

Portable Perspectives - Campus Connections

In Attendance: Catherine (Yeoseong) Seo & Vicka Ter-Ovanesyan, Co-Founder & COO @ Imera

Catherine: Hello, and welcome to the Graduate International Connection Program at the University of California, Irvine. GIC is a peer-to-peer mentoring program dedicated to supporting international graduate students as they begin their journey at UCI. Through one-on-one mentorship, student panels, and community-building events, GIC offers guidance and resources to ease your transition to graduate life. My name is Yeoseong Catherine Seo and I'm podcast coordinator for the 2025-2026 academic year. Here on this channel, we'll share real stories, offer helpful tips, and bring in expert insights to support your academic and personal growth at UCI. Be sure to follow us on Instagram @uci_gic to stay up to date on upcoming events, student resources, and program highlights. Thank you for tuning in and let's get started! Welcome to Portable Perspectives, a GIC channel mini-series offering practical tips and insights to help international students navigate key systems and resources in the United States. This is Catherine, your host, and today I'm joined by Vicka. Do you want to go ahead and introduce yourself?

Vicka: Absolutely. Hi, everyone. My name is Vicka, I'm one of the co-founders of [Imera](#). We are a platform that is essentially your immigration guide along this journey. We help immigrants and international students navigate life in the U.S, and thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

Catherine: Awesome, thank you so much for hopping on this call. I do want to give a little bit of background about how we got connected. Back in, I want to say, April, the Graduate Division at UCI actually granted access to this platform called Interstride, which is a platform for international students to navigate immigration journeys and job opportunities after graduating and they held a summit where they invited a lot of speakers like you. Maybe you want to give a little bit of intro of what session you were a part of?

Vicka: Yes, so shout out to Interstride, an awesome organization, and thank you so much Tim, for having me speak. I spoke a little bit about the international student experience. Imera, obviously, we have a bunch of legal partners on our platform. I work with international students a lot, we have a lot of partner universities and so naturally, I have a lot of insight, also as an immigrant myself, so I have a lot of insight when it comes to working with international students, job aspects, all the different phases of the international student journey, and then as you graduate, get jobs and so forth. I think that's one of the biggest things when you graduate, and you just only know that there's one path, and I hope that during this, obviously, we can also cover some other pathways that are available to international students, new graduates, and hopefully can make an impact there.

Catherine: Yeah, and I found the session so helpful. Interstride might have the recordings of those sessions still available for students who want to check that out. But for our session, I really wanted to host you to talk about similar things, but also some personal stories of your journey as an entrepreneur as well, so maybe you can comment a little bit on your own journey?

Vicka: Yeah, absolutely. A little background, I came to the U.S. 16 years ago and I had a complex immigration story, but all is well that ends well, I'm now a naturalized citizen. I'm very happy. I got to vote recently, it was phenomenal. My co-founder actually came as an international student from Nepal and we met while I was working at a VC fund that had invested

in her previous company and she was one of the most amazing people that I've worked with. We met, I guess now four-plus years ago. After that, I went to work in investment banking, so I worked in industrial investment banking at a bank called Jeffries for 2 years after VC and throughout that journey, I was already helping a lot of people through their own immigration journeys. That's kind of how me and my co-founder Lisa reconnected. We reconnected and started talking more and more about our own personal immigration journeys. She, at the time, was actually going through another O-1 process. She had stepped away from her previous company and had 60 days to leave the country or get a new visa, so through that process we reconnected, we realized that the core part that was missing was that people and immigrants, specifically international students, did not know the pathways that were available to them at the time that they needed to know them. This is something that I've seen for myself, this is something that a lot of my friends have seen and I think this is if you're in an immigrant in this country, you know that this is the case, where a lot of times you don't look at solutions, or you don't know what could potentially be out there until it's a little too late.

Catherine: Yeah and those 60-day or 90-day grace periods can be a very nerve-wrecking time.

Vicka: Yeah, and it's also, I will say, in this current environment, you have to be prepared because at this point, I don't think many people are finding jobs, for example, once you get laid off in 60 days like, that's just not the current market. So I think now, more than ever, you need to know what options are available to you, and you need to really own your own immigration journey. I think what we're seeing more and more is that people are using platforms like Imera to really say, 'okay, how can I achieve my immigration goals, or how can I start a company, or how can I do X, Y, and Z,' and not just hope that my employer sponsors my visa. I think that's incredibly important and part of what I hope to achieve with Imera is being able to give the ownership of their own immigration journey to every single person and every single immigrant in the U.S.

Catherine: Yeah, awesome. I would love to hear more about starting a business or becoming an entrepreneur as an international student. What is it like to kind of take that ownership over your own immigration options by pursuing starting a business, or being an entrepreneur.

Vicka: Yeah, I think that's something that we're seeing more and more. I think for us, it's actually funny, my co-founder started her first business as an international student on a student visa, so she actually did the OPT, she ran her company on OPT, she ran her company on STEM OPT, and then she transitioned to an O-1 visa. I think her first O-1 petition took around 9 months to put together and then file, but then her second one took, I think it was under a month. It is those types of visas that are really focused on founders. I think O-1 is obviously incredibly popular, now especially, and I would encourage every single person, if you're thinking about starting a company in the U.S., if you're thinking about entrepreneurship, or you just want to know what other options might be more flexible. If you want to do more creative jobs, and I kind of put entrepreneurship into a more creative pile because I do think it requires a lot of creativity. I kind of think of ours as creative professionals, but if you want to do something a little more entrepreneurial creative, I would definitely look at that. Also, I know a lot of the students here are obviously Master's students, E-2, like, NIW visa, which is the National Interest Waiver, it is indicating to the government that you will eventually contribute something that will be in the national interest of the country. For example, PhDs, great step, also great for an L1, so there's criteria for both and both of those are things that you do not need an employer for, it's self-petitioned. You can work with one of the partners, so Imera actually has five legal partners on our platform that do these kinds of visas. They do other visa platforms as well. You get a free consultation on our platform with each one of them, so you get those free consultations; talk to

them. We also help you track the case, for example, if your goal is to get an O-1, we help you track it and so forth, so definitely do it. I think the most important thing is just make sure that you have - if you're thinking of working towards, you know, especially an O-1, if you want to start a business on a student visa- just make sure you have people that you trust you have either the technology or a legal provider that you have their phone number, you know who to ask. I find that that's what also a lot of people have been using, which are our platform, which is great and it's just something to make sure that you're following all the rules and ticking all the boxes.

Catherine: Yeah, that's awesome, and I know they always emphasize starting early and compiling your portfolio so that it can be ready by the time you need it. I know we've mentioned different visa options, but perhaps we can start with the basics. What are the primary work authorization options for international students after graduation? Maybe we can start with OPT and CPT, some of those F1-based options.

Vicka: What I would say is, obviously, when you're in college, you have the CPT program and everybody should take advantage of it. I think it sounds scary, but it's easier than you think and then as you go through, once you graduate, there's the OPT and then the STEM OPT. I know a lot of universities that have a lot of international students, actually are starting to make STEM degrees out of degrees that were traditionally not STEM. For example, University of Rochester, where we both went to school that has a lot of international students, their business degree is now STEM; so, you can get a Bachelor of Science in Business, which makes it a STEM degree, which means that you not only qualify for the one-year OPT, you also qualify for the STEM extension on top of it. One thing I will say is OPT is phenomenal in the sense that it is almost like a mini O-1, so you can do a lot of things on OPT. STEM OPT, a little more strict and STEM OPT requires the company that you work for to have e-verification. Given that this is kind of a little more extensive, we actually have a guide on our website that I've made and you can actually send it to your employer that goes over step-by-step what it takes to hire a student on OPT and to hire a student on STEM OPT. I know we shared it during the Interstride podcast, but it's on our website withimera.com. If you go to resources, it's attached there, it's a PDF you can download it, you can send it. It also has my email on there, so if your employer say they have never hired somebody on OPT or STEM OPT, I'm also offering that you can loop me in, just say, 'hey, if you want somebody to hop on the call with you and explain to you how this works,' I'm happy to do it. We've been doing this for companies [and] startups that are looking to hire their first international for some time now. It's an initiative that we started last year in our effort to really be like - we want to not only help the students and the immigrants that are on our platform, but also just be like, if you're an employer, you don't know how this works, and the only thing that's stopping you from hiring this person is that you just think it's gonna be a lot of work to hire somebody on STEM OPT, or OPT, I will hop on the call with you, I will explain it to you, here's a guide and here it very much describes it step by step. That's something that is a free resource, feel free to use it.

Catherine: Right, I think it gives a little more credibility, which is really helpful to just have another representative to explain that process to the companies. Perhaps we can kind of cover some common concerns and misconceptions around OPT and CPT specifically. I know that some people are wondering, maybe I need a job offer even before I start applying for OPT or some people have heard that if I do CPT, I can't do OPT.

Vicka: Yeah, I think one of the popular misconceptions that people do not, or just mistakes that people make is they do not apply early enough, especially for their EAD card. Especially, I think now we're seeing that there's some delay in EAD cards, and this process, by the way, has always been horrendous. I think the U.S. government does a terrible job of shipping EAD cards

to people in an efficient and fast manner. Right now, there's not much we can do about it. but what you can do is make sure that the day you get that email from USCIS, you can also, by the way, if you're on the Imera platform, we will send you a notification reminder of 'apply for EAD card' because we have the expiration date and your graduation date and so forth, so we'll also send you a reminder and be like '90 days, let's go.' I feel like I do find that for myself personally, having somebody literally yell at me about things I need to do for my immigration has been quite helpful, so we wanted to add that little flair to the Imera app. Another aspect is just be prepared. It will be okay, but make sure that you work through everything as soon as you can as early as possible. I will say, we can get a little bit into this, but the current administration timelines are also actively changing all the time, so just be sure that you guys stay on top of it. I think that's really important.

Catherine: Yeah, that's wonderful, and I think a lot of times students assume they need to have the most stereotypical job lined up in order to even consider applying, which is definitely not true. Hopefully this conversation is really empowering students to get on Imera or any other kinds of immigration prep platform, so then they can really start looking at options as early as possible.

Vicka: I'm so glad you brought that up because I think one of the biggest things that the last couple years have shown us is that a lot of people have this opinion that because various, for example, Jefferies, the bank that I worked at, was one of the few investment banks that's sponsored internationals. Not a lot of banks have sponsored internationals [and] that number has significantly gone down, for example. Now, more and more large tech companies like Microsoft, they sponsor your green card only when you get to a certain level, right? So traditionally, what you were told is as long as you go to one of these massive companies as an international person, don't look at startups, don't look at small companies, but if you go to one of these massive companies you will have a higher chance of getting sponsorship and they will automatically sponsor you. You can stay there, you can get your green card, it'll be great. There was a time in the U.S. when that was a thing, for example, when you would apply and get into Google, they would immediately sponsor your green card within 6 months; would just start the process, but I think fewer and fewer companies are doing that now. But what we are seeing is there's a huge fight for really good talent and also talent that's loyal. What we're seeing is smaller companies are more willing to sponsor O-1 visas, they're more willing to sponsor green cards for their employees because when you work at a smaller company, and you actually contribute a lot, and you're an integral part of their pretty small team that there's a lot of excitement, there's also a desire to keep you for longer and you become almost irreplaceable. This is something that I've seen happen over and over again, where even the people that I've graduated with, the ones that had companies sponsor their green cards, at the moment, all of them, so far, have worked at startups.

Catherine: Yes, I'm glad that you were able to echo that message from the Interstride session as well. I remember that being a big part of the conversation - how you can educate and work with flexible teams and flexible HR departments at smaller companies, sometimes that can be not an easier path, but that is a more flexible path compared to working with bigger companies who are I think the trends are, as you said, they're kind of closing the doors to automatic green card or automatic visa sponsorship. Perhaps you can give an overview of H-1B, O-1, E-2, and I think you mentioned EB-2 and NIW as well, so maybe you can cover those next.

Vicka: Yes, after you graduate, you do your OPT. You can get sponsorship during your OPT or STEM OPT, do those in parallel, but if your employer decides to sponsor you, they will typically sponsor you for an H-1B. Now we're increasingly seeing that employers because it is a lottery

system and now there's actually some changes, they're increasingly also looking at other visa options, but let's start with H-1B, so that's the most common visa. It's a work visa. It is also a lottery system with about a 30% chance that you get the H-1B and you will see whether or not you got the H-1B lottery. Now, if you got the H-1B lottery, you're in the 30%, congratulations. If you didn't get the H-1B lottery, you can apply again next year. H-1B is a non-immigrant visa, which means that you actually...it's not like after X amount of years. To start, non-immigrant versus immigrant visas. Non-immigrant visas show the government that you do not have an intent to immigrate. Immigration means staying in the U.S. Immigrant visas tell the government 'Yes, I would like to stay in the U.S.' For example, green card, so EB-1, EB-2, EB-3 - Diversity Green Card Lottery, immigrant visas, they are showing that I'm a permanent resident, I intend to stay here, and eventually I will work my way towards the citizenship. Non-immigrant visas, or most work visas, so H-1B, O-1; there is an exception, L1 are dual intent visas. L1 visas, to say if you are a manager for a company in Australia, and then you get transferred to the New York office, that's a visa that is dual intent, and actually it acts as a pathway to an EB-1 green card. But your company can also file, or you can file for yourself, but that's just a good breakdown. H-1B, non-immigrant visa, O-1, non-immigrant visa, but an O-1 is a pathway that we're seeing a lot more. It is a not-a-lottery system, and actually, almost all lawyers are very particular with how they file the case. It has a very high acceptance rate, so O-1 visa, [which is] also called an Extraordinary Person Visa (do not let the name scare you), it has a 95% approval rating, so unlike the H-1B which is the lottery and has a 30%, O-1 has a 95% approval rates by the U.S. government. It has become increasingly more popular in the last couple of years and what we are seeing is that, for example, the O-1 was initially created for artists, it was very popular in the creative fields. Then we saw a lot more founders use it and now, a lot more people just who are employees or just are building up their cases themselves.

Catherine: I know you mentioned, while we were talking before this chat that there are some recent changes to H-1B and I wanted to hear some of your insights on how that could affect the students who are graduating in the next, perhaps, few months, or in the next year.

Vicka: Yeah, so one thing that I will say is there is gonna be a fair bit of changes that I want everybody to just feel free to sign up for Imera's. We'll give you updates, but also just, you can also just sign up to any immigration newsletter because a lot of things are now in process as far as immigration goes and immigration reform. We saw a lot of it done through executive orders. Now there's more substantial immigration changes. So one of them that's on the table right now is the level system for salaries for the H-1B. What that means is that there's X amount of spots that are available for the H-1B every single year and right now it's a random lottery. Your name gets put in, if you have a master's degree, you get your name put in twice and gets kind of pulled out at random. What the proposed changes are is that it will change based on salary. So, if you are in the top, say, level 4 of salary - that means you make X amount of money and that is usually filled by senior people; or say if you're going to be a software engineer on the East or West Coast, you know entry-level salary a lot of times at these big companies are filled into that bucket, you will get first priority. Say everybody with that salary gets all the spots, or gets two-thirds of the spots, and then we move on to level 3 salary. Those will get the rest of the spots and then there's level 2 and Level 1. What that will essentially lead to is people who are in the middle of the country, where there's generally lower wages because they're adjusted for cost of living, naturally. Like your apartment, on average, a one-bedroom in New York is \$4,000. That is not the case anywhere really else. The wages in New York or in San Francisco, LA are adjusted to that standard of living. What I see as a potential downside for that one is people who are on the coasts or in cities that just have a higher cost of living might get disproportionately favored through that system. But I will say that's also one of the things that I think is holding back that policy and we will see if that actually ends up passing and going into law. It is a

proposition that's on the table right now. Another fun little piece of legislation for you guys just to think about is, if there's anybody who's on DACA that's listening or just, I think this will broadly affect a lot of people, is the Dignity Act that's currently getting reviewed. It is a bipartisan bill. It's called the Dignity Act for a reason. One of the things that it has some snippets for the Republican side of the party and some for the Democratic, but one of the core things that it offers is the pathway to citizenship for DACA, which I think is incredibly important. It is something that should have been done years ago, but also I think is very important. It'll also add some little snippets there.

Catherine: I do want to perhaps transition to how early should students start preparing for their postgraduate visa options and job search. I think we've covered it, but perhaps you can re-emphasize some of the timelines.

Vicka: Yes, so the answer you will always hear from me is yesterday. Part of it is because I do think that the U.S. system is set up in a way that I don't think you're told about a lot as an international student, specifically when you first come into the system. The thought is 'I will go to school, and then I graduate, and then I'll find a job.' But a lot of times, especially in the U.S., people do multiple internships. The internship culture is very prominent. That's partially why CPT is so important that you guys do use, and you do intern, and you do get that real-world experience, whether it is on campus or off campus. But yeah, start yesterday. I think it's incredibly important to prepare, to make sure that your resume is set, and then also just consider what roles are most likely to sponsor you, and which fields are you excited to work in. Some fields are obviously notoriously better at sponsorship than others. For example, I wish that somebody had told me and a lot of my friends this when we were in school, but military, or anything when it comes to aerospace engineering, very difficult to do as an international person.

Catherine: I just want to point out, and I think that's also pertinent to a lot of PhD scholars. Of course, you are going to come into the program with a research project or area in mind that you're interested in, but please consider the funding sources and also job outlook of that research area as an international student. When you commit to a lab or a research project, if they're funding sources are, perhaps the Department of Defense or Department of Energy, those can have some constraints on whether you can be funded as an international student. That's definitely an element or a factor that international students should consider. We are coming to the end of our time, but I wanted to ask you for maybe some final remarks, any last piece of advice that you want to give to our audience?

Vicka: Yes, absolutely. Well, thank you so, so much for having me. I am very excited about this. If you guys are in New York, we do monthly income and happy hours at other events. Please do not hesitate to reach out. We are, again, the company is Imera, it's withimera.com. We're a free app, so you can download us on the Google Play and Apple Store. Check us out, we help you navigate your life in the U.S. and your immigration journey and get all the resources you need in one place.

Catherine: Thank you so much.

Vicka: Thank you so much.

Catherine: Thank you for joining us on the Graduate International Connection channel. We hope you found today's episode helpful and relatable throughout your journey at UCI. Remember to follow us on Instagram @uci_gic and until next time, take care and stay connected.