

Three ways churches can minister to international students

November 1, 2021

As an international student who has worked hard to pursue higher education, I can testify about myths harmful to international students. They often lead us to closed doors to the future.

Leaving my home country to pursue an educational dream was very scary. The hardest part has been challenges I faced once I arrived in the United States.

I was blessed to have church communities support me and become my spiritual family, but other international students have not had been so blessed.

What preconceived ideas do we have about international students? Are those ideas true? How can congregations support international students and offer them a home away from home and an open door to their future?

Myth: Not all international students have financial security.

Some believe all international students have families who financially are able to send them to another country to pursue their studies. While true in some cases, it is not true for all.

In addition to tuition, international students need housing, food, clothing and transportation. An international student might receive sponsorship

from a certain church or organization to get here, but once they arrive, there are many roadblocks to thriving.

An important fact most people don't know is international students are not allowed legally to work in the United States, unless employed within the school they are attending.

International students also do not have access to many scholarships. In my case, the only scholarships available to me have been those offered by faith and religious organizations. All other scholarships require the applicant to be a U.S. citizen or resident.

Financial limitations put international students in a very difficult place during winter and summer breaks. I never had the money to go back home during breaks and often stressed over the thought of holiday seasons away from my family. Thankfully, I always had a welcoming home take me in.

Myth: Not all international students will find great jobs when they return to their home countries.

For most college students, graduation is a time of celebration, with the whole world open to them. Many international students, however, including myself, have a lot of stress around the idea of graduation.

Watching news about the economic and political situation in our home countries has international students fearing their futures back home.

Some my age graduated, only to end in entry-level jobs or selling food from their homes. The years of studying and the investment of time and money were of no use. This is not due to lack of experience or education, but is a result of the political and economic state of our home countries.

Ask yourself: Do you think an international student would want to return to their home country knowing all their time and effort will go to waste? What would you do in their situation?

What can congregations do to support international students?

As congregations called to show the love and warm welcome of Jesus, I encourage you to follow a few steps to offer support to international students and strengthen their future. My thoughts are based on my personal experience as an international student. While generally true for all international students, each student has important differences in their story and needs.

1. Open your homes for them, not just for holidays, but always.

Being alone in a foreign country is scary, but finding the right communities who provide support is a blessing. In my case, I had that support, and it made a huge difference. Congregations became my spiritual family and tremendously changed my path and experience.

2. If your congregation has the financial stability to offer scholarships to international students, please do it.

Financial aid offices will be glad to help you provide financial support to international students in accordance with applicable guidelines.

3. Learn how you can employ or help an international student find a job.

This is challenging for international students, because the U.S. immigration system does not have a pathway from student visa to green card. To stay in the U.S. long term, international students need sponsorship. This requires

employers to sponsor the transition to a more permanent status.

According to [one report](#), international students contributed a combined \$41 billion to the U.S. economy in the 2018-2019 academic year alone.

International students also offer unique value and perspectives to Americans. They have life experiences many others do not, and they are valuable to this country.

If they help our economy grow so much and contribute so much value, why wouldn't we take the extra step of helping them contribute to the growth of this country permanently?

My challenge to you

My challenge for you today is to look at the big picture. Yes, food, housing and transportation are essential for students; please do not stop providing these necessary resources.

But also ask yourself: How can I create an empowered pathway for international students so they have the ability to care for themselves in the long run?

As a church: How can we support international students toward a better future after graduation that allows them to live into who God created them to be?

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Romans 15:5-7).

Cintia Aguilar is from Nicaragua and lives in Waco with her husband and

daughter. She is an intern at the [Center for Church and Community Impact](#) and is a dual-degree student in Baylor University's Garland School of Social Work and Truett Theological Seminary. The views expressed are not intended to represent any institution.