

“I Want to Be Honest, But Also Safe”:

Social Media Disclosures for International Students

Omobonike Odegbami, Ed.D

Director of International Student Services, Hamilton College, Clinton, NY, USA

Email: oodegbam@hamilton.edu

Tags

Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; International Student and Scholar Services; Leadership and Strategy; University/Higher Education

Setting

Recent U.S. federal visa policies require international student visa applicants to disclose social media identifiers used over the past five years. In practice, students report increased scrutiny during visa interviews, including questions about online posts, affiliations, and public commentary. Failure to disclose could have serious consequences for visa adjudication. At the same time, there is no transparent framework for how disclosed content is evaluated. Visa decisions are discretionary, and outcomes are often difficult to predict.

Case

Mariam is from Kenya and has been admitted as a graduate student to a U.S. university. As she prepares for her visa interview and reviews her digital history, she becomes increasingly uneasy. Several years earlier, during a period of civil unrest in her home country, she posted commentary expressing frustration with government actions. At the time, her posts reflected civic engagement and were widely shared among her peers. Now, in a different context, she is unsure how those same posts might be interpreted.

In an email to the International Student Services office at the U.S. university, she writes: “I answered honestly on my visa application, but I am worried. Should I delete anything? Should I make my accounts private? I don’t want to do anything wrong, but I also don’t want to lose this opportunity.”

The advisor reviewing Mariam's message pauses before responding to consider the intersection of compliance, ethics, and institutional values.

Advising Mariam to delete posts could be interpreted as encouraging misrepresentation or concealment, even if the identifiers themselves are disclosed. Suggesting she make accounts private may be seen as reasonable precaution, yet it could also signal an institutional stance that discourages open expression. Advising her to "be mindful" risks sounding vague, offering little practical guidance while reinforcing her anxiety.

As the advisor drafts a response, internal considerations begin to surface.

Legal counsel has previously advised that staff should avoid offering guidance that could be interpreted as influencing how students present themselves to federal authorities. From this perspective, the safest approach is to reiterate compliance requirements without interpretation.

At the same time, the ethos of student services emphasizes holistic support. Ignoring the student's concern or offering a purely procedural response may undermine trust. The student is not asking about policy alone. She is asking how to navigate uncertainty.

Within the institution, perspectives are not fully aligned. Risk management emphasizes institutional liability, cautioning against providing advice that could be misinterpreted. Student affairs professionals, however, express concern about the psychological impact of these policies, noting that students may begin to self-censor in ways that conflict with academic values.

The advisor is left to navigate these competing considerations in real time.

Mariam sends a follow-up message before the advisor responds to the first, writing: "I want to be honest, but I also want to be safe. I don't know what that looks like."

The question underscores the core tension of the case. The issue is not simply about compliance with a disclosure requirement. It is about how students interpret risk in an environment where expectations are unclear and consequences are significant.

The institution must consider its role carefully. Providing overly cautious guidance may contribute to a chilling effect on student expression, reinforcing the perception that international students must limit their voices to succeed. Providing overly general guidance may leave students feeling unsupported in high-stakes situations.

There are also broader implications. If students begin to believe that participation in public discourse—particularly on political or social issues—may jeopardize their academic opportunities, the impact extends beyond individual cases. It affects campus climate, the nature of classroom engagement, and the institution's commitment to global dialogue.

The advisor must ultimately decide how to respond to Mariam in a way that is accurate, ethical, and supportive, while acknowledging the limits of institutional authority. The institution has no influence over federal policy and visa adjudication, and the absence of control complicates the ability to offer definitive guidance. There is no fully correct answer. Any response will carry implications—for the student, for the institution, and for how similar cases are approached in the future.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How can International Student Services best advise students on digital presence?
- What are the long-term implications for U.S. higher education if international students perceive surveillance as incompatible with free expression?
- How can advisors support student expression and academic freedom and be realistic about potential consequences for the students?
- How should institutions best support international students when federal policies create psychological pressure on international students?
- Within universities, most offices have a core mission. In this case, there was tension between a division whose core mission was mitigating institutional liability and the ISSS office focused on student development. What other overarching paradigms might come into conflict, relevant to the work of ISSS?