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# Seeing the Student: Migration Governance in Higher Education

Teresa Naval
*University of California San Diego, USA*

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper traces the histories of noncitizen student surveillance at U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) and positions the U.S. university as both a bordering system and migration agency by discussing how universities grappled with the call to monitor students and how they began to manage different – and sometimes contradicting – narratives regarding the push for international education and military-industry relations in the 2000s. I chart how U.S. universities have embraced, although not without struggle, forms of electronic monitoring, first from the short-lived Coordinated Interagency Partnership Regulating International Students (CIPRIS) to the rollout of the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). Understanding the history of student monitoring as it intersects with the monitoring of noncitizen and nonimmigrant subjects is crucial at a juncture where surveillance is constantly remade as the status quo and where the adoption of these technologies is not simply a top-down process that was absorbed without question but demands negotiation and renegotiation.*

**Keywords:** higher education migration, international students, surveillance

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## INTRODUCTION

For many higher education institutions (HEIs), the issue on the surface seemed simple: suddenly, there was a relatively large, relatively new population that required universities – in partnership with the state – to create new infrastructures of data capture. By the turn of the millennium, there were 547,867 international students present in the United States, 3.6% of the total number of enrolled students in the country (15,312,000) (Institute of International Education 2024).

Since 1980, each decade saw an increase in the number of international students present in the country by 100,000. Such a jump was enabled, in part, by the rise of free trade treaties and new logistical routes in the wake of neoliberal policy around the world. Furthermore, the Doha round of negotiations among members of the World Trade Organization in 2000 declared education a service that could be traded among nation-states. Prior to the systematization of education as a service that could be traded, international students and scholars overwhelmingly were "elites" from the Global South, which Ong (2006) would note as favoring the mobility of "elite migrant subjects". The international student was steadily growing into a figure that bureaucratic entities struggled to contain and understand.

HEIs, then, have become "functionaries of migration policing" (Walsh 2019). In this way, educational institutions, not only in the United States but also in the United Kingdom and Australia (nation-states that are recipients of large numbers of student flows), have adopted, as part of their everyday practices, ways to monitor and account for noncitizen students and dispel those who have violated migration law. Electronic systems, as they are contributed to by universities, capture biometric information, entry and exit, bodily knowledge, and personal identities. These systems try to index whole persons, with universities grappling within the contradictions of making students feel welcome, part of a shared group identity ("students" who attend a particular university), while highlighting foreignness to make them recipients of cultural exchange. Such a concatenation of processes was, in part, made possible by the crystallization of information technology (IT) infrastructure and its role in the migration industry – that is, how IT infrastructures have helped shape the movement and mobility of subjects. It is within these contradictions that American universities have become part and parcel of the governance of international borders – in the regulation and production of noncitizen students. The regulation and production of noncitizen students, furthermore, takes seriously how "the production of place necessarily involves intricate entanglements between past, present, and future" (Axelsson & Hedberg 2025).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Border Studies and Migration Studies

The conditions of international student mobility across borders and boundaries can be understood through analyzing infrastructures that enable and

constrain networks, circulations, and temporalities. Thinking through infrastructures helps cement understandings of borders as both temporary and temporal. They are temporary in the sense that passports, visas, biometrics, information about entry and exit, and even the universities track and maintain them will not last forever. They are temporal in that they emerge from particular moments in history. The question of "what a border is" is perhaps less generative than what it does, what it enables to do, and what it limits or prohibits. The border is not only the object of the border – the physical manifestation of inclusion or exclusion – but also how borders articulate, govern, and manage the passages of people and goods.

Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star's seminal text on classification and information infrastructures (1999) highlight how networks and standards are deeply interconnected and explore how struggles with encountering infrastructure are woven into scientific and technical work. Infrastructure, ultimately, is relational, with it both being a barrier or a border for some and a fast pass for another. While thinking through relationality is helpful, Star and Ruhleder (1996) also provide a list of properties that come to define infrastructure: embeddedness, transparency, reach or scope, learned as part of membership, links with conventions of practice, embodiment of standards, built on an installed base, becomes visible upon breakdown, and is fixed in modular increments, not all at once or globally. As Larkin (2013) notes, however, the invisibility of infrastructure is less of a condition of what infrastructures are and what they do and instead a question of "how (in)visibility is mobilized and why" (336). Conversely, infrastructures can also be made hypervisible – walls, checkpoints, borders; otherwise, sites where crossing, containment, and classification are made to happen. Nikhil Anand (2017), writing on the politics of water management systems, notes how the "dullness of infrastructure has political effects. It enables their various managerial authorities—officials in public utility commissions and departments of environmental services—to remain faceless. It allows their practices to remain illegible in opaque institutions" (n.p.). Moreover, as people make history under existing circumstances, they too live in worlds formed by infrastructures built in the past and maintained into the present – infrastructures that, whether in the process of being built or in the process of falling to ruin, following Anand, Gupta, and Appel (2018) "simultaneously index the achievements and limits, expectations and failures, of modernity" (26).

There are many articulations and rearticulations of border/s – as deep, as borderlands, as borderscapes, as offshored and outsourced, or even as technological borders. However, all these articulations understand the importance of making and remaking the border, demarcating and redemarcating who belongs and who does not, governed by nation-states and expanded by industry and HEIs alike. Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) and Hardt and Negri (2001) emphasize against the dichotomies of open and closed borders, but how borders at once perform both functions – the opening up to those who, in given concrete conditions, are deemed desired, while at the same time restricting access to those who fall away. Legal discourses about (re)inventing the border, on the other hand, focus on how bordering practices facilitate unequal access to mobility, resources,

and even the possibility of life. The border, then, is a site of struggle – struggles that include migration regimes, disruptions and rearticulations of sovereign power, divisions of labor, and how it interfaces with other forms and methods of boundary articulation. In this way, the border – and how it can be maintained, transformed, or withered away – remains flexible and dynamic.

Border maintenance intersects with the profitable "migration industry" as described by Castles et al. in The Age of Migration (5th ed, 2013) as groups, institutions, and entities interested in organizing, controlling, and regulating movement. The industry encompasses travel agents, recruiters, lawyers, smugglers, forgers, and financial institutions such as banks that help with the remittances of money (Castles et al. 235). In their account, they posit that the migration industry could become the primary force in migration, as the different formations have their own goals and motives in facilitating the movement of people – but share a vested interest in ensuring that migration, or otherwise movement or mobility (with various conditions), can continue. The migration industry, like the border, however, is not a singular entity. Different formations instead serve as gatekeepers of migration practices, often outsourced by the state, and work to create institutional and bodily knowledge of migration. In this way, drawing boundaries around what the migration industry is less important than understanding the work needed to create and maintain migration industries (Cranston, Schapendonk & Spaan 2017). For example, the United Kingdom has seen the rise of international education agents that link international students and universities that seek to recruit and enroll them, providing insight and opportunities to negotiate and adjudicate any issue that may arise (Beech 2017).

Universities in the United States and the administration they employ to enforce changing immigration laws are too embedded within the migration industry, creating and maintaining subjects who oscillate between categories of immigrant and migrant – subjects who, through their interfacing with identity documents such as passports and visas, are defined as noncitizen, foreign, or international students. American universities embedded in the global migration industry clarify contradictions between the goals of higher education in theory and the marriage of business and statecraft in practice and begin to view students as buyers of the education commodity.

This paper draws on historical materials to answer how universities grappled with calls to monitor noncitizen students and the lasting impacts of the unprecedented growth of electronic monitoring systems at HEIs. It combines border studies, critical university studies, and higher education studies to concretely emplace the U.S. university in the broader migration industry and how the struggle over student surveillance is historically rooted in the specific conditions of the U.S. political economy. I employ a close reading of federal immigration law, whitepapers, and news articles to understand the ongoing debates of the time. I use two case studies to explore the rise of noncitizen student monitoring: the short-lived Coordinated Interagency Partnership Regulating International Students (CIPRIS) experiment in the 1990s and the crystallization of the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) in the 2000s. I

contrast the rise of electronic monitoring systems with the practice and professionalization of student advising.

## Before Electronic Surveillance: The Rise of Formal Advising

University offices dedicated to international student services have their roots in early efforts to coordinate across a variety of actors: university staff, various nonprofit and volunteer organizations, foundations, evangelists, members of nonprofit organizations such as the Institute for International Education, and others. Of particular interest was the advising of international students – not very many schools had offices or assigned full-time staff to take on the mantle of supporting international students. Members of university administration or faculty would take on such a secondary role to ensure students had their concerns and questions answered, especially in the wake of confusing and shifting foreign policy. These nascent advisors gathered and networked informally to share best practices, but eventually, more focused guidance was necessary to keep the variety of objectives and interests in check, as well as to help legitimize and professionalize foreign student advising as its own path in university affairs instead of merely being an added responsibility (Bevis & Lucas 2007).

In 1942, the Advisory Committee on the Adjustment of Foreign Students in the United States organized a conference that sought to address problems that arose from the first and second World Wars, particularly raising funds for foreign students who were either stranded or displaced due to war activity (Bevis & Lukas 122). The committee was formed under the U.S. Department of State Division of Cultural Relations and in partnership with the Office of Education and the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs – the Division of Cultural Relations, too, emerged as a centralizing force to coordinate activities, especially those within extragovernmental sites such as universities, with other peoples and nation-states (Pattee 1939). Beyond addressing the state of stranded students, the conference also aimed to promote foreign student advisors (FSAs) on individual campuses, as prior to the formation of the Committee, only 13 universities had approved advisors (Bu 2003). At the conference, FSAs were officially identified, and their status as a formal position within university systems enabled the formation of the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors (NAFSA) at the 1948 Ann Arbor Conference on International Student Exchange, an organization that facilitated the professionalization, preparation, and appointment of foreign student advisors.

NAFSA provided the groundwork for the rising professionalization of FSAs and for support in the construction of university offices and centers for both studying abroad and supporting foreign enrollees through in-service training. By the 1950s, NAFSA also included study and teaching abroad coordinators, government representatives, and organizers of community programs and outreach. NAFSA, more crucially, also tried to create policy for granting emergency aid to foreign students and focused many of their efforts in creating handbooks for FSAs who would have to deal with changing and convoluting visa

and immigration regulations. NAFSA often served as the mediator between foreign students and the U.S. government to help smooth and create better working relations; for example, students hoping to gain permission for summer work applied through their foreign student advisor instead of a governmental entity.

By the 1960s, NAFSA pushed for the standardization of foreign student advising to include English instruction, support with admissions, and the evaluation of academic course work. In the academic year 1960-1961, there were 53,107 international students, and by the academic year 1969-1970, there were 134,959 international students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher learning (Institute of International Education). The growing number of noncitizens from a variety of backgrounds – Eastern and Western Europe, newly decolonized and nationally liberated states (even those free only in name) – encouraged such a project of standardization.

The 1960s saw the rise of expansion of American universities, with booming enrollments after World War II, and in the drive for public and mass higher education, especially in states such as California. Within this push for standardization contained contradictions within NAFSA's approaches to international students: the drive to internationalize education in general and encourage students to be global citizens versus seeing international students as a crucial and inalienable part of American higher education and as part of strengthening national interests in international affairs. Despite the deeper partnerships between NAFSA and the U.S. government and the motivations for foreign student enrollment and international educational exchange to further national interests, funding for programs related to foreign students remained inadequate compared to other thrusts such as language and area studies. NAFSA instead relied on support from private foundations such as the Ford Foundation, which provided $150,000 to expand the presence of foreign student advisors and develop a centralized International Education Office. Alongside support from private foundations was support from volunteer organizations: support that saw foreign students not simply as young people who sought training in the United States but also as people who needed welcome and care in an unfamiliar world.

**Early Efforts in Monitoring and Maintaining Student Data**

Scholars have argued that the monitoring of migratory subjects is not new, including the monitoring of noncitizens or international students since the nineteenth century (Allen & Bista 2021, Rodriguez, Mohamed, & Barthelemy 2025). The growth of the international student advising industry, as noted in the previous section, also saw the creation of an infrastructure of both care and capture within the university system. Different agencies have grappled with the question of how to systematically track the status and location of international students and scholars in U.S. HEIs. While the INS tracked basic information on international students through the Student and School (STSC) System, the process of verification was argued to be inefficient and sometimes inaccurate. INS would

send printouts of student information to schools, which schools then had to verify and mail back for the agency to update the STSC database.

The challenge, then, was the creation and maintenance of electronic systems that could index the student subject.

As argued by Ivan Chaar López (2024), Immigration and Naturalization Services officers began to usher in the automation of immigration enforcement in the 1970s. INS staff had support from and were trained by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology-sponsored MITRE Corporation. This was done, in particular, to deter the forging of identity documents such as green cards (of which there had been many versions in circulation in the 1970s). The automation experiment conducted by INS and MITRE has now become part and parcel of any kind of border crossing into the United States. Hopeful entrants into the United States continue to submit biographical information, biometrics such as fingerprints, and photographs of themselves.

The automation experiment between INS and MITRE was situated in the borderlands of Texas, in the wake of the Bracero migrant farmworker program, and with the concern of controlling migration from the southern border. The painstaking work of bringing together biometric data, magnetic stripes, computing technologies, and the immigration officers that could parse them paved the way for a visa regime that could monitor students and mark them as both a bureaucratic unit to be monitored and, for some, a probable threat.

## THE SHORT-LIVED CIRPIS EXPERIMENT

The lack of standardization of identity documents enabled opportunities for forgery and fraud: two activities the U.S. saw as threats to matching the person to the record. Since working to maintain its hegemonic status at the end of the Cold War, during its wars of intervention in Indochina and in the meteoric rise of neoliberalism around the world, the state (in collusion with industry and universities) sought to secure its borders through whatever means necessary. The delineation between alien and American had to be made over and over again: from the application process of identity documents to interfacing at ports of entry and in the living, studying, and working of everyday life. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996 began to frame the noncitizen as subject to removal from the U.S. nation-state, and in the case of noncitizen students, denial of funding for higher education. Congress, upon enacting the IIRIRA, also pushed for the development of a program that would collect data on foreign students – at least five countries in 1998 and all countries by 2003 (Siskin 2005).

The act, then, laid the groundwork for the transformation of universities into migration agencies – by forming the Coordinated Interagency Partnership Regulating International Students (CIPRIS). CIPRIS was an early and short-lived effort to systematize the monitoring of international students and aimed to monitor the movement and academic progress of foreign students from the moment of entry to departure. Prior to CIPRIS, while schools were required to collect data

on students (including names, addresses, dates of birth, visa types, courses taking or taken, and disciplinary actions), they were not required to report to the INS unless requested.

CIPRIS was an attempt to see how feasible it would be for the INS to collect international student information electronically, as schools would now have to input information into INS computers themselves. The computers were provided by the INS. As a prototype, CIPRIS was not initially rolled out nationally but was first tested in the Southeast United States at twenty-one (21) HEIs, including Auburn University in Alabama and two University of Alabama campuses (Birmingham and Tuscaloosa). Further enfolding universities into the migration industry, CIPRIS saw the partnerships among public and private institutions, entities such as airports, and the Immigration and Naturalization Services. The implementation of CIRPIS – although short-lived – grew from the push for the automation of immigration enforcement, such as the MITRE experiment at the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, and served as a way to monitor and map a particular subgroup of noncitizen life in the 1990s: the noncitizen student, whose presence in the country occupied the space between national security and neoliberal globalization.

CIPRIS did not reach all international student-serving institutions in the United States, although there were efforts to expand a newer program to the Northeast (particularly in the Massachusetts area). The testing remained primarily at educational institutions in the Southeast United States. The Southeast was not a top destination for international students in the 1990s – in the 1997-1998 academic year, California was the top state for international students, followed by New York, Texas, Massachusetts, and Florida (Time Wire Reports 1998).

Why, then, did the region serve as the test site for CIPRIS? Jim Ellis, then the president of Auburn University's Office of International Education, was a staunch advocate of the CIPRIS pilot test program. The state of Georgia, too, had a fair share of military facilities and weapons manufacturers (such as Bell Bomber and eventually Lockheed Martin) (O'Mara 2005). Furthermore, the Southeast also had a history of retaliation against international students. In 1979, Greenville Technical College in South Carolina suspended 104 Iranian students in retaliation to the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and following then-President Carter's order to deport Iranian students with lapsed visas (Nunes 1979).

The pilot program was terminated in October 1999 by INS Deputy Commissioner Mary Ann Wyrsch. While CIPRIS was meant to be temporary so that the INS could develop a nationwide system, pushback from universities on remitting fees to the INS also aided in its shelving and eventual demise. While the figure of the international student continued to remain vexing, the gospel of national security had not yet reached its crescendo. Some international students – particularly those racialized and hailing from nation-states the U.S. deemed its enemies – felt the brunt of the consequences of early efforts to securitize the U.S. university (and therefore the U.S. state), but it would not be until the waging of the so-called Global War on Terror that national security would become the primary guiding force for admission into the United States.

Experiments in automating land and water border control, as well as efforts to create sites of containment and counterinsurgency, worked hand in hand with attempts to emplace international students and scholars, their finances, their research, and their labor power within the university-industry-military nexus that was crystallizing. While a national tracking system did not formally roll out to monitor the activities of international students and scholars, U.S. state agents still managed to tap into Cold War-era suspicions of stolen research and espionage that would demarcate the current (or former) international student as a possible threat.

## SECURING THE STUDENT: THE RISE OF SEVIS

With CIPRIS on the backburner and the development of a national tracking system temporarily at a halt, international scholars' research, particularly on satellite technologies, became a highlighted object of suspicion. Satellite technology exports had strict government regulations, as in 1998, they were transferred to the care of the State Department. This shift made researchers working on satellite technologies occupy the same category as exporters of munitions. Space scientists, in an article in Nature, were "now unsure whether foreign-born graduate students are allowed to work on satellite hardware and data without first obtaining an export license" (Reichharrdt 2000). International students – whether their bodies or their work – became highly surveilled despite having been the smallest group of nonimmigrants in the United States (Witt 2008). Tensions undergirding geopolitical relations remained written on the bodies of international students despite many universities working with and through large transnational corporations with outposts around the world. International students, in the new millennium, were at a moment in time when prior justifications of cultural exchange and recruiting the best and the brightest fell short.

From the imposition of new identity documents and new ways to prove or disprove them to developments at border crossings to monitoring at campuses, such methods of surveillance were not cheap. The CIPRIS pilot program was costly and required providing schools with INS computers so advisors could plug in student information. INS, working on a more feasible replacement, renamed CIPRIS to the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) in July 2001, which would be an internet-based database instead of one that relied on interconnected INS computers. SEVIS, like CIPRIS before it, would be a database accessible to federal and state agencies that contains data on both international students and the institutions they enroll in.

However, the implementation of SEVIS was far from smooth, with opposition from university groups such as NAFSA, the American Council of Education, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Offices, and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges – as early as August 2001. Opposition groups noted that singling out a particular sector (in this case, "students") for surveillance would make the U.S. less desirable as a destination for higher education.

All such contradictions came to a head after the fall of the World Trade Center's twin towers on 9/11. A special report released by the Department of Justice, entitled "The Immigration and Naturalization Service's Contacts With Two September 11 Terrorists", traces the INS's modes of surveillance and its limitations – how the INS failed to thoroughly monitor foreign students and predict violations of visa policies (Office of the Inspector General 2002). The attacks, then, were a result of weaknesses in preemption and in managing information. The report proposes, instead, the wholesale implementation of SEVIS as a component of the PATRIOT Act (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism). In this way, SEVIS would be meant to improve data collection and address fraud and the fear of fraud (especially the forgery of documents and the lack of enforcement of monitoring foreign students). Fraud was also the target of INS collaboration with MITRE Corporation in these 1970s experiments. To cooperate, schools needed to provide detailed and updated information on international students.

In September, then-Senator Dianne Feinstein introduced a pause for six months for authorizing student visas – with a blanket ban from seven nation-states on the Department of State's "terror" list, such as Libya, Sudan, Iraq, and Iran. While Feinstein, due to pushback from lobbyists, abandoned the moratorium on all student visas in October 2001, from 2001 to 2021, the decade had an average of 360,000 F1 student visa approvals from – with 2001 having the lowest number of visa approvals at 123,000.

On the side of universities, which still sought to bring international students to their campuses, the INS proposed January 30, 2003 as the deadline for schools to shift to SEVIS. As the trial version of SEVIS launched in 2002, schools only had seven (7) months to make the complete switch. Moreover, these security measures led to all U.S. visas needing biometrics by October 26, 2004. The complete rollout of SEVIS proved to be a challenge, especially as the post-9/11 kerfuffle introduced several laws and databases that university administration had to parse, including:

1. Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002, which was proposed for transitional tracking and monitoring
2. The implementation of the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System until 2003, which made international students from certain countries report to the closest immigration office for reregistration
3. Interim Student and Exchange Authentication System (ISEAS) launched in September 2002, which had no data sharing with the eventual SEVIS database

The seven-month marathon to the January 2003 deadline saw difficulties – for students, who were faced with contradictory information from immigration authorities, and staff working on SEVIS began to have unmanageable workloads. Moreover, the INS dissolved in 2003, and its services were distributed to three new bodies under the Department of Homeland Security: United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). While the

INS' Immigration Services Division developed SEVIS, the Immigration Services Division was absorbed by USCIS, and responsibility for SEVIS was thrust upon ICE. This decentralization of services heightened campuses' being in limbo, as questions could not be answered even by federal regulators, and there were even some reported discrepancies between ICE and USCIS regarding SEVIS.

Moreover, SEVIS, like CIPRIS before it, was expensive to enact. Original SEVIS provisions had universities collecting and remitting fees (that students would shoulder) to federal government agencies, but that proved too arduous for schools, so the responsibility for fee collection went instead to U.S. embassies and consulates – SEVIS would become a self-funded system, maintained by such fees, and monitored primarily by ICE. There was also the question of how to manage new and changing data. Many schools contracted with third party developers that would create interfaces for SEVIS submissions. Some schools used their Information Technology departments to develop their own SEVIS interfaces. Others had integrated systems vendors (such as Datatel, PeopleSoft, ACT) to develop modules that could interface with SEVIS.

SEVIS had been touted as being "data-centric" instead of "document-centric", with hopes that the transition would be as smooth as possible by 2003. By January 2003, HEIs needed to use SEVIS to issue documents (the I-20 and the DS-2019) for new international students and needed to monitor and track their arrival on campus (Godfrey and Altamirano 2002).

Members of Congress in 2002 asked members of HEIs and INS if the deadline to deploy SEVIS could be met. Terry W. Hartle, then the senior vice president of the American Council on Education, noted that the INS had not yet provided the full detains on what HEIs needed to do to become SEVIS-certified.

As universities learned to work with and through changing immigration entities in understanding their role as part of the migration industry, they also needed a plethora of student services that extended beyond the needs of domestic students, particularly ways to ensure and surveil immigration compliance. Many of these extended services enabled shifts and reorganizations within student affairs and demanded the formation and expansion of organizations such as NAFSA that helped train new staff positions, augmenting the volunteer labor that once primarily characterized foreign student advising. Here, shifts were reflected in new positions with titles such as "SEVIS Coordinator" and "SEVIS Director" (and less obvious titles such as "Compliance Officer" or "Compliance Coordinator"). Even professional organizations that had resisted the encroaching surveillance of international students acquiesced to the demands of maintaining intricate student databases.

Aside from recordkeeping, universities and their staff promote visa compliance and immediate reporting of breaches of visa contract, such as suspension, poor grades, failure to enroll, or unauthorized employment. Universities and their employees (including international student advisors, faculty members, or administrators) help paint a fuller picture of legal control and supporting border infrastructures through data classification and organization and everyday interactions with noncitizen students. Moreover, universities that refuse or fail to comply with these outsourced tasks of security and surveillance are often

threatened with fines, the removal of accreditation, or, otherwise, disruption of university activities. Unlike past INS regulations, the consequences for failing to report in a world post-SEVIS were much more severe. As such, university personnel who are unfamiliar with (im)migration law became "coproducers of legal and territorial integrity" (Walsh 2019).

The push to become such "coproducers of legal and territorial integrity" had considerable effects on university personnel. A national study conducted by Rosser (2007) drew out themes from surveys with international student advisors and administrators, who suddenly had to learn how to navigate the changing landscape of post-2001 federal immigration law and understood the stakes of their role, with one respondent noting, "I have made typing mistakes that have caused my students harm". Part of the challenge, too, was waiting for data issues to be fixed, especially given the deadline of January 2003 for universities to fully adopt SEVIS (universities, as noted earlier, only had seven months for the full rollout). Some members of HEI administration lamented the loss of flexibility at the campus level; personnel and staff would no longer be able to fix issues on their own, which meant hard-to-solve consequences for procedural errors (Felde 2003).

The implementation of SEVIS saw the uneven transformation of advisors into bureaucrats and the transformation of care into monitoring. This is not to say that advisors no longer cared but that the conditions of migration governance they found themselves in were deeply shaped and constrained by the new kinds of tasks they had to take up. Rosser (2007) also notes that these new tasks took time away from previous programming, especially efforts that focused on student life and student success, and that SEVIS tasks, in many ways, were "counterintuitive."

Nevertheless, the development and deployment of monitoring systems at the turn of the millennium illuminated how the task of keeping track of half a million international students – and weeding out potential so-called "problematic" entrants – was onerous and demanding. Human errors made in the initial SEVIS rollout had disastrous consequences, as data could not be edited. Finding systems that could integrate SEVIS functions is a task that continued even beyond the rolling out of SEVIS – with the technologies that universities have inherited and continued to develop from the past.

## WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE HISTORY OF NONCITIZEN STUDENT MONITORING?

SEVIS continues to serve as the primary database for noncitizen students today. Universities, too, continue to be able to update and access SEVIS student records through their Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) certification. SEVP-certified schools are subject to renewal and review, with approximately 200 schools having their certification removed or otherwise going out of business each year (U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, 2007). In the past decade, for example, Silicon Valley University (SVU) in San Jose, California voluntarily withdrew its certification in 2018; at the same time, SVU was ordered by California state regulators to close amidst allegations of misusing university funds and treating students as cash cows with little to no support for

their education (Redden 2018; Pender & Asimov 2018). SEVP revocation was thrust into the spotlight in the second quarter of 2025, when the Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem ordered the termination of Harvard University's SEVP certification in an effort to "[hold] Harvard accountable" in their "failure to adhere to the law" (Department of Homeland Security, May 22, 2025). While many revocations, or otherwise "voluntary terminations", are rooted in allegations of schools being for-profit visa mills, the Harvard case exemplifies the tensions in the governance of both higher education and migration in the wake of widespread crackdowns on student activism, of being a "warning to all universities and academic institutions across the country" (DHS, May 22, 2025).

Understanding the history of student monitoring as it intersects with the monitoring of noncitizen and nonimmigrant subjects is crucial at a juncture where surveillance is constantly remade as the status quo. Both the migration industry and the HEIs that have become enrolled in it have relied on processes of categorizing and drawing boundaries between those who can belong, enter, or cross and those who may not. The regime of "immigration surveillance" (Kalhan 2014) and the "networked classroom" (Steeves, Regan, & Shade 2018) not only have intersecting and overlapping histories but also deploy similar tactics of sorting subjects and assessing their legitimacy and often deal with similar concerns such as fraud and anti-social activity. Student monitoring, in particular, has become a practice that starts as early as primary school and is further developed as students go to higher grade levels, especially in the United States. For example, sarin and Hill-Bonnet (2025) trace how K-12 teachers in California must contend with the rise of student monitoring software that seeks to intervene in student mental health and safety. Caught in the crosshair of monitoring are often staff and personnel who must quickly learn changing software, technologies, and techniques and balance their old job descriptions with new descriptions that often place them in the role of watcher.

In May 2025, the Department of State issued a pause on F, M, and J visa appointments until further guidance was issued (Toosi 2025). The "further guidance", disseminated through a Media Note from the U.S. Department of State on June 18th, 2025, involves heightened vetting of social media accounts, demanding all applicants for F, M, and J visas to make their profiles "public" (Office of the Spokesperson 2025). The note emphasizes that "[e]very visa adjudication is a national security decision" and that each potential student needs to "credibly establish their eligibility for the visa sought" (Office of the Spokesperson 2025). Proving one's identity through photographs, biometrics, and identity documents is no longer enough – these new guidelines broaden the arena to include online presence and follow every possible student entrant's digital footprint. As I have discussed in this paper, fraud had become the language of the migration industry, with the fear of fraud (i.e., misrepresenting one's identity or intentions) animating the crystallization of data capture infrastructures such as SEVIS.

While these new guidelines are geared toward incoming noncitizen students, they continue to add to the already existing pressures and challenges faced by current international students, as well as the HEI personnel who must learn how

to be both student advisors and functionaries of federal immigration law. Noncitizen students themselves have reflected on the difficulty of even conceiving a life in the U.S. postgraduation (Wu et al. 2025). In many cases, even conceiving a life in the U.S. during schooling, especially if they have significant others or dependents who must then also interface with the limitations of the U.S. migration system (Bakhshalizadeh 2025). Now, many noncitizen students find themselves in "citizenship limbo", or otherwise a "suspended state of legal uncertainty" (He 2026).

The history of systems such as CIPRIS and SEVIS shows us the contradictions in their creation, implementation, and adoption by HEIs. The CIPRIS experiment was aborted before the turn of the century, even before its Phase 2 deployment at HEIs in the northeastern United States, in part due to changing state priorities and pushback from HEI personnel and advocacy groups on remitting fees to the INS to fund CIPRIS. Similarly, the rollout of SEVIS was also riddled with tensions and difficulties. The splintering of INS into new government entities, the quick turnaround of schools needing to adopt SEVIS, and the shifts in the role of HEI personnel from student advisors to legal scholars and bureaucrats all illustrate how the adoption of these technologies are not simply top-down processes that were absorbed without question but demand negotiation and renegotiation. HEI personnel and advocacy groups have been able to suspend the short-lived CIPRIS experiment, and while the system was eventually replaced to the still-present SEVIS, this history shows how there was a time before such technologies became ubiquitous, and there can be a time after.

Tracing the rise of student surveillance technologies, particularly systems that monitor and capture international or noncitizen student data, is crucial at a moment when international students are thrust once more into the spotlight. Framing international students as "canaries in the coalmine" (Ryan & Caroll 2005) is not new, but it has a history, and understanding this history through engagement with historical and archival documents arms us to look more deeply and more critically at the conditions that shape international education exchange today.

Future research opportunities can focus on the contemporary legacies of these student monitoring systems from the 1990s and 2000s and how both students and HEI staff must grapple with interfacing with them.

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*Author bio*

**TERESA NAVAL** is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of California, San Diego. Her research interests are the critical histories, presents, and futures of higher education and labor migration. Email: tnaval@ucsd.edu.