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**1. How are current immigration policies shaping students ability to plan your career after graduation—are they creating uncertainty, limiting options, or forcing you to rethink their path?**

Yes, current immigration policies create uncertainty, limit options, and often force students to rethink their path.

Even when students are academically prepared, their future is not fully in their control. Policies around visas and work eligibility make it difficult to plan long term. Instead of focusing only on career development, students are often thinking about whether they will be able to stay and work after graduation.

In my case, I did not come on a student visa, but as an immigrant, my process still shaped my opportunities. Becoming a resident made education more affordable and allowed me to continue, but before that, the higher cost limited my options and slowed my progress.

I also started in ESL, including noncredit ESL programs here in California, which are free and provide access to English education for many people. This kind of support makes a significant difference for students who are just starting. It's interesting to note that in Florida, most ESL programs cost money.

As a result, students do not always choose their path based only on passion or talent. Many decisions are influenced by what is realistic, affordable, or secure. In that sense, immigration policies do not only create uncertainty, they also shape and sometimes restrict the direction of students' careers.

**2. What are the biggest barriers students are facing right now—from visas to licensure to employment—and where do they feel the system is most out of sync with the reality of being a student today?**

There are both personal and system-level barriers.

On a personal level, language is a major challenge. Even if you're capable, not feeling fully confident in English can affect how you show up in school, interviews, and professional spaces. Imposter syndrome is also real, you can feel like you're not ready, even when you've worked hard to get there.

Another barrier is the lack of connections. Some students arrive with family or networks, but that wasn't my case, so I had to build everything from zero.

On a system level, the requirements can be very rigid and disconnected from reality. For example, I had to pause my application to a private design school because they required a standardized English test like TOEFL or Duolingo, but they didn't accept my ESL coursework and certificates, even though I completed both credit and non-credit ESL classes through community colleges in California as part of my education in the U.S.

They also required high school transcripts, which I no longer have because I graduated more than 15 years ago. I provided my diploma and documents validated through a foreign credential evaluation process, along with my academic record in the U.S.

I graduated with honors from Pasadena City College with Associate degrees in Mechanical Design and Building Design, and I have recommendations. Still, those current achievements were not prioritized.

Another example is access to internships and professional programs. I was able to participate in NASA Community College Aerospace Scholars after becoming a citizen, which made me realize that without that status, I would not have had access to that opportunity, even as a qualified community college student. While there are other programs open to international students, requirements like citizenship or residency can limit access to certain experiences.

This shows how the system is out of sync, it focuses on rigid, outdated requirements instead of recognizing real experience, growth, and recent academic success.

### **3. If those barriers remain in place, how might that influence students decision to stay in the U.S. or build your career elsewhere—and what does that mean for the profession here?**

If these barriers remain in place, they can directly influence how students make decisions about their future, including where to build their careers.

In my case, I made the decision to step away from an application process, not because I lacked interest or passion, but because the requirements did not reflect my current qualifications. I could not continue investing time and energy trying to prove something that was already demonstrated through my recent academic work and experience.

At the same time, I had ongoing responsibilities, including my classes, an internship, and professional work in my field, creating site modeling in Rhinoceros and Unreal Engine for urban visualization projects related to new metro stations in Los Angeles. I chose to focus on those opportunities, where my skills are recognized and applied in real work.

At the same time, I am still committed to continuing my education and preparing for the next step. I plan to apply to other universities to pursue my bachelor's degree in an environment that better recognizes my experience and supports my growth.

When students face these types of barriers, they often must make similar decisions. Some may choose to leave the U.S. and build their careers in systems that are more flexible and recognize their actual experience. Others stay but redirect their path toward spaces where they can grow without constantly having to revalidate their background.

For the profession, this means there is a risk of losing capable and already trained individuals who are contributing in meaningful ways. When systems do not adapt to recognize nontraditional paths, international experience, or recent academic success, they limit access to talent that is already present and ready to contribute.