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Abstract

International students in U.S. higher education face increasing uncertainty, not only due to shifting immigration policy and rising xenophobia, but also due to systemic failures in institutional support. This article argues that leadership education—when centered on ethics, creativity, and resilience—is no longer a curriculum enhancement. Drawing on narrative, policy context, and global ethics scholarship, the piece calls for a reimagining of leadership development as a core element of higher education and an essential navigational tool for future leaders. A global moral compass, as defined by Thompson (2010), offers an essential framework for international students navigating complex and inequitable systems.

Standing Steady in Shifting Ground: Why Leadership Education Matters for International Students

In his searing reflection on American ideals and contradictions, James Baldwin once wrote, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” For international students studying in the United States today, the dissonance between American university promises and lived realities is becoming harder to ignore—and harder to bear.

In the last week of May, one of the authors, Dr. Ma, was at a women’s leadership conference in Maryland. One of her former students, Artie Gu—a Chinese international student from a prestigious American private university—stood beside her when a gentle attendee asked, “Are you okay?” Artie paused. “I’m fine... not affected, yet.” Dr. Ma said, “This is a safe space for you to share your true feelings.” Her response came not with words but with tears: “How can I be okay?” While this kind of truth-telling is its own form of leadership, vulnerability alone is not enough to meet the demands of this moment.

Artie’s story is not isolated. Her palpable concerns are shared by international students that matriculate our programs. They are an extraordinary population of young people who were the best in class in other countries and arrive in the U.S. with ambition and trust, only to find themselves navigating increasingly unstable ground.

In spring 2025, the Trump administration revoked over 1,800 F-1 and J-1 visas—some linked to pro-Palestinian expression—only to reinstate many after court challenges (VisaVerge, 2025). In late May 2025, Secretary of State Rubio directed U.S. embassies to pause scheduling all new F, M, and J visa interviews pending expanded social media vetting (Toosi, 2025; ICEF Monitor, 2025). Days later, Rubio announced that the State Department would “aggressively” revoke visas held by Chinese students tied to the CCP or studying in “critical fields” (Politico, 2025; Visaverge, 2025). All of those sudden suspensions of visa interviews and the looming threat of mass revocations have fueled widespread fear and uncertainty across the international student community.

The Shifting Landscape of Opportunity

In recent years, it has become harder for international students to plan their futures in the U.S. with confidence. Visa policies have become less transparent, with approvals delayed, revoked without warning, or denied based on shifting political tides. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) offices that once offered symbolic support were preemptively silenced to avoid university-wide economic harm.

The atmosphere is further strained by geopolitics. Students from countries entangled in foreign policy conflicts now find that their country of origin—rather than academic merit—shapes how they are treated. Scrutiny increases. Delays multiply. Trust erodes.

Behind it all looms a louder message: rising anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies are reshaping the cultural and legal boundaries of who gets to belong. Students praised for enriching their programs with global perspectives are now treated with suspicion—or indifference—outside of classroom walls. The result is a quiet but profound erosion of security and self-worth. It's no longer just about *Can I stay?* The deeper question becomes, *Am I even wanted?*

What Leadership Education Can—and Cannot—Do

No leadership course can rewrite federal immigration law or eliminate “us versus them” narratives that have added uncertainty to an increasingly hostile climate. But what higher education can do—must do—is prepare international students to lead in the job marketplace they are actually entering. That means confronting the hard truth: academic knowledge alone does not equip students to thrive in uncertain, unjust systems.

Leadership education, when thoughtfully integrated into core curriculum, offers something different. It helps students build a foundation in three essential capacities: ethics, creativity, and resilience. They are survival strategies to navigate difficult times.

Too often, leadership education is treated as an extracurricular luxury—optional, siloed, and detached from the urgent needs of marginalized students. In a time marked by volatility, precarity, and deep cultural divides, leadership training is core curriculum.

Resilience, Creativity, and Ethical Clarity: What Students Actually Need

We often think of leadership as charisma, titles, or visibility. But for international students, leadership sometimes means something subtle, internal, and courageous:

- **Resilience:** the act of staying grounded when systems push you to disappear. ●
- **Creativity:** the ability to envision new futures beyond what's institutionally prescribed. ●
- **Ethics:** the clarity to choose integrity over assimilation.

Leadership, in this context, is not about rising above others. It is about cultivating opportunities and imagining new possibilities in spite of uncertainty.

As Thompson (2010) explains, cultivating a *global moral compass* is key to navigating these tensions. She defines it as “the ability to evaluate moral challenges not only through personal conscience, but also through a global lens—one that considers cultural differences without collapsing into relativism” (p. 16). This type of ethical reflection, she argues, “bridges local obligations and global realities” and is the foundation of responsible leadership.

International students are constantly operating in this space. They must navigate multiple value systems, reconcile personal goals with family and national expectations, and make high-stakes decisions in contexts where cultural norms, institutional rules, and moral values may conflict. For them, a global moral compass is not simply a theoretical framework—it is a daily necessity, tool for resilience, and guide for action under pressure.

Generation Z and the Demand for Belonging

This generation of international students belongs to a broader Gen Z movement—one that demands authenticity, equity, and systemic change. They are not asking for polished slogans or empty gestures. They are asking for truth, safety, and tools.

Yet they face distinct barriers: visa uncertainty, cultural dislocation, job market discrimination, and the emotional toll of being “othered.” Leadership education can provide both a mirror and a roadmap. It fosters emotional intelligence, ethical discernment, and spaces of belonging where students can reflect, resist, and rebuild.

From Optional to Essential: A Curricular Mandate

Leadership education must no longer be a side program for the privileged. It should be embedded across disciplines and be required across institutions.

Why?

Because the central questions of leadership—*What do I value? Who do I serve? How do I act when it's hard?*—are not abstract. For international students, whether they stay in the U.S. or return home, their cross-border leadership will shape the future of institutions, industries, and nations.

As educators, we must ask whether we are really helping students build the ethical foundation and emotional resilience they need—not just to finish college, but to lead lives of purpose. Artie's tears were a poignant reminder that this question is both delicate and urgent. We must go beyond training students to recover from breakdowns and manifest their own breakthroughs amid doubt and discomfort. Leadership education anchors students in the values they will need to navigate whatever comes next with clarity, creativity, and courage.

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