“I Wish I Knew”: Helping Social Work International Students Achieve Their Clinical Professional Goals

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Abstract: Driven by my personal experience and a desire to understand the journey of social work international students in the United States, I conducted interviews with three social work professionals. These individuals had completed their social work training as international students in the US. The aim of this study was to delve into and share the experiences of these social work international students, particularly in their pursuit of social work professional and career goals. The study focuses on how these students navigate immigration and social work-related policies during and after their program and offers insights on how to alleviate some of the challenges they face.

***Keywords*:** social work education, social work practice, critical reflection, foreigners, immigration

An *international student* is defined as an individual with an F-1 or J-1 visa who crossed a national border outside of their country of origin and whose primary purpose is to complete an academic course of study at an immigration-certified school in the United States (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2021; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics, 2010). For US social work programs, international students strengthen diversity, bring a global perspective to the classroom, and help prepare Americans for the cultural competence and humility required in SW practice (Song & Petracchi, 2015; Zunz & Oil, 2009). Over the past few years, full-time international student enrollment for Master of Social Work (MSW) or Master of Science in Social Work (MSSW) programs has increased (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015; CSWE, 2023). Despite the restrictive and often uncertain nature of US immigration policies, international students continue to pursue a US education, driven by aspirations for advanced training, global engagement, and meaningful career opportunities. However, difficulties with immigration processes are limiting their opportunities (Mowreader, 2025). As international students face increasing challenges while studying at US colleges and universities, academic programs must understand the unique challenges these students may experience and be well informed on the best ways to support them. For the social work field, “the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the NASW [National Association of Social Workers] make a strong moral case for immigration activism” (Levine, 2024, p. 119). This perspective is particularly relevant for supporting international students in social work in the US.

Although there are common challenges international students face, they are usually not publicly discussed (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). I was blinded and unprepared for the significant challenges I faced as an MSW/MSSW international student professional in the US. Consequently, my personal experiences have compelled me to explore how other MSW/MSSW international students navigate the immigration and SW requirement policies that potentially impact their professional trajectories. My goal is to support the next generation of international student social work professionals in the US and to raise awareness among those in positions of influence,

aiming to transform the professional trajectories of international student social work professionals. To fully understand my commitment to this work, it is important to share the personal journey that shaped my perspective as an international student.

I was born and raised in Zimbabwe, but my childhood changed forever at the age of 11 when my father moved to the United States for his postgraduate studies as an F-1 visa student. Our family was initially separated until my mother (also a F-1 visa student), my sister, and I (both on F-2 dependent visas) finally joined him. Like many others from lower-income countries, we considered this move pivotal for better life opportunities, better living conditions, and undeniably an unearned chance to open doors for future generations. Unfortunately, life in the US proved more complex than it had ever been for us while in Zimbabwe. Although my parents were both funded international students and met all financial requirements on paper, the reality was that they still struggled to make ends meet as a family of four and maintain their responsibilities of taking care of their mothers back in Zimbabwe. We immediately found ourselves drastically downgrading our living standards, from an abundance of survival resources to scrambling for basic needs to be met, and from owning a five-bedroom home to being crammed into a one-bedroom apartment, among many other sacrifices. Hoping things will get better with time, many international students are forced to endure these life sacrifices in pursuit of greener pastures and a better future. For my family, the American dream was cut short by immigration laws forcing us to return home. Years later, my mother, who was then pursuing her doctoral degree on her F-1 student visa, and I, still on an F-2 dependent visa, moved back to the US, leaving my father and younger sister in Zimbabwe. This decision to yet again separate our family was not by choice, but simply because the restrictive nature of the US immigration policies made it impossible for us to be sustainably together as a family. I watched my mother work tirelessly towards completing her doctoral degree in record time, with a clear goal of reducing the time she needed to spend in the US and not burden our family longer. Fast-forwarding a few years, my mother graduated and returned to Zimbabwe, where her work calling is, while I remained without my immediate family as a young F-1 visa student. Since then, the US immigration restrictive policies have either remained unchanged or become more restrictive.

My challenges as an international student intensified after graduation, as I struggled to navigate post-graduate life to remain a lawful non-immigrant. Nonetheless, even though I have lawfully spent over half of my life in the US, I still face immigration barriers, which have been exacerbated by my being an MSW/MSSW graduate pursuing a social work career. Consequently, I have had to put on hold my professional desire to obtain an independent clinical license, as I have no other choice but to pursue my PhD without post-Master experience. My journey reflects not just the resilience required to survive systemic barriers, but also the urgent need to reimagine immigration and social work policies so that international students in social work in the US can fully pursue futures in clinical work they have worked so hard to build.

Policies

International students face hurdles that threaten their ability to accomplish their professional goals. Upon graduating, they have up to 60 days to leave the US, enroll in a different program, apply for student work authorization allowing up to one year for F-1s or 18 months for J-1s, find job sponsorship, or change their immigration status to US permanent residency (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], n.d.-a). Unfortunately, these immigration processes are not guaranteed, are case-by-case, and can be complex and costly (Pollak, 2017). In addition, MSW/MSSW international students must also navigate social work requirements policies. For instance, to become independently clinically licensed, most states require at least two to three years of supervised clinical work experience (Munday, n.d.). There is also usually a two-year post-MSW/MSSW direct practice experience required to obtain specific jobs like teaching practice classes in higher education (CSWE, 2022). These policies are meant to maintain the profession's integrity; however, the reality is that the combination of these policy restrictions makes pursuing specific social work careers unattainable for international student graduates. International students migrate to the US for better opportunities, and these challenges pose a significant threat to their ability to stay and realize those opportunities—or to stay at all. Unfortunately, returning home also has challenges, such as reverse culture shock (Le & LaCost, 2017) and difficulty integrating into a home country's job market (O'Malley, 2017). With this said, one wonders what the future of MSW/MSSW international students and social work in the US will look like if nothing is changed.

Although Song and Petracchi (2015) and Zunz and Oil (2009) provide some information to help international students during their social work programs, there is a lack of knowledge about the experiences of navigating immigration and social work policies before and after graduation, as well as the support needed for them. There must be an understanding of the unique immigration-related and social work–related requirements that impact their social work professional and career outcomes. This article aims to share the experiences of some MSW/MSSW international students in the US before and after graduating to achieve their social work career goals. The question guiding this article is: How do MSW/MSSW international students navigate immigration and social work-related requirements policies during and after their program?

Brief Aggregate Description of Interviewees

First, I want to acknowledge and appreciate the interviewees' (pseudonyms provided) vulnerability in sharing their stories. Though the three interviewees shared many commonalities, they represented a diverse sampling of how international students experience and navigate immigration and social work requirements policies to achieve their social work professional and career outcomes. The MSW/MSSW degree was the highest earned for two participants, while a PhD in social work was for one participant. Unintentionally, all participants were from African countries (Kenya, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe). Although they are from one continent, the three participants shared unique narratives that captured different universal experiences of international students that influence post-graduation professional and career outcomes. Two identified as male and one as female. The participants ranged in age from 34 to 43, and continuous years in the US ranged from eight to 20. One participant has H1-B status, which is

later explained; one has obtained US permanent residency; and one relocated to Canada on a foreign worker status. The three participants shared unique narratives that captured different experiences of international students which influenced their post-graduation professional and career outcomes.

First Interviewee

"Rudo" is a 42-year-old, single Black Kenyan female. She resides in the US, has H1-B status, and is employed providing adult rehabilitative mental health services. Rudo moved to the US in 2002 to pursue a BA in social work but switched to sociology in her first year. As a "professional student," before graduating with her MSW in 2019, Rudo started a Master of Human Services, Planning, and Administration and completed graduate certificates in non-profit leadership and ethnic studies. One year after her MSW, Rudo returned to being a student again, pursuing a graduate certificate program in psychology. Rudo's professional dream is to become an independently licensed clinical social worker. She is currently on H-1B working status, which is expiring soon, without knowing what to do next. Even after 20 years of being in the US, Rudo has still yet to achieve her professional SW dreams and obtain permanent immigration status.

Second Interviewee

"Ayo" is a 34-year-old married Black Nigerian male. His highest degrees are a Master of Social Work and a Master of Psychology. He arrived in the US as an F-1 student in 2016 to pursue a Master in Gender, Women's, and Sexuality (GWS) studies. He switched to a graduate certificate in GWS and enrolled in the MSW program a year later, graduating in 2019. After his MSW, Ayo was admitted into a PhD program. However, he realized he could not achieve his goal of becoming a licensed clinical social worker on his international student immigration status. He then changed his professional career. Ayo returned to school, pursuing a Master of Applied Clinical Research program. During this program, Ayo married his American citizen fiancée and is currently a full-time clinical researcher studying HIV.

Third Interviewee

"Tino" is a 43-year-old married Black Zimbabwean male currently living in Canada with foreign worker status as a post-doctoral social work fellow. He holds a PhD from the US in social work. His first experience in the US came through a mid-career professional development fellowship program, after which he returned to Zimbabwe. A few years later, he came back to the US to pursue a MSW degree, eventually continuing on to a PhD with the goal of focusing on public health–related research and becoming a scholar in academia. However, after completing his studies, Tino was unable to secure academic or non-academic employment in the US, which jeopardized his and his family's immigration status. As a result, he was forced to move to Canada, though he still holds some hope of returning to the US in the future.

Integrated Narrative Reflections

I aimed to understand the experiences of other MSW/MSSW international students in the US before and after graduating to achieve their social work professional and career goals. Interviews with three individuals who completed their MSW/MSSW in the US as international students revealed common and different experiences that influence social work professional and career outcomes and multiple alternatives to consider when navigating immigration and social work requirements policies. Specifically, the interviewees discussed (a) identifying the challenges caused by the policies; (b) exploring alternative solutions to the obstacles; and (c) receiving external support as significant themes for how MSW/MSSW navigate some inhibiting policies.

Identifying the Challenges

All three interviewees identified specific immigration and social work requirements policies and referred to them as "barriers" to achieving their desired social work careers. The immigration policies commonly identified as challenges for international students before graduating are the ones that restrict their work: Students may be limited to only 20 working hours per week when school is in session, forced to work on-campus during their first academic year or longer, and/or confined to certain locations, jobs, or types of work. In addition, the participants described inconveniencing policies of social work requirements before graduating, like needing to complete practicum hours of up to 16–20 hours a week. Explaining how the intersection of immigration and SW policies impact MSW/MSSW international students during their program, Tino stated:

> Most of the international students I know come from low-income families. So, even if they have full scholarships, they also care for families and need to work. But, if you are doing an MSW program, you cannot take extra work because of the practicum.

Unsurprisingly, all three interviewees also encountered financial issues, which added additional stressors as students, straining their relationship with their programs and preventing them from having consistently positive experiences in the US. These economic issues were tied to the identified immigration policies.

As if the challenges during the program are not enough, the work restrictions and additional social work requirements continue after graduation, especially if one aspires to become an independently licensed clinical social worker. Tino realized that his social work career decision to be in academia was stressful, but not as bad as trying to pursue other social work careers. "There are so many protocols for you to do clinical social work, which I avoided without knowing," he said. Here, Tino referred to the need to pass two licensure exams after graduating, and to obtain many clinical hours through a paid post-graduation job. Unfortunately, Rudo and Ayo had to experience this firsthand. Rudo failed her initial licensure exam, stating that it was stressful to write in a second language and to be rushed to complete it in three hours. Furthermore, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has acknowledged significant racial disparities in the Association for Social Work Board (ASWB) licensure exams (NASW, 2022). Rudo was confident she would have promptly achieved her clinical social work

career goals without this barrier. Instead, she has had to accrue more practice hours to avoid the hassle of taking the initial licensure exam, a luxury of additional time international students do not have. Ayo shared his experience figuring out how to meet the practice hours requirements during the one year of his valid work permit, indicating a concern about how it was nearly impossible for him. Although the number of required practice hours differs from state to state, the obstacle remains for many international social work students. Nevertheless, when discussing accruing practice hours, international students must first consider getting a job to achieve it, which is a complex outcome for these students.

Getting a job as an international student in the US is easier said than done. The participants reported being unemployed because "many social work-related organizations are unwilling to invest in sponsoring their working visas." For example, Rudo's practicum wanted to hire her due to a shortage of Black social workers in their school district. However, because they are a government middle school, they had to go through tedious hoops to be granted permission to sponsor her and opted not to try the process. Tino was frustrated during his job search because he constantly had to initiate the conversation about being sponsored for a green card. He described how much pressure it was to do this when trying to be competitive for a job. Thankfully, both Ayo and Rudo were fortunate to be offered employment. However, both received low-ball offers that Ayo referred to as "unspeakable." While Ayo rejected those offers, Rudo could not afford to do the same. Unethically, Rudo's new workplace used their willingness to sponsor her as justification for how low her salary will be and assigned her job tasks that would not contribute towards her licensure requirements. Rudo stated, "I had no choice. I mean, I wanted a work permit. I wanted the chance to stay in the US longer." Her feelings portray a significantly similar and genuine fear that other international students have.

Exploring Alternative Solutions

Although the participants identified immigration and social work requirement policies as barriers, what stood out the most was the fact that they all figured out a way forward. This reflected how challenges induced by these policies were not barriers but hurdles/obstacles that could be overcome with additional effort or a change in strategy. All participants sought solutions, indicating that there are different ways to navigate these policies. It is important to note that mentioning various alternatives in this study is only informational and not a replacement for legal and professional law advice. International students must seek appropriate immigration legal advice and seek their USCIS-designated school office (DSO) and program faculty members for more details and proper support.

After many years in school, Rudo was introduced to curricular practical training (CPT). This program temporarily allows international students with an F-1 visa to gain practical experience directly related to their major through employment, paid or unpaid internships, or cooperative (co-op) education while still in school (USCIS, n.d.-c). Ayo experienced severe economic hardship due to unforeseen circumstances beyond his control. With much evidence, he qualified for off-campus work authorization while in school through the "economic hardship status." On the other hand, Tino was strategic before he even came to the US. He knew he would not be able to sustain his family within F-1 status, so he instead opted to be on the J-1 status. With F-1

status, a spouse cannot work as a dependent and can only engage in part-time recreational study, like taking English classes, but the J-1 status provides permission from the USCIS for spouses as dependents (J-2s) to work or study in the US. Like CPT, J-1s can be authorized for off-campus work while in school under practical academic training. Through this, Tino had a paid internship off-campus for the entire program and sustained his family financially.

After graduation, there are also options that all three participants became aware of as alternatives to minimize the burden. Rudo found out after the licensure exam that, as a foreigner from whom English is a second language, she could have requested an additional hour for the exam from the ASWB. Nevertheless, she was grateful that she could obtain work authorization through the H-1B. The H-1B visa allows US employers to invest financial and non-financial resources and temporarily employ foreign workers in specialty occupations (USCIS, n.d.-b). Although H-1B was not Ayo's direct experience, he mentioned it as an option, alongside the national interest waiver (NIW) and other employment-based work authorizations as potential options he was looking into. He recognized that even if immigration processes are complicated and "it is a long shot, you just have to give it a shot." Other mentioned options are getting married to a permanent resident or US citizen to potentially get a green card, the optional practical training of up to one year for F-1 MSW/MSSW students, and academic training of up to 18 months for J-1 MSW/MSSW students. More information about the indicated immigration alternatives can be found at the end of this article.

Another alternative that all three experienced to maintain their immigration-documented status was remaining enrolled in school. I resonate with this option. However, one can only stay in school for so long, which is financially draining. Finally, Ayo said if he had known of immigration and social work limitations early enough, he would have been discouraged from studying social work. In due course, people like Ayo and Tino, who have a passion and calling for social work and can significantly contribute to the field of social work in the US, are forced to make tough decisions, whether it is to leave the field of social work like Ayo or to move away from what has been home for years in the US to a different country like Canada in the case of Tino. While it brings hope that some options exist for MSW/MSSW international students to help navigate immigration and SW requirement policies, immigration-related alternatives can never be generalized and are usually based on a case-by-case situation. In addition, international students cannot do it alone and need to seek external support.

Receiving External Support

Navigating immigration and social work requirements policies requires assistance from others like peers and family, social work faculty, international office DSOs, and employers if possible. A significant lesson learned early by Tino was that networking is essential for international students. It is not just about what you know, but whom you know that is important. Therefore, international students are encouraged to connect with many people when they know they are coming to the US. It is important to understand that some cultures view directness as disrespectful; however, in the American culture, it is very acceptable to send cold emails to different faculty members seeking mentorship. All participants were introduced to the various policies and informed about the other solutions through different individuals in their support

network. The most helpful for all three participants were family and peers. Rudo said she had to constantly go back to her peers, asking them what to do next, and for Ayo, those who had gone before him were willing to share their experiences to help him out. However, knowing that everyone's situation is different is essential, and immigration policies can change anytime. Therefore, when information is shared from non-professionals like immigration lawyers or designated school officials for immigration purposes, it is good practice to always do your due diligence to verify whether it applies to you.

Social work faculty also played a significant role in helping international students navigate their lives during and after graduating. CPT and practical academic training require dedication and commitment from individuals, notably those in higher education positions, to make untraditional decisions that cater to international students' needs. For Tino, it took his previous dean and current field experience coordinator to advocate for him to a local agency, so he was hired on salary for his internship. In addition, they made necessary changes and approvals for him to stay at the same practicum site for his entire program. Rudo's program director explained different licensure alternatives to her after failing her exam. They also shared information about asking ASWB for test time accommodations because English is her second language after she failed multiple times. In addition, due to the advisor's lack of understanding of international students' issues, they provided Rudo with contacts of potential organizations that may sponsor her and information about immigration lawyers to help her. Ayo and Rudo experienced a significant lack of support and proper direction from the social work faculty during their time in the MSW/MSSW programs. The two reported that their faculty members "were ignorant" and did not know about their challenges. As a result, they were misguided in ways that impacted their studies and career trajectories. Rudo regrets not changing her advisors early on, and Ayo's relationship with the program was tarnished. On the contrary, Tino had a positive, supportive experience with faculty who knew precisely what he needed and ensured he and his family were well connected. This shows that, if knowledgeable and intentional, social work faculty can transform the trajectory of MSW/MSSW international students in the US.

Finally, nothing can be done regarding immigration issues without a DSO. Every alternative option needed a DSO's knowledge, support, and guidance. For Rudo and Ayo, it was only when they sought advice that their DSO was beneficial and even shared helpful unconventional alternatives. This means one should not wait to be approached and should take the initiative to seek guidance. Last, Tino and Rudo were fortunate enough to have practicum sites willing to work with them to navigate the challenges they faced. For Rudo to obtain her H1-B, her nonprofit practicum organization had to partner with a for-profit organization to sponsor her work visa. This was because the non-profit could not afford to hire her, and there are also advantages of a non-profit filing for a student due to not having any cap on how many work visas the government can approve. Likewise, Tino's practicum site was willing to keep him as an employee before and after graduating with his MSW.

Summarized Findings

MSW/MSSW international students are no ordinary international students and have much more to navigate than is acknowledged. They face unique challenges because of the combination of

immigration and social work requirements policies, influencing their social work and helping their professional and career trajectory. Identifying the potential challenges of these policies serves as the first step to navigating them to avoid violating immigration status by seeking unauthorized employment. If student status is violated, students face serious repercussions like immediate termination of student status and deportation. Second, the uniqueness of the interviewees in this study is that these policy-induced challenges did not serve as barriers but simply as obstacles: temporary blocks that may be overcome with advanced planning and support systems in place. Ultimately, MSW/MSSW international students have some options to explore to help them navigate the different policies. However, even with all these alternative options, it must not be generalized as it is based on a case-by-case situation. The alternative options mentioned in this study are very complicated, and can take up to years, leaving one in jeopardy. For instance, failing to follow the working hours policy for CPT or the practical academic training may result in lost eligibility for optional practical training or academic training, respectively, after graduation. Therefore, one must carefully decide what works for them with appropriate guidance. Third, external consultation and support must be sought from the appropriate people. Through a supportive network of people, information that international students in this paper had never had access to suddenly became available at a time of dire need through other people.

A Call to Action

Implications for Social Work Programs

The findings from these interviews contribute to the knowledge of how MSW/MSSW international students can navigate immigration and SW requirements policies before and after they graduate. However, the lingering thought is that if the international students had this information much earlier and had suitable support systems in place, would their professional/career paths, outcomes, and decisions have been different? MSW/MSSW international students must make well-informed decisions to pursue a social work education in the US. Being explicit about the various issues impacting their professional trajectory is necessary. As a profession, social work takes pride in diversity, integrity, and service. As many accredited social work programs in the US continue to expand and enroll international students, the programs must seek the necessary support and become sensitized to the issues their international students' experience. The program should also work with its international students and others to inform the students about the way forward and to be flexible in their ways of doing things that accommodate arising needs. In addition, something to consider for MSW/MSSW programs is developing mentoring programs, pairing international student alumni or advanced current international students with new students. Programs could also consider having information readily available for prospective MSW/MSSW international students to be well-informed about pursuing a social work helping profession. Due to the intersection of immigration and social work policies, the international office and the social work faculty advisors must be savvy about specific immigration-related potential challenges social work international students face and how to navigate them.

Expanding Opportunities Through Policy Reform

Acknowledged is the social work profession's movement towards changes, particularly with the licensing exam and the licensure compact. However, our international social work students will still face immigration barriers. Hence, social work professionals must also engage policymakers in modifying the national immigration policies to alleviate some of the challenges faced by international social work students. A very practical and powerful immigration policy change is to permit international US SW students to have the ability to extend their one-year post-graduation work authorization to up to three years post-graduation at each degree level. For this to happen, social work as a profession and academic field must first be recognized by USCIS as a STEM-related field (U.S. Department of Homeland Security [USDHS], 2022). As it stands, SW meets the criteria that allow this classification as being a "related field" to STEM because in our education and practice, we are actively engaging in work (clinical or not) that informs research, innovation, and the application of sciences to address complex social issues. We engage in program or service evaluations, which require statistical and mathematical analytical skills. Through rigorous scientific inquiry using statistical methods and interdisciplinary collaboration (including with psychologists, psychiatrists, medical doctors, public health experts, statisticians, and researchers in related fields), social workers advance knowledge and develop effective evidence-based interventions to promote individual and community well-being. Therefore, the path forward is clear: In an era where clinical social workers are in high demand due to increasing clinical needs in the US population, as a profession, we must mobilize by lobbying policymakers, submitting letters of support, and urging professional organizations such as NASW, CSWE, and IFSW to formally petition with the USDHS to designate social work as a STEM-related field. Doing so will expand post-graduation work authorization for international social work students, allowing them more time to attain their independent clinical licenses, gain practical experience, contribute to the US workforce, and strengthen communities through evidence-based practices.

Research Gaps and Opportunities

Lastly, social work and higher education researchers should engage in qualitative and quantitative research to further understand the unique needs of international students in social work. Current research has identified challenges for international students during their studies: language, acculturative stress, jobs, transportation, religious interactions, identity, social interactions, Westernized pedagogies, different learning styles, lack of faculty support, and finances (Almurideef, 2016; Ejiofo, 2010; Gautam et al., 2016; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Song & Petracchi, 2015; Zunz & Oil, 2009). For social work international students in the US, research has focused on how to support them in field placements (Zunz & Oil, 2009) and on adaptation needs when they start school (Song & Petracchi, 2015). However, nothing is known about how immigration and social work requirements policies impact MSW/MSSW students in the US during or after their program to help achieve their professional goals. Future research on this will be timely as social work continues to grow as a profession and international trainees are enrolled.

Conclusion on Reflection

It took me a while to acknowledge that the specific challenges I have faced might not apply to others. Curiosity, an essential skill, helped me then to explore others' unique experiences in-depth. However, this reflection piece benefits from my basic understanding of the immigration-related terminology used by the participants. Knowledge of the concept being explored helped me develop specific probes and follow-up questions during the interviews. As a result, the data was rich, and I avoided making many assumptions. I, however, also quickly realized that there was more I did not know about immigration and SW policies, as well as alternatives to navigating them. Unexpectedly, during the interviewing process, I needed to empathize with the research participants who shared heartbreaking experiences during and after their MSW program. Transference and countertransference pay particular attention to emotional and affective reactions between the interviewer and participant (Holmes, 2014; Johanssen, 2016). If one is not self-aware in the present, projected thoughts and feelings can quickly produce an environment that results in an unbalanced, biased, or dishonest dialogue. At some points during interviews, I experienced intense frustration, bitterness, and anger regarding the ignorance of different SW program personnel in the US about the immigration and SW-related regulations international students must endure. I took many deep breaths, shed some tears, and utilized verbal and nonverbal actions to acknowledge the misery and validate the participants' experiences.

However, hearing the success stories of some interviewees in navigating or avoiding the challenges brought hope and a sense of comfort in knowing that this study would contribute towards increasing knowledge to make social work students thrive professionally in the US. This process leaves me with some hope that, as we become more aware of these challenges, something can be done about them. I am ready to be part of that process, and my question is, are you also ready? Ultimately, this reflection has reinforced for me that awareness is only the first step. What truly matters is turning that awareness into action. I invite colleagues, educators, and policymakers to join me in advocating for meaningful changes that will ensure international social work students in the US are not only seen and heard, but also fully supported to thrive, for the benefit of a stronger, more innovative, and culturally responsive social work profession in the US.

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List of Resources for Immigration-Related Solutions

Curricular Practical Training (CPT)/Optional Practical Training, J-1 Status/Practical Academic Training

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *Foreign academic students.* https://www.uscis.gov/archive/foreign-academic-students

Economic Hardship

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *Immigration relief in emergencies or unforeseen circumstances*. https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/special-situations

F-1 Status/F-2 Dependent

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *Changing to a nonimmigrant F or M student status*. https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/students-and-employment/changing-to-a-nonimmigrant-f-or-m-student-status

H-1B Visa

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *H-1B specialty occupations*. https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/h-1b-specialty-occupations

National Interest Waiver (NIW)

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *Employment-based immigration: Second preference EB-2.* https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/permanent-workers/employment-based-immigration-second-preference-eb-2

Employment-Based Work Authorization

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *Permanent workers*. https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/permanent-workers