 percent of United States of America's higher-education student population.

4. International students provide commercial advantages for host institutions and local communities, affect curricula by diversifying knowledge and language base of student body, and bring other potential benefits to American university campuses (Altbach and Knight, 2007)
5. In 2011, the university had an international student enrollment of 17 percent (The Yale Daily News Staff, 2011, pp. 175-176). In the 2016-2017 academic year, the percentage of international students at the university had risen to 33 percent (U.S. News and World Report, 2017), and the school was ranked number one, out of 265 U.S. universities, for having the highest percentage of international students based on total student population. The international student enrollment is reflective of the school's mission statement, which in part states the university's commitment to providing 'high quality education to a culturally diverse student body in order to prepare students entering a global workforce' ('Welcome,' n. d., Mission section, para. 1).

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