Left in Limbo: The Alienation of the International Students at Scripps College

Seerat Sandhu
Scripps College

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LEFT IN LIMBO: THE ALIENATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT
SCRIPPS COLLEGE

by

SEERAT SANDHU

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR KIMBERLY DRAKE
PROFESSOR GLENN SIMSHAW

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Dedication

I am a writer because of the communities which have sustained me. I am also a writer because of the communities which have failed me. This story is as much mine as it is theirs.
Abstract

The study unpacks the alienation experienced by the international students at Scripps College who comprise 4.4% of the college’s student population using techniques of long-form literary journalism. A host of interviews, past news stories and data has been utilized for research purposes. The findings highlight an inadequate culture of support to international students posed by the lack of a proactive administration, minimal support resources, and a monoculture imposed by the cost of the education at Scripps. The study further indicates the rising transfer rates and unhappy testimonials of present students and their detrimental impact on the college’s bottom line.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my parents for making this education a reality for me and to Scripps College for serving as the backdrop to my growth and for teaching me how to be critical of my surroundings.

I would like to thank Professor Kimberly Drake, in whose Creative Nonfiction class I stumbled upon the idea for this piece, and who believed in me and my project when I myself didn’t. I would like to thank Professor Glenn Simshaw whose Newspaper Op-Ed class made me see myself as a writer. I would like to thank Alison Singh Gee for teaching me the art of interviewing and Jean Chen Ho for pushing me to experiment with new forms of writing.

I would like to thank the Gang of Nine, for bearing with me through the process and the International Community at Scripps for being my “Home away from home.”
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Introduction

Displacement is a vector quantity which refers to “How far out of place an object is.”

8,341 miles is the extent of my displacement. It's a hop, skip and a twenty-two-hour travel jump between New Delhi and my current life in the United States. I came to the United States in 2019 to pursue an undergraduate degree at Scripps College, a historically women’s liberal arts college nestled in the foothills of the (occasionally) snow-capped Mt. Baldy in Southern California. Much like me, about 1 million international students from over 200 countries come to the United States in pursuit of higher education every year. Irrespective of whatever factors drive such a migration, enhanced employability, international exposure or other forms of career development, the process is rarely an easy one. Rather it is one plagued by the themes of displacement and re-discovery of the self in relation to a new environment, of struggling to gain a foothold in this excitingly crazy and occasionally hostile country and that of a unique alienation posited by an existence in the gray area between distinct cultures. The struggle is as much a legal one as it is an emotional one. With complicated visa procedures, work authorization guidelines, homesickness and cultural acclimation, there exist multiple variables at play. The extent of the alienation experienced by the international student body at Scripps, both emotional and legal, is what has birthed this capstone project.


Scripps College does not exist in a vacuum. It occupies its position within a seven-college consortium comprised of five undergraduate institutions: Pomona College, Claremont McKenna College (CMC), Harvey Mudd College (HMC) and Pitzer College along with two other graduate institutions: Claremont Graduate University (CGU) and Keck Graduate Institute (KGI). The international student programming at the Claremont Colleges has traditionally been performed jointly under a shared resource called the Claremont Colleges International Place (I-Place) since 2001. This joint nature of programming has historically masked the differences in attitudes and the extent of resources that each college has individually dedicated towards its international student body, one which vastly varies in size (14.2% at CMC, 11.1% at Pomona, 8.4% at Pitzer and 7.3% HMC, and 4.4% at Scripps).³ Through my four years at Scripps, I’ve witnessed the disintegration of I-Place, and a shift towards a segregated student programming. Such disintegration has revealed in its wake, a lack of administrative effort in making Scripps a welcoming place towards the 49 or so students comprising Scripps’ international student body. What has resulted is a community which relies more and more on each other than the institution for support. What has resulted is a community that knows each other on a first-name basis, bands itself together when the administration it relies on consistently fails to be there and continues to shrink as an increasing number of individuals look for means of escape when pure activism and student-led efforts aren’t enough, relying more on each other than the institution for support.

Not only is this project inspired by personal observations and experiences, but it is also driven by a kairotic moment. A kairotic moment is seen as the perfect opportunity or time to make a persuasive argument or statement. This piece comes at a time when more and more colleges

across the US are opening their doors to foreign learners, after years of hostile immigration policies from the Trump administration. Even colleges similar into stature and size to Scripps are trying hard to attract and more importantly retain a vibrant international student body. Soka University, a private liberal arts college in California boasts of a 50% international student enrollment rate. Mount Holyoke, a historically women’s college in Massachusetts, draws more than one-quarter of its enrollment from foreign students while Bryn Mawr College, another all-women’s liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, relies on these learners for about one-fifth of its student body. Similarly, 12% of Dickinson College’s 1900 students are international learners. As per the official statements published by these colleges, and the many blogs lining their websites, it becomes clear to observers that the schools’ sizable international populations are woven into their educational models, with their college officials stressing more and more the global perspective brought about by such foreign learners. In fact, even Scripps’ very own Claremont neighbors, such as Pomona, CMC, HMC and Pitzer have made notable expansions in the size of their international student bodies. The question then arises, why and how has Scripps failed to follow a similar trajectory? And how much of Scripps’ low international student count is a result of a lack of care as opposed to a lack of funds?

This project is an attempt to answer such questions. It isn’t mere catharsis, nor is it a blatant list of grievances against the Scripps administration. Rather, it is a sincere attempt to uncover and reveal the narrative behind what really goes on at Scripps by someone who has existed and

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6 Ibid
worked within the community in various roles. It is also a wake-up call for the Scripps administration which, with each passing year, is losing more and more foreign learners and prospective foreign learners to other institutions either by virtue of transfer applications or by virtue of the unhappy testimonials of current students to prospective ones. And last, but certainly not the least, this project is not only a way to claim space, but also to shed light the unspoken experiences of a resilient community. Its intended audience includes the administration, the faculty and the students at Scripps College and anyone who wishes to understand the intricacies of the international student existence. In its entirety, the piece provides a comprehensive case-study on Scripps, while each of the individual sections can serve as shorter, more targeted pieces with the potential of being published individually.

There exists a significant body of literature on the international student experience, both in the form of academic research studies and literary journalism. The most common themes covered include the mental health of international students, language barriers, academic challenges, social isolation and discrimination, instances of racism, and financial struggles among others. Academic research papers including “Coming to America: Developing Social Support Systems for International Students” by Richard L Hayes and Heng-Rue Lin, “Addressing Mental Health Concerns of International Students” by Sakurako Chako Mori, and “Encounters with Racism and The International Student Experience” by Lorraine Brown and Ian Jones tackle these themes using broader mixed samples of international students from various universities. In contrast, literary journalism pieces in publications like The Chronicle of Higher Education and the New York Times include articles about larger trends for example “How Liberal Arts Colleges are Make International Students Feel Welcome” by Natalie Schwartz, “After the
Pandemic’s Dark Days, the Outlook for International Enrollments May Be Brightening” by Karin Fischer and “International Students Face Hurdles Under Trump Administration Policy” by Anemona Hartcollis, supported using data and brief profiles of individual international students. This project stands out, and builds on existing research, by offering a local case-study that represents a communal experience. Unlike the shorter journalistic pieces incorporated in this project from publications such as TSL and The Scripps Voice, this piece paints a more in-depth picture of the international student experience.

To give life to this project, I immersed myself in the history, economics, and the culture of international student support at Scripps. I drew from my experiences working on both sides of the student body- as a mentor and as a mentee, from being a member of the community and from being a representative of the same in my capacity as an International Student Ambassador. I scoured through archival documents from the Denison library and referred to past coverage from published articles in local publications like The Student Life (TSL) and the Scripps Voice for an accurate re-telling of past events. I reached out to my community, members of the Scripps international student body, and the larger Claremont student community for their experiences, most of whom responded with an overwhelming amount of support in the form of stories via interviews and google forms, through text messages and phone calls and long-winded email exchanges. I also reached out to the administration: the Registrar and the SCORE Office, the Office of Admissions, and the Study Abroad Office (SAGE), the Scripps College Treasurer and the many Deans who were roped into international student programming at different times. Some like SAGE, Deb Gisvold and the Office of Admissions responded with enthusiasm, others like the SCORE politely declined on account of issues posed by temporary understaffing; and others
like the office of the Registrar, refused to comment. I sent out emails, and I sent out follow ups. I tracked past administrative officials, and I reached out to them for their opinions.

Throughout my four years as a Writing and Rhetoric Major, I have always gravitated towards writing pieces which at their core explore the concept of identity, identity development, and a sense of place and belonging. This project is no exception. In my four years, I have experimented with genre and form, from highly personal memoirs, and argumentative essays to opinion editorials to journalistic pieces to fiction stories. I have played with characters and word counts, adding, or subtracting bits and pieces of myself from the mix based on the rhetorical need at hand. This project is one that I am inherently a part of, both on and off paper. And so, to balance my own experiences with those of the numerous stakeholders involved in my project, whilst also searching for bigger more bureaucratic answers, long-form journalism is what I have leaned into. The use of this genre of creative nonfiction has allowed me to simultaneously switch between being a participant, a curator, and a fly on the wall in the story that I tell. It has allowed me to not only include personal anecdotes and observations but has also given me the space to add statistics, credible sources, and personal interviews, thereby enabling me to represent with objective honesty the varied opinions of the participants involved. My goal in using this genre has been to educate, inform and establish the stakes associated with international student programming. The balance of the personal with the factual in literary journalism is what, I hope, will help increase the accessibility of the piece to a wider audience.

This piece is the culmination of my learnings as a Writing and Rhetoric Major and a by-product of a variety of rich texts that I have been exposed to by virtue of my education in the discipline. I
am inspired by Maggie Nelson’s ability to adopt a nonlinear structure and jump between different moments in time and narrative threads in “Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial” a book through which she explores the death of her aunt while meditating on bigger themes such as grief, justice, and the obsession with crime. Her ability to seamlessly integrate trial manuscripts, news reports and quotes from other works of literature to craft a well-rounded narrative is one that I seek to incorporate in this piece.

I draw from the accessible reporting style of Kendall Lowery in The Tree of Life: Observations from the Olive Grove, more specifically, the way in which she weaves in history, data, and information from the Scripps archives to use fruit as a lens into exploring Scripps Colonial history. Much like her, I tell a local story which has global relevance. I am equally inspired by the teachings and the works of Alison Singh Gee, introduced to me through her course on Literary Journalism. In her piece titled LAying Down the Lore, she revisits her family’s history in Los Angeles’ Chinatown and intersperses it with the long, rich, and troubled history of the resilient Chinese American community. Her blend of the personal and the factual, and her ability to represent a marginalized community, is what I seek to emulate through my piece.

Lastly, my piece is inspired by the immersive nature of the journalism adopted by Taffy Brodesser-Ackner in her piece titled How Goop’s Haters Made Gwyneth Paltrow’s Company Worth $250 Million, and particularly the way in which she manages to insert herself and her observations into her reporting through setting scenes and bringing in the personal, whilst also delving into Goop’s history, monetary and otherwise. Much like Brodesser-Akner, I also intend
to weave in my own distinct voice whilst including numbers and data to help uncover the larger narrative behind the systemic failures of International Student Programming at Scripps.
LEFT IN LIMBO: THE ALIENATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT SCRIPPS COLLEGE

Two years after the disintegration of the International Place (I-Place) of the Claremont Colleges, a writer revisits her tumultuous journey as an International Student, one that is deeply enmeshed with administrative curveballs, covid-19, and the collective experiences of a resilient International Student Community.

Wheels Down

“When faced with immigration difficulties at Scripps, I will be left to my own devices.”

The harsh glow of the interrogation room’s fluorescent lights felt like a spotlight on my fear as I sat there, detained in immigration.

Only moments ago, I had slid my passport and my student travel document (I-20) under the glass casing, pulling down my N95 mask to look into the camera with the kind of confidence and ease that I’d learnt to master through the many airport visits leading up to the moment. After a year and a half of zoom school from India, I was back at LAX, ready to return to some semblance of a normal college life. I was a junior bubbling with freshman-esque excitement. Not even a catastrophically long line at immigration could dampen my spirits.

An I-20 is a document which provides legal proof of enrollment at an academic institution. It must be signed by the primary designated school official prior to entry and exit.
That is until the U.S Customs and Border Protection (CPB) Officer requested me to follow him to a fancy card-access-only room. Admissibility Review Area B is what they called it.

The air around me felt heavy, my confidence and ease replaced by fear and uncertainty as I saw my passport and I-20 trade hands from one uniformed officer to another. I sat and stared at the white and red “No mobile phones allowed in this room” poster with its chipped edges, while a *Harry Potter* movie played on mute on a little black screen in one corner of the waiting area. The LAX Admissibility Review Area, with its thirty-something chairs, occupied by equally terrified individuals, was the kind of stuff that my immigration nightmares are made of. I sat there for three hours, evaluating, and re-evaluating my entire student existence—every misdeed, every transgression that I may or may not have committed stateside.

The lack of communication with the outside world made me feel helpless, and I couldn’t help but wonder if I would be deported. I didn’t know who I would call and what I would do if the situation went downhill. I sat there staring at the lack of bars on my phone, mentally cursing myself for forgetting to text my parents who were potentially worried sick by now, not having heard from me after landing in America. I was questioned and cross-questioned—everything ranging from my father’s income to my major, my GPA to the value of cash on me. As I sat there answering questions, occasionally interrupted by the sniffling noises of a crying woman in the booth next to me or the roaring sound of another officer’s line of questioning elsewhere, my heart pounded in my chest. I was terrified.
After a lengthy questioning, I was eventually let out by an immigration officer, with the green signal to fetch my bags. Leaving that room, I felt a mix of relief and anger. It was only until I got into my uber, that I actually let myself cry. Driving back to Claremont, with tears streaming down my face, I knew that this was only the beginning of a long and uncertain journey as an international student in the United States.

This was my first time in secondary interrogation, but certainly not my last. Rather, it has become an all-too-familiar routine during my travels to the US. I’ve been stopped every time since, at Los Angeles, at San Francisco and at New York, scrutinized by the watchful eyes of airport officials, and escorted to the secluded corners of secondary interrogation rooms. No matter what route I take, I’m always flagged out, questioned, and cross-examined and made to wait for durations ranging from forty-five minutes to three hours. I wish I could say that it gets better, but it doesn’t. Every time I fly home, there’s this tiny part of me that worries. I’m apprehensive, and almost too scared to leave. *What if they don’t let me back in?* The sanctity of my student visa must be greater than that? Or so I’ve since hoped.

I am certainly not the only international student to have ever been detained at immigration. But my detainment isn’t conventional behavior either. It is anomalous, but more importantly, it is the result of not my misgivings but those of my Primary Designated School Official (PDSO) at Scripps, the very person responsible for updating and maintaining my Security and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) record, a record that must necessarily be updated to preserve the legal status of a nonimmigrant such as myself. I am a firm believer that too err is human, and while the negligence of the PDSO has caused me a great deal of emotional distress
and visa insecurity, I’m less appalled about the nature of her mistake but more so about the
nature in which she confessed the same to me- accidentally, in a meeting for an unrelated
activity, one which I’d managed to secure only after weeks and weeks of emails, and pointless
visits to the Registrar’s Office to get a hold of her.

She is symptomatic of a bigger problem at Scripps, an administration which doesn’t really
understand the complexities associated with an international student identity, an administration
which fails to serve as a proactive support system and an administration which inadvertently
contributes to the additional alienation of its international students.

An existence on an F-1 student status is complex, both by virtue of visa concerns and the
emotional upheavals that come with re-starting life in a foreign land. Almost every decision you
make is a loaded one. Something as simple as choosing your major is complicated, but not for
the reasons you would think. My own decision was influenced by my ability to secure a work
visa upon graduation. I picked a major which was “pragmatic” - Economics - and a major which
was “fun” - Writing & Rhetoric. My “pragmatic major” is what is enabling me to stay in the
country given its status as a major in STEM. Most of my international peers have made similar
decisions, either consciously or unconsciously, sticking to the confines of STEM degrees in areas
such as mathematics, psychology, economics, and other natural sciences which provide an
additional 24 months to work in the country, in addition to the 12-month default allotment which
accompanies a student visa. An equally weighted decision is the ability to procure internships
and full-time jobs when on an F-1 status. If you do succeed in procuring an employer which (a)
you like (b) likes you back, there is the added layer of sponsorship, of finding an employer who
is (c) willing to go through the expensive and tedious process of keeping you in the country, when they can, quite simply, hire (with much less hassle) someone of American origin to fill the role. If you do manage to complete the steps (a)(b) and (c) with your spirits intact, you are greeted with mountains of paperwork and are left at the mercy of your school’s ability to help you navigate these legal processes. While navigating these complex bureaucratic practices, you are also struggling to assimilate, to fight the cultural contradictions between your upbringing and your present surroundings in a foreign land, again, a process which is highly dependent on the culture of support prevalent at your school.

Enter Scripps.

While the challenges associated with the F-1 status, both legal and emotional, were baked into my expectations when applying to colleges in the United States, I did not foresee the lack of support that I would encounter at Scripps. I could not have known about my PDSO’s 2-month long reply-back rate on imminent OPT-related visa questions. I could not have anticipated that the very people in-charge of my mental health and well-being would commit microaggressions against me. Nor could I have, in any shape or form, anticipated the deportation scare that I would go on to experience. This is to say that I knew I was complicating my life by choosing to study abroad, but I did not know that I was complicating it further by choosing to study at Scripps.

The culture of support prevalent at Scripps can be best understood by tracing the history of international student programming at Scripps in the past four years. It can be witnessed through the dissolution of I-Place (as represented in the section titled “The Closure”), through the
continuous transfer of responsibility from one administrative official to another (as represented by the section titled “The Revolving Door”) and through the cost barriers which lead to the sustenance of a dominant monoculture at Scripps which in turn contributes towards the additional alienation of the Scripps international student community (as represented by the section titled “Minorities, Monocultures and Transfer Rates”)

**The Closure**

There is strength in numbers, or so I used to believe.

I remember people sitting on the couches, on the tables, and on the floors. I remember people leaning on white the countertops of the little kitchenette and I remember people spilling over into the courtyard attached to this little rectangular room we’d all recognized as our special spot on campus. It is in this very rectangle shaped room, I remember playing board games, attending trivia nights, spending hours singing karaoke on the TV, and doing my homework on the wooden table with the wonky wooden chairs. I also remember the color of the carpet- brown with beige threads, and I remember not being able to see any of it, merely because of the overwhelming number that had shown up to save this little rectangular space - the I-Place of the Claremont Colleges- from complete closure.

Focus Groups are what the Claremont Colleges called these gatherings. These were dedicated sessions to gather the input of the International Community on their needs and their stance on a Claremont experience devoid of I-Place. Armed with unfinished lunches, and the dedication to
skip class, if need be, familiar and unfamiliar faces from each of the Claremont colleges scuttled in to save their ‘home away from home.’ There was strength in numbers that day.

Very soon it became obvious that the focus groups weren’t so much an effort to save the space, but more so an occasion to make the decision officially known to the student body. No degree of strength in numbers could have reversed this decision. The onset of the coronavirus pandemic, and the shift to a virtual college experience further complicated matters, as individuals sought to move back to their home countries to resume school online. The focus groups, much like everything else, shifted to an online format, while its attendees scattered across a myriad time zones. “I could barely pull myself together to attend class,” says Perbhaat Khowaja SC’23, a senior at Scripps. Her 12-hour time difference while living in Karachi, Pakistan made participation in extracurricular activities difficult. “Survival was my only goal,” she adds. Much like her, most International Students struggled to stay on top of classwork, participating in the larger Claremont discourse emerged as a challenge. There was no longer strength in numbers when it came to the I-Place preservation efforts. As participation in focus groups dwindled, it became easier for the administration to eventually fade out I-Place’s existence without the kind of pressing scrutiny that an in-person student presence would have warranted.

The I-Place building wasn’t merely a symbolic nod to the international student existence at Claremont, rather it was the vital structure tying Claremont’s international community together. It was responsible for building connections and offering systems of support which lasted beyond the four-year undergraduate experience. For most students like Gunn Phikrokhit PZ’22, an international student from Thailand, it served as a way to meet new and exciting people. He
mentions in an interview for The Student Life (TSL), Claremont’s student-run newspaper, that “through events and the work that I did at I-Place, I got to know at least half the people that I knew at the Claremont Colleges, not only international students but also a lot of domestic students that are friends with international students who came to events at I-Place.” A conversation with a recent alum, Tanvi Jhunjhunwala PO’22 further confirms how the connections built through I-Place remain a vital part of one’s social life, even after graduation. Much like Phirokhit and Jhunjhunwala, my freshman year experience was infused with regular events such as the International Student Gala (I-Gala) hosted by I-Place. And such events were an excellent opportunity to acquaint myself to people beyond the boundaries of Scripps.

Not only did I-Place facilitate lifelong friendships, but it also made cultural acclimation a seemingly achievable reality. I remember moving in early and setting foot on an empty campus, for the first time ever, as an eager little freshman, with my too-heavy backpack and no sense of the campus or the culture. The New International Student Orientation (NISSO), a four-day orientation program specifically targeted towards international students organized by I-Place, was my soft launch into college. Held before the actual Scripps orientation and the arrival of domestic students, it gave me the additional time to adjust to a new culture, time zone and environment. Through this program, I was given a mentor, some procedural guides, and then practical support in setting up a bank account, acquiring a new phone number, and knowing

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which documents I needed re-entering the US and how often I needed to renew such documents. “NISSO essentially taught me how to function within the boundaries of my F-1 status. There are so many restrictions on the types of work you can do, on the number of hours you can work per week, and on the minimum number of classes you need to take to maintain an active student status, and I didn’t know any of this until NISSO, says Sumedha Bhandari SC’23, a student from India.

What made NISSO special was the seamless integration of the students from all the Claremont colleges and the joint programming efforts of the five Claremont Colleges to support international students. There were fewer than ten international students at Scripps in my year, and yet, combined with the strength of the other Claremont Colleges, it didn’t feel like such a small community. Combined, there were enough of us to fill out the five to six yellow school buses which I-Place had commissioned for a trip to Target during orientation week. The joint nature of such programming efforts and an integrated orientation is something that has predictably remained missing in the post-I-Place era, with each college now pursuing its own procedures.

Each institution had provided a commensurate share towards the upkeep of I-Place, commensurate with the percentage of international students within their respective populations. In light of the disparity in the proportion of international students enrolled in each college, it was clear that institutions with a larger international student body, such as CMC and Pomona, with student bodies comprising 14.2% and 11.1% international students respectively, bore a more substantial share of the financial responsibility in supporting I-Place, relative to colleges like Pitzer and Scripps, with an international student enrollment rate of 8.4% and 4.4% respectively.
Harvey Mudd College had preemptively withdrawn from I-Place much before its formal dissolution, citing a desire to “establish its own Office of International Students and Scholars in efforts to provide enhanced support for international Mudders on its own campus.” HMC’s decision was in line with their efforts to ramp up international student enrollment and was based on the results of a survey sent out to Mudders in 2019. What this meant was that while colleges like CMC and Pomona already had a heavy concentration of international students, Harvey Mudd was essentially making efforts to follow a similar trajectory, while Scripps and Pitzer were still lagging. Even the Claremont Colleges which were less endowed like Pitzer, or those with less international student populations such as Scripps, were able to benefit from the support of, and the dedicated resources of the more endowed colleges, thereby ensuring a relatively uniform and well-integrated consortium-wide international student experience, but only at a higher expense to the more endowed colleges. This disproportionate burden, and the subsequent inability of colleges like Scripps and Pitzer to dedicate resources towards attracting and supporting international students, resulting in low numbers, is what encouraged the formal dissolution of I-Place.

While the loss of I-Place was a collective loss for all international students, its dissolution meant different things for each of the Claremont Colleges, and by extension it meant a drastically different student experience for someone who went to a college like CMC versus someone who

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went to Scripps. A common concern raised during the focus groups, and the online town halls held during the I-Place closure phase was that owing to the differing sizes of international communities, some colleges may not provide adequate administrative support without I-Place. “[I-Place] was this big thing dedicated solely towards international students,” Rhea Malhotra SC’23, an international student from Singapore said. Its disintegration was bound to be catastrophic because then each college would have had to begin balancing international student programming along with a host of other things it was already organizing for the larger student body.” And this was a concern which would eventually turn into a reality.

Not only was the loss of I-Place the loss of a physical space, but more importantly, it was the loss of a safe space where international students could grow and learn and find community among peers. With I-Place gone, Scripps now had to find new ways to support its International Students, both emotionally and legally. The college was now in need of an official who was well nuanced in the legalities associated with work authorization guidelines, tax filing procedures, and the active maintenance of a SEVIS status, and it had to equip itself with individuals (or an individual) who actually understood the stakes involved with an international identity: the alienation resulting from struggling to fit in a different culture, the gradual acclimation to things like mainstream American politics and discourse, the culture of political correctness at Scripps, and the subsequent degree of homesickness brought about by a existence in catastrophically different time zones than loved ones back home.
The Revolving Door

“I will get a faster response on visa questions by emailing upperclassmen, than I will by emailing the designated official at the registrar’s office.”

(Natasha Sethia SC’24.5)

“One day I will figure out who my current Primary Contact Dean (PCD) is.”

(Drishti Thakur SC’24)

“When talking about homesickness, my PCD will tell me ‘In America, we have Netflix’”

(Anonymous)

The end of the academic year 2020-2021 marked the end of the I-Place era, thereby creating in its wake a void which each of the Claremont Colleges was now rushing to fill in, albeit on an unequal footing.

Emotional Support

CMC, which was already directing its abundant supply of resources towards international student recruitment, now absorbed the staff, the space, and the programming resources of I-Place, thereby taking over the role of I-Place for its students, quite literally. Pomona College, with its pre-existing International Student Mentorship Program (ISMP), a student-run mentorship program in place since 2008, possessed the infrastructure to gradually shift into the role of I-Place. It also had an administrative official who catered to the Pomona international student community’s visa and other technical needs. Slipping into I-Place’s role then, was a relatively
easy transition for Pomona. Harvey Mudd College, after pulling out from I-Place before its formal dissolution, had already begun to lay the groundwork for international student programming.

What is worth noting is that even Pitzer, a college with less monetary resources than Scripps had a better blueprint for international student programming than that at Scripps. The college already possessed a dedicated International Student Advisor in the form of Todd Sasaki, someone who has provided support to Pitzer’s international students since 2002. His heavy involvement in the Pitzer international student community is best exhibited through the infamous “Wall of Money” in his office, one which has about 35-45 currencies taped to it, all serving as memorabilia from the many international students he’s helped over the years.10 The college also has a mentorship program in place called the Pitzer International Students Association (PISA) and has in the post I-Place era, been successful in creating a dedicated physical space for international students. As per Nayab Ali PZ’23, Pitzer has also contributed towards the maintenance of a fund with campus life which has in the past been used for international student community building events like “Friendsgiving” dinners, trips to Disney and Universal Studio, and to pay for storage costs of international student’s belongings over the summer.

In comparison to each of the other Claremont colleges, the efforts made by Scripps have been insufficient. The College did not have any official college-backed mentorship program (like Pomona’s ISMP, Pitzer’s PISA or CMC’s I-Connect), nor did it have a dedicated International

Student Advisor or any experience in hosting an International Student Orientation, a situation which posed a gap in providing resources catering to emotional acclimation. A student-run club with voluntary membership, called the Scripps International Community (SIC), was perhaps the only weapon in Scripps’ arsenal.

To initiate its in-house international student programming efforts, Scripps did what it does best— it found an interim, and then another, and then another, inundating inexperienced individuals with the task of international student programming on top of their regular roles at the college, thereby passing the baton of international student programming around - until it landed in somewhat stable hands.

Deborah Gisvold, the Assistant Dean and the Director of the Tiernan Field House, the on-campus gym and sports center, was entrusted with being the Primary Contact Dean (PCD) for international students. By virtue of her role, she was to serve as the first point of contact for student support. She was also responsible for organizing and hosting Scripps’ first ever International Student Orientation. It is worth noting that Gisvold was entrusted with a role which she had no prior working experience in. Her role as the director of the campus’ sports and recreation facility and her background in the sports and campus recreation management by no means equipped her to serve as an advisor catering to the unique challenges faced by international students.

Under Gisvold, Scripps created its first ever international student job positions- two interns, and two student ambassadors- to help put together Scripps’ first ever international student orientation
program. Individuals like Rhea Malhotra and myself were a part of the last cohort to be integrated into Claremont through an I-Place-led program. And that set the tone for, rather equipped us for a host of varied experiences which followed. As we saw the existence of I-Place shrink into oblivion, and the international student programming shift into shaky new hands at Scripps, the student job openings were a way for us to use our experiences towards recreating NISSO, or some semblance of it. “I wanted to work within the programming side of things to provide support because I didn’t trust Scripps to take care of their international students after I-Place dissolved. Since then, I’ve been involved for the same reason.” says Malhotra SC’23 who went on to take charge of the Scripps International Community (SIC) and the International Intern position alongside Vasu Jalan SC’22. Shortly after, the team expanded to four, with me and Airi Sugihara SC ‘22 taking on our respective roles as the International Ambassadors for Scripps. The four of us, in collaboration across four time zones- Singapore, San Francisco, India and Japan courtesy of covid- put together a hybrid orientation program for incoming first years. The only thing guiding us was our past knowledge on how things were done at I-Place, and the default access to I-Place’s programming resources possessed by Jalan and Sugihara who had previously worked as NISSO leaders at I-Place. We were given total freedom in figuring out what kind of resources an entire cohort of students needed, a scary amount of responsibility given how we ourselves had only experienced a semester and a half of actual school. We weren’t visa experts and were at the time still figuring out the implications of our international identities through trial and error.

Along with being the PCD for international students, Gisvold served as the PCD for students at Scripps whose names ended with the alphabet T-Z and was also responsible for the on-campus
gym and recreation center. The college was throwing multiple responsibilities towards her, and she was clearly overwhelmed while juggling between the many roles. Certain international students, (who wished to remain anonymous) shared stories about reaching out to her for PCD related support, when dealing with issues such as a family emergency or homesickness. They mention her inability to provide concrete support or help them in their efforts to negotiate deadlines with professors. On the programming side of things, she relied on us to guide her, to explain the things we needed. She didn’t understand the needs of international students, but she was willing to learn and adapt. And that was our consolation. But it shouldn't have to be. We were just supposed to be interns, playing a supporting role. But we were, in essence, bringing in experiences which should've been known to her and performing organization and scheduling tasks which should've been a part of her job, a responsibility which in hindsight, shouldn’t have been ours to bear. Despite having to work above and beyond our role, under Gisvold, we managed to put together Scripps’ first ever international orientation. It lacked the budget and the grandeur of NISSO, but it delivered in terms of providing the right information- a small win for the international students at Scripps.

And then, just as Gisvold was beginning to understand what the role entailed, there was a handover. Marissiko Wheaton, the new Dean of the Scripps’ Communities of Resources and Empowerment (SCORE) Office stepped in to serve as our supervisor, and the new Primary Contact Dean (PCD) for international students. International student programming would eventually merge into the existing basket of affinity networks under SCORE’s management. The arrangement, at the time, felt like a reasonable one. Not only would the international community benefit from the added resources and the larger budget of the SCORE office, but it would
potentially gain access to a physical space where events, workshops and information sessions could be hosted with greater ease. The four of us, who had previously operated and organized in isolation would now be a part of a larger team of SCORE interns.

Our happiness was short-lived.

It was the little things. It is always the little things, that is until they don’t remain little anymore. The staff at SCORE would mix up, occasionally misspell, or forget to CC one or more of our names on important emails. The four of us were the only SCORE interns absent from the SCORE group chat. Icebreakers and team building activities at weekly meetings would almost always end with the four of us being left out last, confirming that we were indeed outsiders in this circle. The more time we spent working at SCORE, the more alienating it felt. As individuals who had held a host of student jobs in other on-campus offices such as the Career Planning & Resources office and the Tiernan Field House, this very office meant to welcome marginalized communities felt increasingly hostile. If we, as the programming committee, didn’t feel welcome, how could we then be expected to create a warm and welcoming space for others. While each affinity group ranging from Cafe Con Leche, to BLEND, to AASP and AASU all had dedicated offices inside the SCORE office or elsewhere on campus, the only space allotted to the Scripps International Community (SIC) was a measly little locker. Sure, we could reserve the SCORE living room for events, much like every other student at Scripps, but we no longer had the kind of dedicated safe space which we had possessed with I-Place, or the similar ones which the other Claremont Colleges had managed to develop post the dissolution of I-Place.
International freshmen from the international student orientation in 2021 recall Dean Wheaton mentioning how the homesickness and the challenges associated with leaving home and coming to college weren’t all that different for international and domestic students. This was one of their first interactions with Scripps’ admin before having set foot on campus. Right at the door, they were told that their unique struggles weren’t all that unique.

While the emotional support system to international students was failing, the state of legal support offered at Scripps wasn’t doing much better.

**Legal Support:**

For legal matters, federal laws in the US require a Primary Designated School Official (PDSO) to maintain and update an F-1 student’s valid immigration status. The PDSO at Scripps, Marge Kligerman, was responsible for this task, however PDSO role wasn’t Kligerman’s main job profile. Rather, it was a secondary role she assumed while also serving as the primary program coordinator at the Registrar’s Office. Any complicated or case-specific queries posed to Kligerman about legal status were often re-directed towards Chrystal Orozco at the I-Place. Not only was the scope of her knowledge limited and her priorities divided between two roles, but she was also known to have held conversations with mildly racial underpinnings.

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international student who chose to remain anonymous, when asked about her experiences with Scripp’s administration recalls, “I once saw Marge [Kligerman] talk to an Asian student in a very slow, very enunciated English accent assuming that the Asian student didn’t understand English.” She further remarks how such an encounter mentally prepared her for the alienation and ignorance she went on to experience at Scripps.

We were already operating sub-optimally under Kligerman, and then the global pandemic hit, followed closely by the closure of I-Place. During this time, Kligerman retired, handing over the reins of the PDSO role to Kelly Hogencamp, the Registrar at Scripps College.

Not only was Hogencamp new to her role, but her adjustment period also further conflated with an increasingly complex visa environment warranted by “covid-ian” policies and hostile Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) under the Trump administration. Much like her predecessor, her role as PDSO was one secondary to her role as the Registrar. Unlike the other Claremont Colleges which had dedicated International Student Advisors, Scripps failed to hire an individual dedicated solely to international student visa concerns. This was the backdrop and the administrative support which set me up for my first ever immigration and deportation scare, the first of many more to follow.

My airport experience was a result of Hogencamp’s failure in issuing Curriculum Practical Training (CPT) work authorization for an internship I had performed in the covid summer prior to my return, despite me filing the paperwork for the same. This was something I found out months later. Upon her admission, she presented me with two alternatives: leaving and re-
entering the country after applying for a new student visa, a process which would take months, potentially delaying my graduation or the option of scrapping all traces of my summer internship from my resume, my transcript, and every other legal document. I had leaned towards the latter. She eventually took three more days to seek proper legal counsel and eventually got back to me with the knowledge that Covid-19, and the remote nature of my work would be my savior, rescuing me from her catastrophic blunder. When asked for the opportunity to be interviewed for this project, Hogencamp declined to talk.\textsuperscript{12}

In February 2022, Scripps hired Ge-Yao Liu, the college’s first ever International Student Advisor (ISA). Not only did he relieve Kelly Hogencamp of her role as the Primary Designated School Official (PDSO) for international students, much to everyone’s relief, but he also served as the first point of contact for any visa concerns. For the first time ever, Scripps had a dedicated resource committed towards its international students. His appointment was taking place with the blessings of the international student body represented by Vasu Jalan’SC 22 and Rhea Malhotra’SC 23 who were called in to participate in the hiring procedure. He wasn’t their top choice. The top candidate promptly refused the job offer on the pretext of insufficient compensation and the ‘part-time’ nature of the role offered by Scripps. With Liu, the college now had someone with twenty years of international student advising under his belt. Someone who essentially knew what he was doing. He was equipped with the legal knowledge to sustain

\textsuperscript{12} Excerpt from her email response: Hi Seerat, I must respectfully decline your interview request. It’s my policy that my staff and I do not participate in or provide data for student classes, thesis, research, or projects. Sorry for this, but I must pass. Best, Kelly
Scripps’ international student visa concerns. He was undeniably late to join the ranks of HMCs Nikki Acosta, CMC’s Taivna Mills, Pitzer’s Todd Sasaki, and Pomona’s Kathy Quispe, but his presence was a relief, nonetheless.

After months of having the baton of international student programming passed around between the I-Place, Dean Gisvold, Dean Wheaton, the Registrar, and Ge Yao it took months for the international student community to figure who to reach out to. Every time one would establish who their person was, the baton would be passed to the next person, and would leave in its wake, a set of confused students. By the time the International Student Community was fully acquainted with Ge-Yao and the breadth of his role, he resigned. His resignation which came within seven months of his assumption of the role was made public to the student body through its inclusion at the bottom of a weekly SCORE newsletter (attached below) and remained unknown to the vast majority who weren’t religious newsletter readers.

(9/20/22)

Dear International Students:

I hope your Fall Semester has been going well so far! I would like to take this opportunity to wish you a successful semester and inform you that I will be leaving my position as International Student Advisor and PDSO at Scripps College to take on a position with larger responsibilities in another institution in Southern California. My last day of work will be September 28th.

- After September 28th, if you have SEVIS related questions, such as F-1 Student Visa, OPT/CPT as well as STEM OPT Extension, please contact the College Registrar, Kelly
His resignation to “take on a position with larger responsibilities in another institution in Southern California” was code for him pursuing a full-time role at the California Institute of Arts, a position which offered him the compensation and the “full-time” work status which he had been wanting at Scripps. He was the second person rejecting the same role on the pretext of its “part-time” status and low compensation. For the first time, Scripps possessed a person who was well-equipped and knowledgeable, and yet the college failed to retain him. Liu’s resignation brought to the forefront the college’s inability to divert its financial resources where they are most needed. It also highlighted the importance given by the college towards its international students, who have been at the mercy of deans and administrative officials who juggle between multiple roles. International student programming is not deemed worthy enough of a full-time role at Scripps.

“I cried when Ge Yao left.” says Malhotra SC’23. “I cried in the SCORE meeting when Dean Wheaton broke the news to me.” His resignation meant more uncertainty for the international community. With Liu’s resignation, the baton has been passed back to Kelly Hogencamp. Multiple members from the international student body have since complained about the inordinately long time taken by her to respond to time-sensitive issues, or the sheer number of
automated responses received when emailing her. With the April tax deadline, my own inbox
and mobile phone was buzzing with questions and phone calls from stressed underclassmen
figuring out the tax filing procedure for the first time. Much like me, some of my fellow
graduating international friends have also been receiving hordes of questions from
underclassmen about issues pertaining to tax. We help to the best of our abilities, but we don’t
know it all. There have been instances where people have been re-directed towards Todd Sasaki
at Pitzer to troubleshoot cases which we collectively haven’t been able to resolve. Because of the
nature of programming in the recent past, there is now this belief among the Scripps international
students that reaching out to upperclassmen, and recent alums who have weathered through the
process of tax filing, work authorization, SSN issuance etc. is more efficient than reaching out to
the assigned administrative official who might only get back to you after the assigned deadline.

Money, Monoculture & Transfer Rates

“Being an international student means I must be rolling in money” (Perbhaat Khowaja SC’23)

I will automatically be considered a “Crazy Rich Asian” when I tell people I’m from Singapore

(Rhea Malhotra SC’23)

People will always make uncomfortable terrorism jokes when I tell them I’m from Pakistan

(Anushe Engineer’ SC 22)
I am an international student, not because my family has deep pockets. Rather, I am an international student because years and years of sacrifices have been made by my family to be able to make my education a reality.

With an annual price tag of $84,432 dollars (including room and board), the education offered at Scripps is one of the most expensive ones in the United States. A CNN article from 2015, ranks Scripps as the eighth most expensive college in the country. With years of tuition free increments and inflationary costs, the price of a Scripps education has only soared upwards since 2015. This high price acts a barrier to entry at Scripps, carefully filtering who makes the cut.

“Scripps’ history as a women’s college is rooted in extending higher education to underrepresented students, says Suzanne Keen, the former president of Scripps College, “but the Scripps experience remains unaffordable and therefore out of reach for some.” Despite the recognition that Scripps poses high barriers to entry for “underrepresented students”, very rarely are international students considered as being “underrepresented” or as being part of a minority needing empowerment. The international student existence is one that is associated with privilege. While this attitude towards international students isn’t specific to Scripps, the extent of its prevalence is in fact typical to Scripps given the shortage of diverse perspectives among a student body that is primarily white and privileged. As me and my fellow international peers move through Scripps, it is assumed that we hail from rich families with ostentatious supplies of

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wealth simply by virtue of our existence abroad. This silent assumption further cuts through our interactions with peers, administrative officials, and professors. Hence, by equating the international existence to one of privilege and refusing to recognize the International Students as being worthy of additional empowerment, the college inadvertently enables a culture of lack of care towards International Students.

These already high barriers to entry at Scripps are further exacerbated for international students at Scripps, a majority of whom hail from countries in South Asia such as China, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh where local currencies compare weakly against the mighty dollar. Affording the chance to shoot for the American dream keeps getting further out of reach as the parity between exchange rates continues to widen. Even if one manages to afford this education, the quest to find an on-campus job to support daily expenses is equally tough, given most on-campus employment being reserved towards work-study roles available only to domestic students.

The International Student Financial Aid homepage on the Scripps International Student webpage states, “Financial assistance for international applicants is limited. Financial aid for international students is only rewarded at the time of admission.” These statements highlight the de-prioritization of making education affordable for international students, most of whom are ineligible for the many other grants and scholarship opportunities available to domestic students. The statements also highlight the inflexibility of the college in accommodating a changed

15 1 USD = 283.46 PKR; 1 USD = 131.42 NPR; 1 USD = 82.12 INR; 1 USD = 18 MXN

financial condition. What this essentially highlights is that if and when met with calamities (such as a global pandemic) or other unforeseen financial circumstances, one’s only option as an international student is to withdraw from Scripps. Unlike neighboring colleges like Pomona, CMC and HMC, Scripps isn’t need-blind. What this means is that the Scripps factors in an individual’s ability to pay for their college education while making the decision to admit them. The need aware nature of admissions at Scripps combined with the college’s minuscule financial aid provisions for international students, dissuades international student enrollment, and plays a role in maintaining the status of the college as a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) thereby maintaining Scripps’ demographic as one of privilege.

Scripps’ high admission price and rigid financial aid provisions already impose heavy barriers to entry for International Students, thereby limiting the college’s international student population to minuscule numbers. However, for all the International Students that Scripps does manage to attract despite such inflexible policies, the college's ability to retain such students also rests on shaky foundations.

*I'm glad I transferred out (Malia Smith SC’24, now Northeastern ’24)*

*I should have transferred out (Tara Zhang SC’24)*

*I’m looking to transfer out (Shalini Shyam Kumar SC’25)*

Victoria Romero, the Vice President of Enrollment at Scripps, migrated across from CMC where she oversaw the development of the college’s recruitment programs in parts of East Asia and India. Her understanding of the areas has enabled her to build Scripps College’s recruitment
pipeline in India over the past ten years. When asked about the college’s international student recruitment efforts, she mentions that “Scripps has been traveling internationally for years.” She also mentions additional information sessions and interviews held by Scripps during the fall “which align better with other countries’ time zones.” She is equally candid about the shortcomings in recruitment efforts, such as the relative lack of success in attending virtual school visits and college fairs and also mentions the college’s inability to travel post pandemic.

Upon close inspection of her LinkedIn profile, I was positively surprised by our mutual connection: Arjun Seth, founder, and CEO of EdBrand, one of North India’s major college counseling services providing mentorship services to a steady stream of prospective international students in India. Her response and LinkedIn profile both hint at the idea that the college has been making attempts to develop an international presence. One of Romero’s colleagues, Kolby Stallings, the Associate Director of Admission at Scripps, and former Interim-Associate Dean of Admissions at Pomona, is responsible for international student recruitment from other countries. His bio on the Scripps college website, when answering the question “Why attend a women’s college” states, “I want to work at an institution that doesn’t make students feel othered and inspire them to be ambitious regardless of societal norms or expectations.”17 But the very community that Romero and Stallings fight hard to recruit does in fact experience the said feelings of being “othered” at Scripps.

There exists a dominant monoculture at Scripps, one that is white and privileged. Experiencing Scripps as someone who is a Person of Color (POC) is vastly different from experiencing it as a white person. The POC identity is, in itself, one accompanied by a unique set of challenges at a

PWI like Scripps. Adding an international student identity to the mix, only contributes to further alienation. At Scripps, conversations about cultural identity and acclimation are often met with sympathy, but rarely ever understood. Comments with racist or merely ignorant underpinnings such as, “How do you speak such good English?”, “Must be so poor in India”, “You look exotic” underline everyday interactions. Stereotypical notions about one’s country of origin are common. While the emotional labor committed in educating the relatively ignorant individuals is a common facet of the general international student experience, the problem arises when the very officials appointed to guide us through these experiences, express the same level of ignorance.

Emotional alienation when accompanied with an easily endangered visa status, and an administration that is both unwilling and unable to consistently devote adequate resources, leads to more and more international students doubting their Scripps education. Over the last four years, I’ve seen the Scripps International Community fight tooth and nail to preserve the building symbolic to our presence (I-Place), I’ve seen events like I-Gala and I-fest disappear from the cultural fabric of Claremont, I’ve seen my community commit the added emotional labor of educating and sometimes even assuming the roles of the interim deans assigned to take care of us, and I have seen more and more members of my community experience feelings of frustration and alienation, to the point where they look for means of escape.

I have first-handly witnessed multiple international students such as Malia Smith and Nandini Sharma transfer out to other American universities where they feel more supported (the Registrar’s office refused to provide official data for the same). I have witnessed an even higher number apply for transfer applications or consider the prospect of doing so, now more than ever
before. For this capstone project, a survey was sent out to a sample of 20 students including current Scripps international students from all four years, some alums, and some students from the other Claremont colleges. A question in the survey asked whether the individuals would apply to their respective colleges again. Most international students currently enrolled at Scripps expressed ambiguity and replied with a “maybe”, at least three replied a definitive ‘no’. What is worth noting is that the only individuals who responded with a ‘yes’ were either those who went to other Claremont colleges or those who attended Scripps during the I-Place era. Not only are current international students unhappy and looking for potential exit opportunities through transfer applications, but their unhappy testimonials are interfering with the college’s international student enrollment, as more and more admitted students reach out to present students to gather their experiences. The treatment meted out to international students is now creeping up on the college’s bottom line.

Two years of its dissolution of I-Place, the Scripps International Student webpage still brags about its role at the Claremont Colleges. Not only is this misleading, but it is also proportionate to the standard of care exercised by the college towards its international students.

Every time the registrar fails to answer our emails, every time the baton of international student programming is thrust upon a new equally unequipped interim, and every time the very people in charge of looking into our needs make ignorant statements is every time that Scripps fails to be there for its International Students.
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