

An international student's perspective on challenges and opportunities as an undergraduate health professional student in the United States

Ana Minski

INTRODUCTION

As an international student that was born and raised in the south of Brazil in a small rural town, I, Ana Minski, entered the United States for the first time in 2019 to start my first year as an international undergraduate student. The decision to come to the U.S. was based on multiple factors that included seeking better education, research opportunities, and overall, an education that would open more doors than if I had stayed in my hometown.

Before being able to enter the U.S., I was denied a tourist visa under the suspicion that I would become an illegal immigrant. During my three years in the U.S., I faced many challenges, including racism from students and staff, social exclusion, a reduced amount of quality jobs/research/internship opportunities due to restrictions related to my student visa, and due to the lack of places willing to work with international students, and many challenges related to my educational background.

My experience isn't unique, it is the reality of many other international students even though we add to the U.S. economy. "Nearly one million international students at U.S. colleges and universities contributed \$28.4 billion to the U.S. economy during the 2020-2021 academic year," supporting a total of 196,620 jobs (NAFSA, 2021). This number was much larger in the past but has declined due to the pandemic. International students encounter difficulty obtaining a visa (Lee & Rice, 2007), encounter challenges regarding language limitations, cultural challenges, prejudice, and discrimination, and studies show that "Africans, Asians, and South Americans perceived more prejudice than Europeans" (Araujo, 2011).

International students are often undermined and encounter many challenges during their time in the United States. Providing space and opportunity to grow enables us to thrive as individuals and professionals and ultimately positively impact the people and places around us. Providing space in the healthcare field for international students can impact institutional diversity, adding culture and knowledge, and incentivize students to become healthcare professionals in the United States.

PURPOSE

Worksites, internship and research positions, and higher education must reduce barriers to participation in such programs by international students. I was the first international student to participate in the Wisconsin AHEC's Community Health Internship Program (CHIP) internship which has prompted discussions to remove restrictions that bar students like me from participating in the program.

When seeking a job after graduation, I must demonstrate that I possess skills and attributes above and beyond those offered by American citizens. That presents a challenge, as I do not have the same opportunities as my American peers (USCIS, 2022). To acquire an H-1B visa, which is a temporary non-immigrant visa, the petitioner, when filling the Form ETA-9035/9035E, is attesting that "the employment of the nonimmigrant workers will not adversely affect the working conditions of workers similarly employed in the area of intended employment" (Walker & Divine, 2018).

Providing equal opportunities to international students ensures that they are getting the most out of the education, opportunities, and social support that the U.S. can provide. Allowing international students to enter places previously not allowed, ensures equity, diversity, and inclusion, and not only benefits the international student, but also the place that is providing this opportunity.



Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Advocate Award 2022 from UW-Eau Claire Housing.



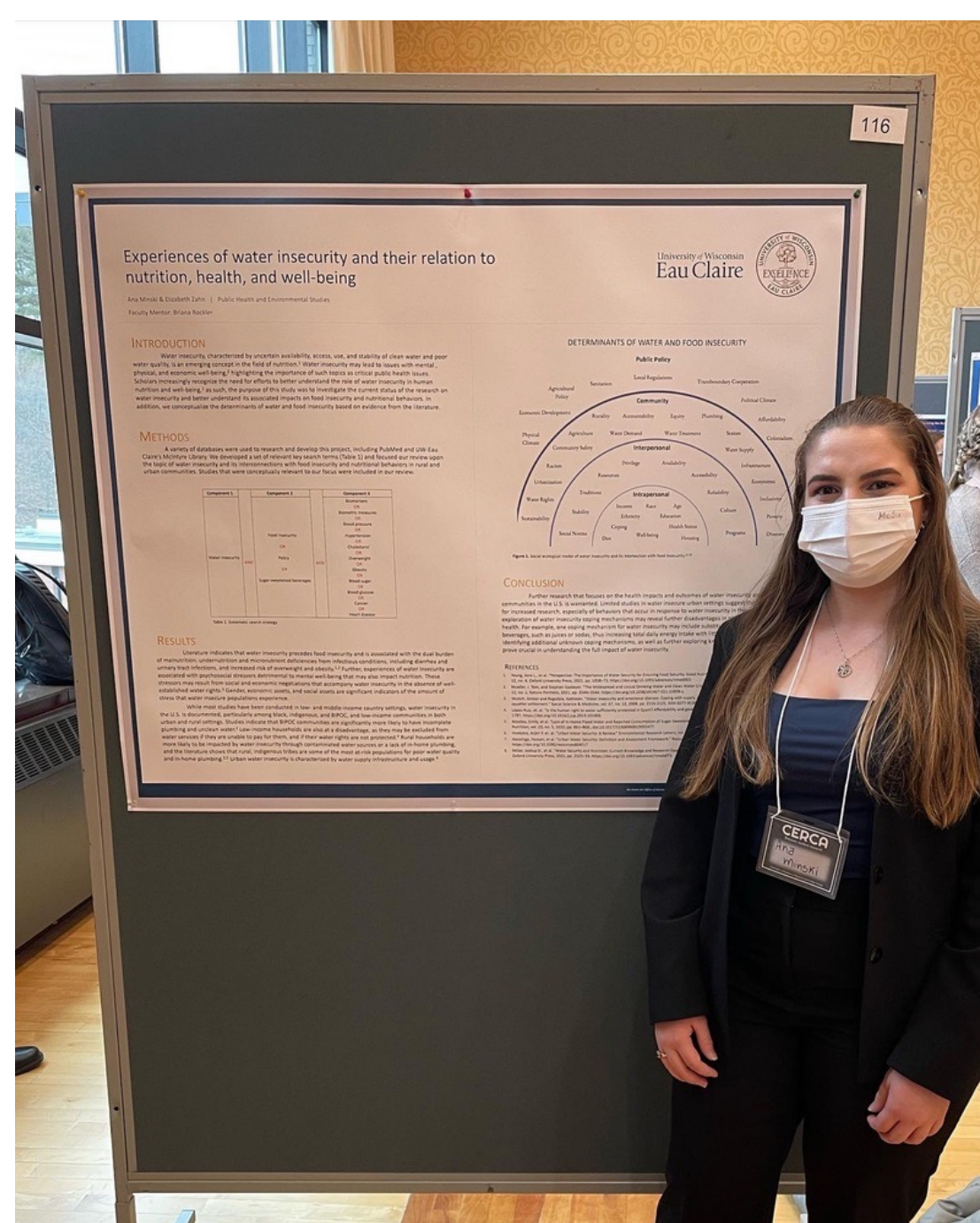
Tabling event as the Community Health Intern at the Eau Claire City-County Health Department.



Tabling event with other AHEC Interns through Healthy Communities.



Stream sample collection for a biology class.



Poster presentation at CERCA (Celebration of Excellence in Research and Creative Activity) at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Several factors have impacted my opportunity to succeed. It is discouraging to receive rejection after rejection, to be interested in an opportunity only to discover that is not open to international students, and to have to prove myself repeatedly. Visa restrictions reduce the number of places I can work, as I am only allowed to work on campus during the academic year. To get an internship or job related to my major off campus during school breaks, I need to go through an approval process and must be enrolled in courses. This lessens my ability to participate in the workforce, even if the position was unpaid. International students often pay the highest tuition out of all students, which causes them to often rely on working labor-intensive jobs on campus for little pay. Getting better on-campus jobs is difficult and often not advertised to international students. When I applied to my previous college for a leadership position regarding improving diversity and inclusion, I was denied on the basis that "I have little experience with Americans and would not be fit to deal with them."

As a pre-med international student, many great opportunities are not available to me. This has impacted my ability to prove to the few medical schools that accept international students that I am a competitive candidate. Current restrictions for international students to join healthcare studies, and eventually, the healthcare workforce often draw international students away from this career path.

BENEFITS

I am currently a senior pre-med public health major at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and am participating in research that investigates water insecurity and its relation to food security, nutrition, and well-being. During the summer of 2022, I participated in an 8-week internship at the Eau Claire City-County Health Department through the Wisconsin AHEC Community Health Internship Program (CHIP) as a community health educator intern in Chronic Diseases and Nutrition. I was a Resident Assistant (RA) at my current University for 1.5 years and at one point I was the only international student RA among over 100 RAs. I have advocated for the inclusion and better compensation of international students in leadership positions on campus, created several programs to promote inclusivity, hosted talks about Impostor Phenomenon, was nominated for the Resident Hall Leadership Award in 2021 and won the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Advocate Award given by UWEC Housing in 2022.

I am only one example of how being willing to work alongside international students can be mutually beneficial for both institutions and students, but my experience does not have to be unique. There could be many more international students present in research, internships, healthcare majors, and ultimately in the healthcare workforce if employers and organizations are willing to support equity and inclusion of international students.

CONCLUSION

International students can achieve great things through participation in internships, employment, and research opportunities in the healthcare field and contribute to the U.S. economy if given the opportunity. I have been able to accomplish these things because I extensively advocated for myself and others during my time in the U.S. and was able to overcome many obstacles.

With a rising focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion inside healthcare settings, there must be reduced barriers to the engagement of international students in the healthcare workforce. It is important to remember all minority populations present in the U.S. and ensure that they are given a space to succeed just as much as their American peers.

REFERENCES

- Araujo. (2011). Adjustment Issues of International Students Enrolled in American Colleges and Universities: A Review of the Literature. *Higher Education Studies*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v1n1p2>
- H-1B Specialty Occupations, DOD Cooperative Research and Development Project Workers, and Fashion Models. USCIS. (2022, July 21). Retrieved September 4, 2022, from <https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/h-1b-specialty-occupations>
- Lee, & Rice, C. (2007). Welcome to America?: International student perceptions of discrimination. *Higher Education*, 53(3), 381-409. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-005-4508-3>
- NEW NAFSA data show largest ever drop in international student economic contributions to the U.S. NAFSA. (2021, November 15). Retrieved September 4, 2022, from <https://www.nafsa.org/about/about-nafsa/new-nafsa-data-show-largest-ever-drop-international-student-economic>
- Walker, M. C., & Divine, R. C. (2018). *Immigration update: The new Labor Condition Application Eta 9035/9035e and what it means for employers*. Baker Donelson. Retrieved September 4, 2022, from <https://www.bakerdonelson.com/immigration-update-the-new-labor-condition-application-eta-9035/9035e-and-what-it-means-for-employers>

University of Wisconsin
Eau Claire



NORTH CENTRAL
Wisconsin Area Health Education Center



My parents and younger brother together when I visited for the first time after 2.5 years of being in the U.S. through the pandemic.



A newspaper article covering when I had the opportunity to be the first person to be vaccinated against COVID-19 in the region where I live.



Picture of me on my first day on campus before I transferred to UW-Eau Claire.