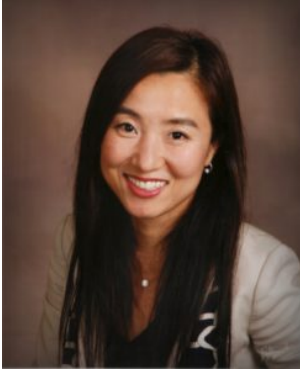




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“Do I Need to Carry My F-1 Visa Papers at All Times on Campus?”

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Imagine quickly stepping out for a coffee break between classes. It sounds simple enough: latte or mocha? But for international students, especially those with F-1 visas, that seemingly easy choice turns into a mental checklist: Am I carrying my passport? My I-20 form? Do I have a valid driver’s license—if that’s even permitted? Could today be the day I’m stopped and questioned?

As theological education shifts into virtual and hybrid formats, many international students remain physically tied to campus to meet strict visa requirements. Dorms and seminary apartments become their main living spaces—where they eat, sleep, and study. Yet in a climate of anti-immigrant rhetoric and possible Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) visits, the usual rule—*carry your identification at all times*—can feel like a heavy emotional burden.

When domestic students pick up their backpacks, they carry laptops, books, and perhaps a snack. International students carry something extra: proof that they belong here, documents that validate their right to study and exist in this country. A simple stroll to the campus café can trigger anxieties like: What if someone demands my papers? Do I have everything in order? Behind these immediate concerns lurks a deeper, more painful fear—do I truly belong in a

place intended to nurture my spiritual and intellectual growth?

Of course, it's not only about paperwork. The possibility of being asked for legal documents at any time creates an ongoing stress that many domestic students may never feel. It can negatively impact their class interactions, making them cautious about speaking up or standing out. It's hard to fully focus when part of you is always on alert.

Additionally, international students often encounter explicit and implicit biases—messages implying they're outsiders, job-stealers, or perpetual foreigners. I've spoken with students who describe exhaustion from continually navigating these prejudices, worrying about complicated reentry processes if they travel home, or feeling anxious about political shifts that could abruptly alter their visa status or employment prospects. While their peers confidently pursue internships and research opportunities, international students wrestle daily with layers of uncertainty.

As graduation nears, the pressure piles on. Optional Practical Training (OPT) and finding a visa-sponsoring employer can feel like uphill battles in an already competitive job market. Whenever I talk with students about their futures, I sense the stress they carry around from potential bias or outright hostility—an unfair burden during what should be an exciting time.

For those of us who teach or mentor—whether or not we've ever navigated immigration rules ourselves—that small question, *Do I need to carry my F-1 visa papers at all times on campus?* opens a window into their day-to-day experiences. It's a reminder that institutions meant to nurture faith and scholarship can sometimes feel more like guarded checkpoints.

Belonging isn't cultivated by a single individual's effort; it flourishes within communal care. If we pause to recognize the emotional toll our students carry, we can more intentionally practice radical hospitality. Instead of leaving international students to shoulder their anxieties alone, our campuses could provide accessible legal support and staff trained specifically to handle immigration-related encounters. In our classrooms, we can intentionally create opportunities for students to share global perspectives, fostering empathy and breaking down harmful stereotypes.

Institutionally, we might consider advocating for clear campus-wide policies protecting students from sudden ICE interventions and providing ongoing training to equip faculty and staff with a deeper understanding of immigration complexities. Many schools already work hard to support international learners, yet it's always helpful to ask: *What does genuine safety look like here?* How do we ensure no one feels compelled to carry the weight of constant legal anxiety?

When we truly listen to the question—*Do I need to carry my F-1 visa papers at all times on campus?*—we're challenged to see the campus through international students' eyes—a place where daily life in a place they call home can still feel uncertain. It invites us to imagine, create, and nurture educational spaces where every student can learn, engage, and thrive without having to endlessly prove they belong.

Thus, this question is not just about legal documentation. It's about belonging, empathy, and our shared responsibility as theological educators to build communities where no student must carry the weight of constant vigilance alone.

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