
**Visa Anxiety and Labor Market Behavior:
How Immigration Uncertainty Shapes Job Search Strategy and
Outcomes****Dr. Barbara Franks, Chief Research Officer****Introduction**

International students have become an increasingly important component of the United States higher education system and labor market. Beyond their substantial economic contributions, international graduates represent an important source of highly skilled labor in knowledge-based economies (Becker, 1993; OECD, 2023). Chinese students remain among the largest international student populations enrolled in U.S. universities and contribute significantly to STEM, business, and research-intensive fields (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2024).

Although international students often possess strong academic credentials, their transition into the labor market differs substantially from that of domestic students. Graduate employability research suggests that employment outcomes are influenced not only by academic achievement but also by access to social capital, labor market knowledge, professional networks, and employer perceptions (Tomlinson, 2017; Yorke, 2006). Unlike their American counterparts, international graduates must navigate a complex system of work authorization requirements, Optional Practical Training (OPT) regulations, and employer sponsorship processes. Consequently, employment decisions are frequently made under conditions of considerable uncertainty.

Existing research has documented the role of employer sponsorship practices and immigration policy in shaping employment opportunities for international graduates. However, less attention has been devoted to understanding how immigration uncertainty influences student behavior during the job search process itself. While visa sponsorship is often treated as an external hiring barrier, it may also affect students' willingness to apply for positions, target particular industries, pursue ambitious career pathways, or remain engaged in prolonged job searches.

The purpose of this study is to examine immigration uncertainty as a behavioral constraint influencing labor market participation among Chinese international students. Specifically, the study investigates whether concerns related to visa sponsorship and work authorization affect job search intensity, employment strategies, interview attainment, and job offer outcomes.

Literature Review***International Students and Labor Market Integration***

The transition from higher education to employment represents one of the most significant phases in the international student experience. While international students

often pursue overseas education to gain access to high-quality academic programs, global professional networks, and enhanced career opportunities, their ability to successfully transition into local labor markets frequently determines whether these educational investments achieve their intended outcomes (Marginson, 2014; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). For many students, studying abroad is not solely an educational endeavor but also a strategic career decision designed to improve long-term employability and economic mobility.

Employability research suggests that successful labor market integration depends on more than academic achievement alone. According to Tomlinson (2017), graduate employability is influenced by multiple forms of capital, including human capital, social capital, cultural capital, and psychological capital. Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills acquired through education, while social capital encompasses professional networks and relationships that facilitate access to employment opportunities. Cultural capital includes familiarity with workplace norms and expectations, and psychological capital reflects confidence, resilience, and adaptability. International students often possess strong human capital but may experience disadvantages in social and cultural capital due to limited professional networks and reduced familiarity with local labor market practices (Crossman & Clarke, 2010).

Previous studies have documented a variety of challenges encountered by international students during the employment process. Arthur and Flynn (2011) found that international graduates frequently face uncertainty regarding career pathways and long-term residency opportunities, which can influence both educational and career decisions. Similarly, Nunes and Arthur (2013) reported that international students often experience difficulties integrating into local labor markets due to limited networking opportunities, unfamiliar recruitment practices, and employer concerns regarding immigration status. These barriers may persist even among highly qualified graduates with strong academic credentials.

Research also suggests that international students must navigate a complex intersection of academic expectations, labor market demands, and immigration requirements. Le and Gardner (2010) found that international students often experience additional pressures associated with adapting to new educational and professional environments while simultaneously planning for uncertain post-graduation futures. As a result, labor market transitions for international students are often more complex and uncertain than those experienced by domestic graduates.

Immigration Policy and Employment Outcomes

Immigration policy has emerged as one of the most significant structural factors influencing employment outcomes for international graduates. Although many countries actively recruit international students as a source of highly skilled labor, immigration regulations often create barriers that complicate the transition from education to employment. In the United States, Optional Practical Training (OPT) and employer-sponsored visas represent the primary mechanisms through which international students gain access to the labor market following graduation. However, these pathways are often characterized by regulatory complexity and uncertainty.

Bound, Khanna, and Morales (2017) argue that immigration policy plays a critical role in determining the allocation of highly skilled labor within the U.S. economy.

Programs such as OPT were developed to facilitate labor market participation among international graduates; however, employer sponsorship requirements and visa caps can significantly affect employment opportunities. Shih (2016) similarly found that labor market openness and immigration policy directly influence international student enrollment and employment outcomes, suggesting that immigration systems function as important determinants of workforce participation.

Employer perceptions of immigration regulations may further contribute to employment challenges. Research conducted by the Migration Policy Institute indicates that many employers overestimate the complexity, cost, and legal burden associated with hiring international graduates (Ruiz Soto et al., 2019). Consequently, some organizations avoid considering international candidates even when legal pathways for employment exist. These perceptions create barriers that extend beyond actual regulatory restrictions and may reduce employment opportunities for qualified graduates.

The influence of immigration policy on labor market outcomes is particularly important because it affects both employers and students. Employers must evaluate the costs and administrative requirements associated with sponsorship, while students must assess the likelihood of securing employment within an uncertain regulatory environment. As a result, immigration policy functions not only as a legal framework but also as a structural context shaping labor market behavior.

Immigration Anxiety and Career Decision-Making

While immigration regulations influence labor market opportunities, they may also affect how students perceive and respond to employment challenges. Career decision-making under uncertainty has been widely examined in both educational and organizational research. Scholars have consistently found that uncertainty influences individual behavior by increasing perceptions of risk and reducing confidence in future outcomes (Knight, 1921; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979).

For international students, immigration uncertainty introduces an additional layer of complexity to career planning. Unlike domestic graduates, international students must consider not only whether they can obtain employment but also whether they will be legally permitted to remain and work within the country after graduation. This uncertainty may shape decisions regarding industry selection, employer targeting, geographic mobility, and job search intensity.

Jackson and Tomlinson (2020) found that students operating within uncertain labor market environments often engage in more intensive career planning and proactive job search behaviors. At the same time, heightened uncertainty may increase anxiety regarding employability and long-term career prospects. For international students, immigration concerns may amplify these effects by introducing uncertainty regarding work authorization and sponsorship availability.

Prospect Theory provides additional insight into how immigration uncertainty may influence career decision-making. Kahneman and Tversky (1979) argue that individuals facing uncertain outcomes tend to become increasingly sensitive to potential losses. Consequently, international students may adopt more conservative employment strategies, prioritize employers perceived as sponsorship-friendly, or avoid pursuing opportunities viewed as risky. Such behavioral adaptations may influence employment outcomes independent of employer hiring decisions.

Despite growing interest in international student employability, relatively little research has examined immigration uncertainty as a behavioral mechanism shaping job search strategy. Existing studies have primarily focused on employer barriers or policy constraints, while relatively few have investigated how immigration concerns influence student behavior directly. This study addresses that gap by examining immigration uncertainty as both a structural and behavioral phenomenon affecting labor market participation.

Theoretical Framework

Institutional Theory, Signaling Theory, and risk and uncertainty frameworks guide this study. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive lens through which to understand how immigration uncertainty influences labor market behavior and employment outcomes among Chinese international students in the United States.

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory posits that individual and organizational behavior is shaped by formal regulations, social norms, and broader institutional structures (Scott, 2014). Institutions establish the rules and expectations that govern behavior, creating incentives and constraints that influence decision-making. Within labor markets, institutional arrangements determine who can participate, under what conditions participation occurs, and how opportunities are distributed.

In the context of international student employment, immigration policies function as institutional structures that influence both employers and job seekers. Regulations governing OPT, visa sponsorship, and work authorization establish formal constraints that shape employment opportunities. Employers must consider compliance requirements and administrative costs associated with hiring international graduates, while students must navigate uncertainty regarding future legal status and employment eligibility.

Institutional Theory suggests that behavior is often adaptive rather than purely rational. Students may modify their employment strategies based on perceived institutional barriers, targeting organizations known to sponsor visas or avoiding industries viewed as inaccessible. Similarly, employers may adjust hiring practices based on interpretations of immigration regulations rather than objective assessments of candidate qualifications. This perspective provides a useful framework for understanding how immigration systems influence labor market outcomes beyond individual skills and competencies.

Signaling Theory

Signaling Theory offers a complementary explanation for labor market behavior under conditions of uncertainty. According to Spence (1973), employers frequently rely on observable characteristics to evaluate candidates because complete information about future job performance is unavailable. Educational credentials, professional experiences, and other applicant characteristics serve as signals that help employers assess potential risks and benefits associated with hiring decisions.

For international students, immigration status may function as an additional labor market signal. Employers may interpret work authorization status as an indicator of hiring complexity, administrative burden, or future uncertainty. Candidates who

possess OPT eligibility may be perceived as less risky because they can begin employment immediately without requiring sponsorship. Conversely, candidates requiring future sponsorship may be viewed as more uncertain investments regardless of their qualifications.

Signaling Theory also suggests that job seekers adapt their behavior based on how they believe employers interpret signals. International students may strategically target organizations with histories of sponsoring visas, emphasize work authorization eligibility in application materials, or avoid employers perceived as reluctant to hire international candidates. These behavioral adjustments demonstrate how signaling processes influence labor market participation from both the employer and applicant perspectives.

Risk and Uncertainty Frameworks

Risk and uncertainty frameworks provide a third lens for understanding how immigration concerns influence career decision-making. Knight (1921) distinguished between risk, where probabilities can be estimated, and uncertainty, where future outcomes remain fundamentally unpredictable. International students often operate within conditions of uncertainty because employment opportunities depend upon multiple factors outside their control, including employer sponsorship decisions, immigration policy changes, and visa allocation processes.

Prospect Theory further explains how individuals respond to uncertain environments. Kahneman and Tversky (1979) argued that people evaluate decisions relative to potential gains and losses rather than objective outcomes. When uncertainty is high, individuals often become more risk-averse and more sensitive to potential negative consequences.

Applied to international student employment, these frameworks suggest that immigration uncertainty may influence behavior even when actual employment opportunities exist. Students concerned about sponsorship may submit more applications, prioritize perceived employment security over career fit, or avoid pursuing opportunities with uncertain sponsorship prospects. Such behavioral adaptations may represent rational responses to uncertainty but can also shape employment outcomes in ways that reinforce existing barriers.

Together, Institutional Theory, Signaling Theory, and risk and uncertainty frameworks provide a comprehensive explanation for how immigration systems influence labor market behavior. Institutional structures create constraints, signals shape perceptions of employability, and uncertainty influences individual decision-making. These interconnected processes form the conceptual foundation for examining how visa anxiety affects job search strategy and employment outcomes among Chinese international students.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study addressed three primary research questions:

1. How does visa uncertainty influence job search intensity and strategy among Chinese international students?
2. Does visa status predict interview and employment offer outcomes?
3. How does immigration concern shape job preferences and career risk tolerance?

Based on the literature and theoretical framework, five hypotheses were developed.

H1 predicted that students who identified visa sponsorship as a major employment challenge would demonstrate greater job search intensity than students who did not identify sponsorship as a major challenge.

H2 predicted that visa sponsorship concerns would significantly influence interview attainment.

H3 predicted that sponsorship-related job preferences would significantly influence employment offer outcomes.

H4 predicted that OPT-ready students would have higher odds of receiving employment offers than students with uncertain or ineligible work authorization status.

H5 predicted that application volume would positively predict both interview attainment and employment offer attainment.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between immigration uncertainty, job search behavior, and labor market outcomes among Chinese international students studying in the United States. Quantitative survey research was selected because it allows for the systematic examination of relationships among multiple variables within a large population and provides a means of identifying patterns associated with employment experiences and post-graduation intentions.

A cross-sectional design was considered appropriate because the objective was to capture participants' perceptions, employment behaviors, and labor market outcomes at a single point in time. While the design does not permit causal conclusions, it allows for the identification of statistically significant relationships among immigration-related variables and employment outcomes.

Population and Sample

The target population consisted of Chinese international students currently enrolled in, or recently graduated from, institutions of higher education in the United States. Eligible participants were individuals studying under international student status who had engaged in career planning, internship searching, or employment seeking activities during their academic studies or immediately following graduation.

Participants were recruited through university networks, student organizations, social media platforms, and professional contacts associated with Chinese international student communities. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Following data cleaning procedures, the final analytical sample consisted of 182 valid survey responses. Responses identified as incomplete, duplicate, or otherwise invalid were removed prior to analysis. The resulting sample represented students from a variety of universities, degree programs, academic disciplines, and stages of career development.

Although the sample was nonprobabilistic and therefore not intended to be nationally representative, it provided sufficient variation in immigration experiences, employment outcomes, and job search behaviors to support exploratory quantitative analysis.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured survey instrument designed to investigate educational experiences, post-graduation intentions, employment activities, immigration concerns, and labor market outcomes among Chinese international students.

The instrument consisted of demographic items and employment-related questions organized into several thematic categories, including educational and academic characteristics, post-graduation intentions, immigration and work authorization status, job search activities, employment challenges and barriers, interview and employment outcomes, and employment decision-making preferences.

The survey included both categorical and ordinal response formats. Several items permitted participants to select multiple responses to reflect the complexity of employment decision-making and perceived barriers. Content validity was established through review to ensure alignment with the study's conceptual framework and research objectives.

Variables

The primary variables examined in this study were selected to capture both immigration-related uncertainty and labor market outcomes among Chinese international students. Consistent with the study's theoretical framework, immigration uncertainty was conceptualized through measures of work authorization status, sponsorship concerns, and employment decision-making preferences.

A key independent variable was participants' work authorization and Optional Practical Training (OPT) status. Respondents reported their current OPT eligibility and employment authorization situation, and responses were subsequently categorized into three groups: students who were OPT-ready, students who reported uncertainty regarding their OPT status, and students who were not eligible for OPT. This measure served as a proxy indicator of immigration certainty and labor market readiness, reflecting participants' perceived ability to legally participate in the U.S. workforce following graduation.

Additional indicators of immigration uncertainty were derived from participants' perceptions of visa sponsorship. Respondents were asked to identify challenges encountered during the job search process and factors influencing their employment decisions. From these responses, binary variables were created to indicate whether visa sponsorship was identified as a major employment challenge and whether sponsorship availability was considered an important factor when evaluating job opportunities. These variables were intended to capture both the perceived barriers associated with immigration status and the extent to which immigration considerations influenced career decision-making.

The study also included participants' desire to remain in the United States following graduation as a control variable. Respondents rated their level of interest in remaining in the United States using a Likert-type scale. This measure was included

because motivation to pursue long-term employment in the United States may independently influence job search behavior, application intensity, and employment outcomes regardless of immigration status.

The primary dependent variables focused on labor market outcomes and job search behavior. Employment outcomes were measured through participants' self-reported interview attainment and employment offer attainment. Interview attainment was operationalized as whether a participant had received at least one employment interview during their job search. In contrast, employment offer attainment reflected whether a participant had received at least one job offer. Both variables were coded dichotomously, with responses indicating the presence or absence of each outcome.

In addition to employment outcomes, the study examined job search intensity as a behavioral measure of labor market engagement. Job search intensity was operationalized using participant-reported application activity. Because survey responses were reported as application ranges rather than exact counts, midpoint values were calculated to create a continuous approximation of application volume. Consistent with prior job search research (Kanfer et al., 2001), application volume was used as an indicator of job search effort and served as a key predictor variable within the regression analyses.

Collectively, these variables allowed for an examination of the extent to which immigration uncertainty, sponsorship concerns, and labor market readiness were associated with job search behavior, interview attainment, and employment offer outcomes among Chinese international students pursuing employment opportunities in the United States.

Data Preparation Procedures

Prior to statistical analysis, the survey dataset underwent a comprehensive data preparation and cleaning process to ensure accuracy, consistency, and analytical reliability. The initial dataset was reviewed to identify duplicate records, incomplete submissions, and responses that did not contain sufficient information for analysis. Cases determined to be invalid or substantially incomplete were removed from the dataset prior to subsequent analyses.

Following the cleaning process, all variables were reviewed for coding consistency and alignment with the study's analytical objectives. Several variables were recoded to facilitate statistical analysis and to reflect better the conceptual constructs examined in the study. Immigration-related indicators were transformed into categorical and binary variables, allowing for the examination of differences among students with varying levels of work authorization certainty and sponsorship concerns. Similarly, survey items relating to employment challenges and job selection preferences were recoded to identify participants who viewed visa sponsorship as a significant factor in their employment experiences.

To operationalize job search intensity, application volume categories reported by participants were converted into midpoint values. This procedure provided a continuous approximation of application activity and enabled more robust statistical analysis. The resulting measure served as an indicator of job search effort and was subsequently incorporated into correlation and regression analyses.

Once all variables had been coded and transformed, the dataset was examined for missing values, coding inconsistencies, and data entry errors. A detailed codebook

was maintained throughout the preparation process to document variable definitions, coding decisions, and data transformations. Maintaining this documentation enhanced the transparency, consistency, and reproducibility of the study's analytical procedures.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was conducted in several stages to examine patterns of immigration uncertainty, job search behavior, and labor market outcomes among Chinese international students. The analytical strategy combined descriptive, correlational, and multivariate statistical techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationships among the study variables.

The first stage of analysis consisted of descriptive statistical procedures designed to summarize participant characteristics, immigration-related concerns, job search activities, and employment outcomes. Frequency distributions and percentage calculations were used to examine categorical variables, while measures of central tendency were used to summarize continuous variables where appropriate. These analyses provided an overview of the prevalence of visa sponsorship concerns, levels of work authorization uncertainty, application behavior, and employment outcomes within the sample. Descriptive findings also established the foundation for subsequent analyses by identifying key patterns and trends in the data.

Following the descriptive analyses, correlational procedures were employed to explore relationships among immigration-related variables and indicators of labor market behavior. Particular attention was given to the associations between visa sponsorship concerns and application activity, as well as the relationships between immigration uncertainty and employment outcomes. These analyses provided preliminary insight into the extent to which immigration-related concerns were associated with job search effort, interview attainment, and employment success.

To further investigate the predictors of employment outcomes, binary logistic regression analyses were conducted. Logistic regression was selected because the primary outcome variables—interview attainment and employment offer attainment—were dichotomous in nature. This approach allowed for the examination of multiple predictor variables simultaneously while estimating their relative contributions to employment outcomes.

The first regression model examined factors associated with interview attainment. Interview attainment served as the dependent variable, while work authorization status, visa sponsorship concerns, sponsorship importance, application volume, and desire to remain in the United States were included as independent variables. This model was designed to assess whether immigration-related factors influenced students' likelihood of progressing to the interview stage of the employment process.

The second regression model examined predictors of employment offer attainment. Similar to the first model, employment offer attainment served as the dependent variable, and the same set of independent variables was included in the analysis. This model was intended to determine whether immigration uncertainty, sponsorship concerns, and job search behavior contributed to students' ability to secure employment offers.

For both regression models, odds ratios, significance levels, and model fit statistics were examined to evaluate the strength and direction of relationships among

the variables. Collectively, these analyses provided a more comprehensive understanding of how immigration uncertainty influences labor market participation and employment outcomes among Chinese international students.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical standards for social science research. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of the purpose of the study prior to completing the survey. Participants were also advised that their responses would remain confidential and would be used exclusively for research purposes.

Survey data were collected anonymously, and no personally identifying information was included in the analytical dataset. All data were stored securely and accessed only by members of the research team. Throughout the study, careful attention was given to maintaining participant confidentiality and ensuring responsible data management practices.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced. Participants were informed of their right to discontinue participation at any time without penalty. These procedures were implemented to protect participant privacy and to ensure the ethical integrity of the research process.

Results

Analysis of work authorization status revealed substantial uncertainty among respondents. Nearly three-fifths of participants reported uncertainty regarding their OPT or work authorization status, while fewer than one-fifth identified themselves as fully OPT-ready. These findings suggest that immigration uncertainty remains a prevalent feature of the international student experience.

Visa sponsorship emerged as one of the most significant employment concerns within the sample. More than half of respondents identified sponsorship as a major challenge during the job search process, and a similar proportion reported that sponsorship availability was an important consideration when evaluating employment opportunities. These findings provide preliminary support for the study's central premise that immigration considerations shape labor market behavior.

Employment outcomes revealed a notable gap between interview attainment and offer attainment. While a majority of students reported receiving at least one interview, fewer than one-quarter had secured an employment offer. This pattern suggests that barriers to employment persist beyond the initial recruitment stage.

To further investigate these relationships, logistic regression models were estimated. The interview attainment model was statistically significant and explained a meaningful proportion of variation in interview outcomes. Application volume emerged as the strongest predictor of interview attainment, indicating that students who submitted more applications were substantially more likely to receive interviews. Visa sponsorship concerns approached statistical significance, suggesting that students experiencing greater sponsorship-related challenges may engage in more intensive job search efforts that increase interview opportunities.

The employment offer model produced a similar pattern. Application volume remained the only statistically significant predictor of employment offers. Although OPT-ready students demonstrated higher odds of receiving offers than students with

uncertain work authorization status, the relationship did not reach statistical significance. Likewise, sponsorship concerns and sponsorship-related employment preferences did not significantly predict offer attainment once application behavior was considered.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how immigration uncertainty influences job search behavior and labor market outcomes among Chinese international students studying in the United States. The findings suggest that immigration-related concerns operate not only as structural barriers within the labor market but also as behavioral influences that shape how students approach the employment process.

One of the most notable findings is the prevalence of immigration uncertainty within the sample. More than half of respondents reported uncertainty regarding their OPT status or future work authorization, indicating that immigration concerns are not limited to a small subset of students but rather represent a widespread feature of the international student experience. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that international graduates frequently navigate employment decisions under conditions of significant ambiguity regarding their future legal status (Shih, 2016).

The results further revealed that visa sponsorship was consistently identified as both a major employment challenge and a critical factor in evaluating job opportunities. This pattern suggests that immigration concerns influence student decision-making long before employers make hiring decisions. Students appear to internalize immigration-related constraints and incorporate them into their job search strategies, potentially narrowing their perceived opportunities and shaping their expectations regarding employment outcomes.

The regression analyses provide additional insight into the relationship between immigration concerns and labor market behavior. Although visa sponsorship variables did not emerge as statistically significant predictors of employment offers, they approached significance in predicting interview attainment. This finding suggests that immigration concerns may influence how students engage with the job market rather than directly determining final hiring outcomes. Students who perceive sponsorship as a significant challenge may respond by increasing application activity, targeting specific employers, or adjusting their job search strategies in ways that improve opportunities for initial employer contact.

Perhaps the most important finding is the role of application volume. Across both regression models, application intensity emerged as the strongest predictor of labor market success. Students who submitted larger numbers of applications were significantly more likely to secure interviews and employment offers. This finding supports previous research indicating that proactive job search behaviors remain among the most important determinants of employment outcomes regardless of labor market barriers (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001).

The importance of application intensity is consistent with job search theory and previous empirical research. Kanfer, Wanberg, and Kantrowitz (2001) found that job search effort is one of the strongest predictors of employment outcomes across labor market contexts. The present findings suggest that this relationship remains applicable

among international student populations despite the presence of immigration-related barriers.

The finding that OPT-ready students demonstrated higher odds of receiving employment offers, although not statistically significant, warrants consideration. The direction of the relationship is consistent with both Institutional Theory and Signaling Theory. Employers may perceive OPT-ready candidates as less administratively burdensome, while students possessing greater certainty regarding work authorization may approach the labor market with increased confidence and persistence. The absence of statistical significance may reflect sample size limitations rather than the absence of a meaningful relationship.

The findings also align with graduate employability frameworks proposed by Tomlinson (2017), which emphasize the interaction between structural opportunities and individual agency. Students possessing greater certainty regarding work authorization may be better positioned to convert educational credentials into employment opportunities because they face fewer perceived barriers during the job search process.

Collectively, these findings suggest that immigration uncertainty functions as a behavioral constraint operating through student perceptions, expectations, and strategic decision-making. Rather than simply preventing employment, immigration uncertainty may shape the pathways students pursue and the actions they take while seeking employment.

Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for higher education institutions, employers, and policymakers. For universities, the results highlight the need to integrate immigration advising more closely with career development services. Traditionally, immigration advising and career counseling have operated as separate institutional functions. However, the findings suggest that students' employment decisions are heavily influenced by their understanding of work authorization processes. Universities should therefore adopt a more holistic approach that combines career planning, immigration education, and employer engagement. Providing students with earlier and more comprehensive information regarding OPT, STEM OPT extensions, and sponsorship pathways may reduce uncertainty and encourage more strategic job search behavior. These findings reinforce calls for higher education institutions to adopt a more comprehensive approach to employability development that integrates career services, immigration advising, and employer engagement strategies (Yorke, 2006; Tomlinson, 2017).

The findings also have implications for career services professionals. Given the importance of application volume in predicting employment outcomes, career advisors should focus on helping international students develop effective and sustained job search strategies. Students may benefit from structured application plans, employer targeting strategies, networking opportunities, and training designed specifically for navigating sponsorship-related challenges.

For employers, the results suggest that misconceptions regarding international student hiring may contribute to labor market inefficiencies. Numerous studies have documented that employers frequently overestimate the complexity and cost of hiring international graduates (Ruiz Soto et al., 2019). Increasing employer awareness

regarding OPT eligibility and sponsorship procedures may help expand employment opportunities for qualified international candidates. Organizations experiencing talent shortages, particularly within STEM fields, may benefit from more proactive engagement with international student populations.

The findings also carry implications for policymakers. While immigration policy debates often focus on border security and long-term immigration reform, less attention is given to how uncertainty affects labor market participation among highly educated graduates already residing in the United States. The results suggest that uncertainty itself may function as a barrier to workforce integration. Policies that improve transparency, predictability, and continuity within work authorization systems may encourage greater labor market participation and improve talent retention. From a policy perspective, improving transparency and predictability within employment authorization systems may contribute to stronger talent retention outcomes. As nations increasingly compete for highly educated workers, reducing uncertainty may become an important component of workforce development strategy (OECD, 2023).

Finally, the study contributes to broader discussions regarding human capital development and global talent competition. As countries increasingly compete for highly educated workers, the ability to retain international graduates may become an important determinant of economic competitiveness. Reducing unnecessary uncertainty within employment authorization systems may strengthen the transition from education to employment for international talent.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. The study relied on self-reported survey data. Although surveys provide valuable insights into perceptions and experiences, responses may be influenced by recall bias, social desirability bias, or subjective interpretation of survey items. The cross-sectional nature of the study also limits the ability to establish causal relationships. While associations between immigration concerns and employment outcomes were identified, causal conclusions cannot be drawn. Longitudinal research would provide greater insight into how immigration uncertainty influences employment trajectories over time.

The study focused exclusively on Chinese international students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions. Although Chinese students represent one of the largest international student populations in the United States, the findings may not generalize to students from other countries or educational contexts. Several constructs related to immigration anxiety and career decision-making were measured indirectly through proxy variables. Future studies may benefit from the development of dedicated measures assessing immigration-related stress, uncertainty, and perceived employability. While the sample size was sufficient for exploratory quantitative analysis, a larger sample may provide greater statistical power for detecting relationships between immigration-related variables and employment outcomes. Some relationships identified in this study approached statistical significance and may warrant further investigation using larger datasets.

Conclusion

This study examined how immigration uncertainty influences labor market behavior and employment outcomes among Chinese international students in the United States. The findings indicate that visa sponsorship concerns represent a significant feature of the international student employment experience and influence both employment decision-making and job search behavior.

More than half of respondents identified visa sponsorship as a major challenge and an important factor in evaluating employment opportunities. Immigration uncertainty was widespread throughout the sample, with many students reporting uncertainty regarding future work authorization. Although immigration-related variables were not the strongest predictors of employment outcomes, they appear to shape the behavioral context within which job searches occur.

The study found that application intensity was the most consistent predictor of both interview attainment and employment offers. This finding suggests that while immigration systems create structural constraints, individual job search behaviors continue to play a critical role in employment success. At the same time, immigration uncertainty appears to influence those behaviors by shaping perceptions of opportunity, risk, and employability.

The findings support the argument that immigration systems should be understood not only as legal and administrative frameworks but also as behavioral environments that influence how individuals navigate labor markets. International students make career decisions within these environments, adapting their strategies in response to uncertainty, perceived barriers, and institutional constraints.

The findings further support broader employability research suggesting that labor market outcomes emerge from the interaction between individual agency, institutional structures, and labor market conditions (Tomlinson, 2017; Yorke, 2006). Immigration uncertainty represents a unique institutional factor that influences this relationship for international students.

As global competition for highly skilled talent continues to intensify, understanding the relationship between immigration policy and labor market behavior becomes increasingly important. Future research should build upon these findings through longitudinal studies, qualitative investigations of student decision-making, and comparative analyses across international student populations. Such research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how immigration systems shape the experiences and opportunities of globally mobile talent.

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