

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Belonging in Uncertainty: Navigating Higher Education as an International Professional Post-2024 Election

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Dear Higher Education,

I am tired. I feel like I am lying to myself. I have forgotten why I came to the United States.

You may not know me, so let me introduce myself. My name is Karren Shaalini Gunalan. I was born and raised in Malaysia, a country known for its diversity, where Malays, Chinese, and Indians live together in harmony. This harmony does not, however, erase the systemic inequities that have persisted since Malaysia's independence from British rule. Growing up, I constantly heard “Leave the country. There is no future for you here. The Malays have the government, the Chinese have generational wealth, but the Indians only do drugs and have no future.” At five years old, I knew I wanted to go to the country with the Golden Gate Bridge. Everyone spoke of the American Dream, and I made it mine—to see that bridge and access the opportunities that America promised.

I worked hard in school, excelling academically to secure a future through education. When I graduated high school with seven As and two Bs, I still did not receive an offer from government universities due to Malaysia's quota system, which reserves 90 percent of seats for Bumiputera—an affirmative action policy benefiting Malays and the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak—with only 10 percent remaining for non-Bumiputeras (Tan). The system denied me opportunities based on my ethnicity, reinforcing my determination to pursue my American Dream: education and boundless possibilities.

In 2018, I arrived in the United States as the first in my family to study abroad and earn a bachelor's degree. I was living a generational dream. But as my senior year approached, I faced a new question: “What's next?” Seeking career guidance, I visited Western Michigan University's career services office, where an advisor bluntly told me, “Either you pursue your master's, or you have to leave the country!” For the first time, I felt the same fear I had experienced back home—that of discrimination and systemic exclusion. I was still a minority, still an outsider. If I did not figure out my future, I would be forced to leave.

Fueled by frustration, I pursued a master's degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs. I was determined to educate professionals on how to support international students, yet my coursework was steeped in an American-centric perspective. I assimilated because my experiences and identity were absent from the curriculum. There were no courses on international education, no discussions on international student identities. I often found myself educating my peers and faculty—labor that should not have fallen solely on me. Once, I presented research on Indian international graduate students and the financial stress impacting their mental health. A white male classmate dismissively remarked “Every student goes through that stress.” His comment enraged me, but I held my tongue, fearing I would be labeled the “angry woman.”

Why does this story matter now?

Because the United States prides itself on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), yet international students and professionals are rarely included in DEI policies. Bias, discrimination, and microaggressions persist, often from [Special Issue in Response to the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election \(2025\)](#)

student affairs professionals themselves. I have been told “Your English is so good!”—as if fluency should be surprising. A friend of mine, upon being told her Chinese name was too difficult to pronounce, adopted the English name “June” just to accommodate others. When a white sorority sister mocked how I pronounced “water,” I called her out. Her response? Tears. Suddenly, I was the villain.

The barriers are not just cultural but systemic. As an international student, my job search was the most disheartening period of my life. To remain in the U.S. after graduation, I needed an employer to sponsor my H-1B visa—the visa that allows international students to work in the U.S. (“The H-1B Visa Program”). Many institutions avoid this sponsorship process, being exempt from the visa lottery. I applied to 57 jobs. Thirty-seven employers rejected me outright because they did not sponsor visas. Unlike my American peers, who each applied to a handful of positions and secured offers, I was met with “We do not hire international students.” In one interview, I disclosed my visa status seven minutes in, and the employer immediately ended the call. Rejection after rejection crushed my confidence and forced me to compromise my passion. I accepted a role in Housing and Residence Life—not because it was my calling, but because it was my only viable path.

As I transitioned to full-time work, I realized that the struggle never ends. DEI was a national priority, yet higher education institutions continued to reinforce exclusionary practices. The power dynamics in predominantly white spaces became even more evident. A white female supervisor repeatedly missed deadlines yet faced no consequences. I could not help but wonder—if she were a person of color, would she be held accountable?

With the current political climate, my fears have intensified. DEI is under attack. Immigration policies are unstable. The H-1B process feels even more precarious. My husband and I live in constant uncertainty, questioning when we can truly rest. As an international professional, I wonder every day if I will be replaced, if my voice will continue to be silenced. The impact of Trump’s presidency looms over me, reinforcing the power imbalance in my all-white office. I must constantly advocate for myself and my students of color while navigating a system that was never built for us.

International students are also feeling the weight of these uncertainties. They fear deportation, job insecurity, and financial strain. Many come from collectivist cultures where families sacrifice everything for their children’s education, expecting that investment to yield a return. But now, these students are afraid to share their struggles back home, mentally and emotionally burdened by an uncertain future. Some, particularly activist students, are at risk of deportation due to recent executive orders targeting international students involved in campus protests (Martinez). The silencing of international voices is not incidental—it is systemic.

Higher education institutions must do better. They must recognize that hiring international professionals is not an act of charity but an investment in diversity of thought, pedagogy, and student experience. Universities must take intentional steps, including the following:

1. Educating employers, particularly in non-STEM fields, on how to sponsor employees by tailoring job descriptions to meet “H-1B specialty occupation” (“The H-1B Visa Program”) requirements.
2. Allocating budgets for visa sponsorship rather than treating it as an exceptional cost.
3. Clearly stating in job postings whether sponsorship is available, rather than leaving international candidates to guess.
4. Ensuring that career services connect international students with sponsorship-friendly employers, creating a structured pipeline.
5. Finally, advocating for policy changes that simplify the hiring and retention of international employees.

If higher education truly values diversity, it must go beyond performative DEI statements. It must act.

Despite the systemic barriers, I have found resilience in mentorship, community, and advocacy. International professionals and allies have guided me through these challenges, helping me navigate the unspoken rules of

survival in academia. I urge other international professionals to seek out communities where they can lean on others, share their experiences, and be heard.

When engaging with international students and employees, higher education must shift from a deficit-based mindset to an asset-based perspective. We are not lacking—we bring global perspectives, multilingual abilities, resilience, and adaptability. Institutions must recognize and value these contributions, not just in rhetoric but in action.

The road for international professionals in post-election America feels like a tightrope, on which we balance dedication to our fields with the fear of policy changes beyond our control. Yet we persist. We believe in education, in community, and in our right to belong. If higher education is to remain a beacon of knowledge and progress, it must champion diversity not only in words but in action.

*Lots of Hope and Faith,
Karren Shaalini Gunalan
International student affairs professional*

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About the author

Karren Shaalini Gunalan is a higher education professional and advocate for international students. Originally from Malaysia, she is a first-generation college graduate who navigated systemic barriers in both Malaysia and the United States to pursue her academic and professional dreams. Her experiences with discrimination, immigration policies, and the challenges of securing employment as an international professional fuel her commitment to equity and inclusion in higher education. Karren’s work focuses on mentorship, career accessibility, and policy advocacy to create more inclusive spaces for international students and professionals.