

Contact Does Not Affect Immigration Attitudes on Campus: Evidence from College Housing Assignments

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Abstract

The success of social contact in changing individuals' attitudes is well-documented in the literature. We test whether this finding generalizes to university campuses, where American students meet international students. The design takes advantage of first-year housing assignments, in which some domestic students were randomly paired with international students. Results from an original survey show no evidence that having international roommates changed American students' immigration attitudes. We speculate that the shared identity of college students explains the null results. Our findings suggest that the effects of contact are context-dependent.

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1 Introduction

International activities, such as travel, study, and work abroad, create opportunities for social interactions between natives and migrants. While forms of contact across nationalities become more common than ever, immigration policy has also become a salient issue, particularly in high-income democracies. Although these two patterns are not inherently contradictory, and the latter may be related to the former because of it rather than in spite of it (Lacina, 2026), they prompt an investigation into the role of contact in shaping individuals' immigration attitudes.

This study examines the effects of naturally occurring contact on campus, where American students meet peers from abroad. Over 1.1 million international students were enrolled in U.S. higher education by 2024, with a substantial share joining the American workforce after graduation and becoming long-term residents (IIE, 2024). Research shows that socialization in college shapes attitudes and behavior (Sidanius et al., 2008; Klofstad, 2010; Mendelberg et al., 2017; Strother et al., 2021), and that intergroup contact can change perceptions of outgroups are well-documented in the literature (Pettigrew et al., 2011; Paluck et al., 2019). However, interactions between American students and international students are understudied.

The research design takes advantage of the housing assignments at a private university, where 20% of the undergraduates are international. Incoming first-year students either request a roommate or receive a random assignment from the residential life office. In the latter case, some American students are paired with international roommates, while others are paired with American roommates.

Among students who received random housing assignments, the results do not show that having an international roommate affected respondents' immigration attitudes compared to those with American roommates. The null results may be explained by the shared identity of college students, which is a more salient identity than nationality on campus. American

students were welcoming of international students before meaningful contact occurred. Thus, contact may reflect pre-existing traits, such as high levels of openness and cosmopolitanism, and function as a reinforcing mechanism rather than a mechanism that produces change. Our study contributes to the understanding that the effects of contact are context-dependent (Gravelle, 2016; Paluck et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2021; Nathan and Sands, 2023; Zhou and Lyall, 2025).

2 Related Literature

College campuses are ordinary social settings where informal interactions between individuals or groups frequently occur. For many individuals, college is the first time they spend most of their lives as adults in a semi-closed environment with peers, engaging in a wide range of activities, from studying and sports to everyday socializing. College students are in a particularly impressionable period of life in which attitudes are susceptible to change, and research shows that this type of socialization experience has consequences for individuals' attitudes. For example, in addition to institutional efforts to promote inclusivity (Taylor et al., 2025), Worthen (2012) shows that knowing an LGBT individual is a strong predictor of more inclusive attitudes. Lang (2011) examines the relationship between college majors and environmental attitudes and find a mixed effect of self-selection based on pre-existing beliefs and value transmission shaped by coursework.

Woessner and Kelly-Woessner (2020) find while students' political identities remain stable over four years, their attitudes toward social issues such as abortion, affirmative action, and same-sex marriage tend to shift left. Similarly, Campbell and Horowitz (2016) show that college increases support for civil liberties and gender egalitarianism, but does not make individuals more liberal overall. Further evidence suggests that students' ideologies align with their economic preferences but not with their social preferences (Bailey and Williams, 2016).

The dormitory experience in college provides an ideal setting for contact, under the conditions of equal status, common goals, and prolonged proximity through academic and social activities (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew et al., 2011; Paluck et al., 2019). Studies that use random housing assignments have examined contact across race and ideology, and its effects on outcomes such as racial attitudes (Sidanius et al., 2008; Albuja et al., 2024), civic participation (Klofstad, 2009), ideological change (Strother et al., 2021), and affective polarization (Sun, 2026). However, the effects of contact between American and international students remain understudied.

3 Research Design

To isolate the effect of contact under everyday circumstances, this study examines interactions between American and international students on campus. The design takes advantage of random first-year housing assignments at a private university in the Northeastern United States. The housing assignment is only restricted by gender and nonsmoking status.¹ While hand matching is not an ideal method of randomization, the parsimonious information collected by the residential life office suggests that the assignment is as-if random conditional on these observed characteristics and preferences. Figure A.3 shows balance on covariates between American students who had American roommates and those who had international student roommates. All characteristics are balanced except for gender, which may simply reflect the higher proportion of male international students on campus.

To recruit participants, we distributed an original survey to students’ university email accounts in April 2023.² Our samples include 394 American students who received random housing assignment in their first year, 18% of whom had international students as their

¹The housing questions include student’s gender identity, smoker status, and preference for living with a nonsmoker or smoker. Students also rank their housing options: co-ed by wing, co-ed by random room, or single gender, as well as affinity housing options: quiet study, substance free, and nonsmoking. No information is collected on students’ nationality, race, religion, or sexual orientation. Based on students’ responses, the residential life office conducts a manual matching.

²Participants were eligible to enter into a raffle valued between \$10 and \$200.

first-year roommates, closely matching the 20% share of international students on campus (Table A.1). The analysis compares American students with international roommates to those with domestic roommates.³

To measure immigration attitudes, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a 5-point scale with the following four statements:

- (1). International students often face legal restrictions if they want to work in the United States during and after their study. In your opinion, should the U.S. government make it easier for international students to get an internship or a job?
- (2) and (3). The U.S. should allow more [highly educated/poorly educated] immigrants from other countries to work and live here.
- (4). U.S. employers should give priority to U.S. citizens over foreign citizens.⁴

The aim is to examine whether contact with international students extends to American students' immigration attitudes toward other immigrant groups. Figure A.4 shows that respondents held favorable opinions toward their international peers and highly educated immigrants but not toward poorly educated immigrants, consistent with expectations based on social distance.

The estimating equation is:

$$Y_{ic} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{InternationalRoommate}_i + \gamma X_i + \lambda_c + \epsilon_{ic} \quad (1)$$

where Y_{ic} is the outcome variable; $\text{InternationalRoommate}_i$ is an indicator that equals to 1 if respondent i has an international roommate, and 0 otherwise; X_i is a vector of covariates, including ideology (at the start of college), gender, race, first-generation student

³Our pre-analysis plan is available in section C of the Appendix, with the survey instrument in section D, and we report deviations in section B.

⁴The first question uses a Likert scale: definitely yes, probably yes, neutral, probably not, definitely not. The second through fourth questions use a Likert scale: strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, strongly agree. Questions (2) and (3) are adapted from Hainmueller and Hiscox (2010), and question (4) is adapted from the World Values Survey.

status, second-generation immigrant status, and housing characteristics; λ_c is cohort fixed effects; ϵ_{ic} is the error term, and β_1 represents the parameter of interest.

4 Results

Figure A.1 shows that respondents with international roommates had nearly identical views on supporting easier access to work visas for international students compared to those with domestic roommates. However, respondents with international roommates seemed to have less favorable views toward highly educated immigrants. The null results for the other three groups suggest little reason why their views were changed particularly toward a group whose social distance is between international students, poorly educated immigrants, and immigrants from all citizenships. Overall, no evidence suggests that having an international roommate affects American students' immigration attitudes.

In addition to immigration attitudes, we also examine perceptions of how students from different countries contribute to campus diversity, a direct form of group evaluation. Figure A.2 shows that American students with international roommates do not significantly differ from those with domestic roommates on this measure. The null results are unlikely to be explained by a lack of contact. Compared to those with domestic roommates, American students with international roommates got along equally well and reported a similar level of frequent interaction with their roommates (Figure A.2). It is also possible that international students were not seen as potential immigrants by American students. However, nearly all international students in the sample indicated their interest in finding an internship or a job in the U.S. during or after their studies, and the majority felt comfortable sharing their career plans with American students.

[figure A1 here]

5 Discussion

We speculate that the shared identity of college students explains the null results. American students were welcoming of international students at the start of college before prolonged contact (Figure A.4). This identity explanation is consistent with social identity theory, which posits that attitudes are dependent on a salient identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). The COVID-19 pandemic may have shaped college student identity and made it more salient, including students' sense of belonging within the university community. The 2022-23 academic year was the first fully normal year, with students back on campus and classes held in-person. After this prolonged disruption, the college experience, including roommate relationships and residential life may have become especially important for students' social and academic experiences.

The results further suggest that intergroup contact in some contexts may reflect pre-existing personal traits. Individuals who are more open may be more likely to seek out contact in the first place, so contact functions more as a reinforcing mechanism rather than producing attitudinal change. In this interpretation, the null results suggest that students in these diverse settings already possess traits, such as high openness or cosmopolitan values, that predispose them to welcoming views. A similar pattern can be observed in sorting into cities (Maxwell, 2019), neighborhoods (Martin and Webster, 2020), and universities (Acton et al., 2025), where individuals select into environments that match their prior preferences. Future research could examine populations with different baseline characteristics that differ from those of students at highly selective universities.

The findings also point to future work on the relationship between social identity and policy preferences. The number of international students studying in the United States peaked in the late 2010s and sharply declined during COVID-19. Although it has since rebounded to an all-time high, the dynamics of interaction between international and American students on campus may change in response to shifts in the policy environment, such as caps

on the share of international students or reforms to foreign worker visas. Local students' policy preferences could shift, for example, if their beliefs in zero-sum thinking change as the labor market becomes more competitive. While interactions between the two groups may be amicable, social relationships alone may not outweigh durable identities, such as citizenship ([Lajevardi and Merolla, 2025](#)), which are tied to symbolic and material benefits.

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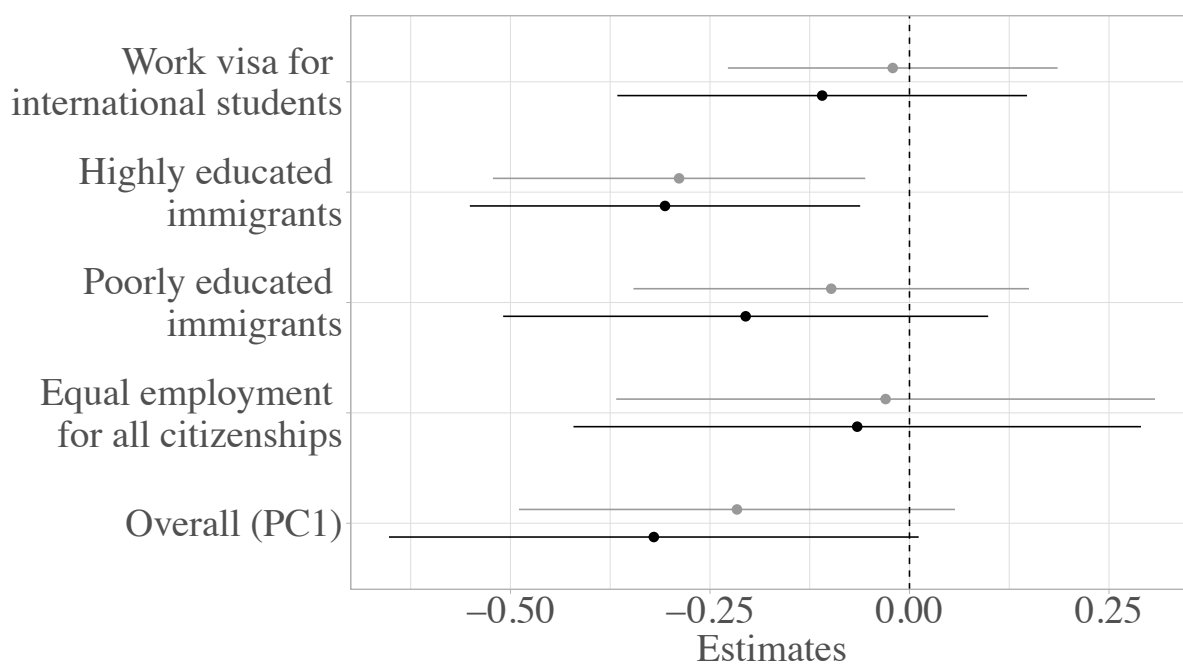
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Online Appendix

A Descriptive Statistics and Results

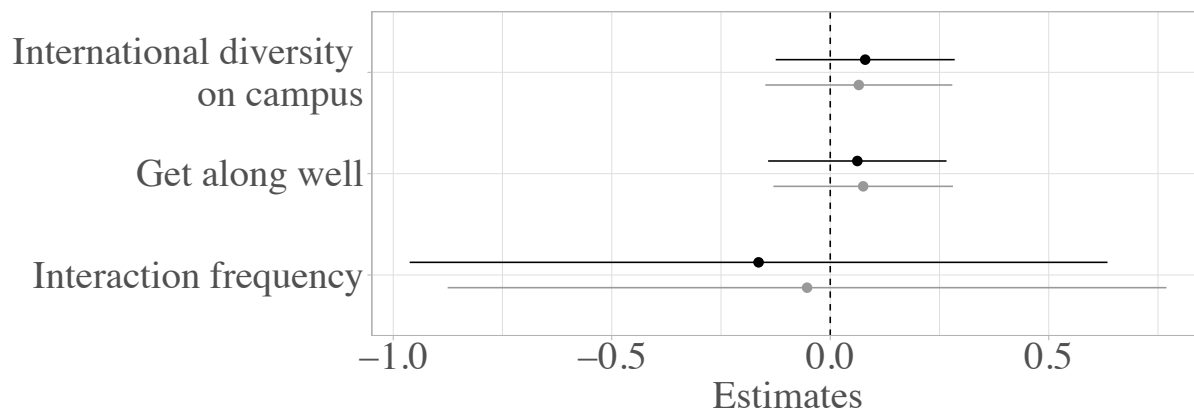
Figure A.1: Effect of International Roommates on American Students' Immigration Attitudes



Model Specification ♦ No Controls ♦ With Controls

Note: "Overall (PC1)" represents the first component extracted from the four specific policy items. Higher scores indicate more favorable attitudes in all categories. Lines are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure A.2: Effect of International Students on Social Relationships with Roommates



Model Specification ♦ No Controls ♦ With Controls

Note: International diversity on campus: “In your opinion, how much do each of the following groups contribute to campus diversity at the University? Students from a different country.” (5-point scale). Get along well: “Did you get along with your first-year roommate?” (3-point scale). Interaction frequency: “During your first-year living on campus, how often did you hang out with your first-year roommate?” (8-point scale). Lines are 95% confidence intervals.

Table A.1: Summary Statistics

	Control Group			Treatment Group		
	Mean/Freq.	SD	N	Mean/Freq.	SD	N
Work visa for int. students	3.411	0.748	248	3.302	0.890	53
Highly educated immigrants	3.640	0.634	247	3.333	0.869	54
Poorly educated immigrants	3.279	0.983	247	3.074	1.043	54
Equal employment	2.028	1.186	246	1.963	1.213	54
Roommates relationship	1.364	0.717	250	1.426	0.690	54
Roommates interaction	3.664	2.646	250	3.500	2.732	54
Ideology (start of college)	-1.578	1.366	244	-1.346	1.467	52
Male	38.8%	0.488	250	53.7%	0.503	54
White	56.8%	0.496	250	61.1%	0.492	54
Cohort	2.228	1.101	250	2.407	1.055	54
First-generation student	78.0%	0.415	250	75.9%	0.432	54
Second-generation immigrant	28.0%	0.450	250	27.8%	0.452	54
Housing: co-ed	71.2%	0.454	250	70.4%	0.461	54
Smoker	08.0%	0.272	250	13.0%	0.339	54
Affinity housing	53.2%	1.010	250	63.0%	1.015	54

Figure A.3: Covariate Balance by Roommate Assignment
(Treatment: International Roommate)

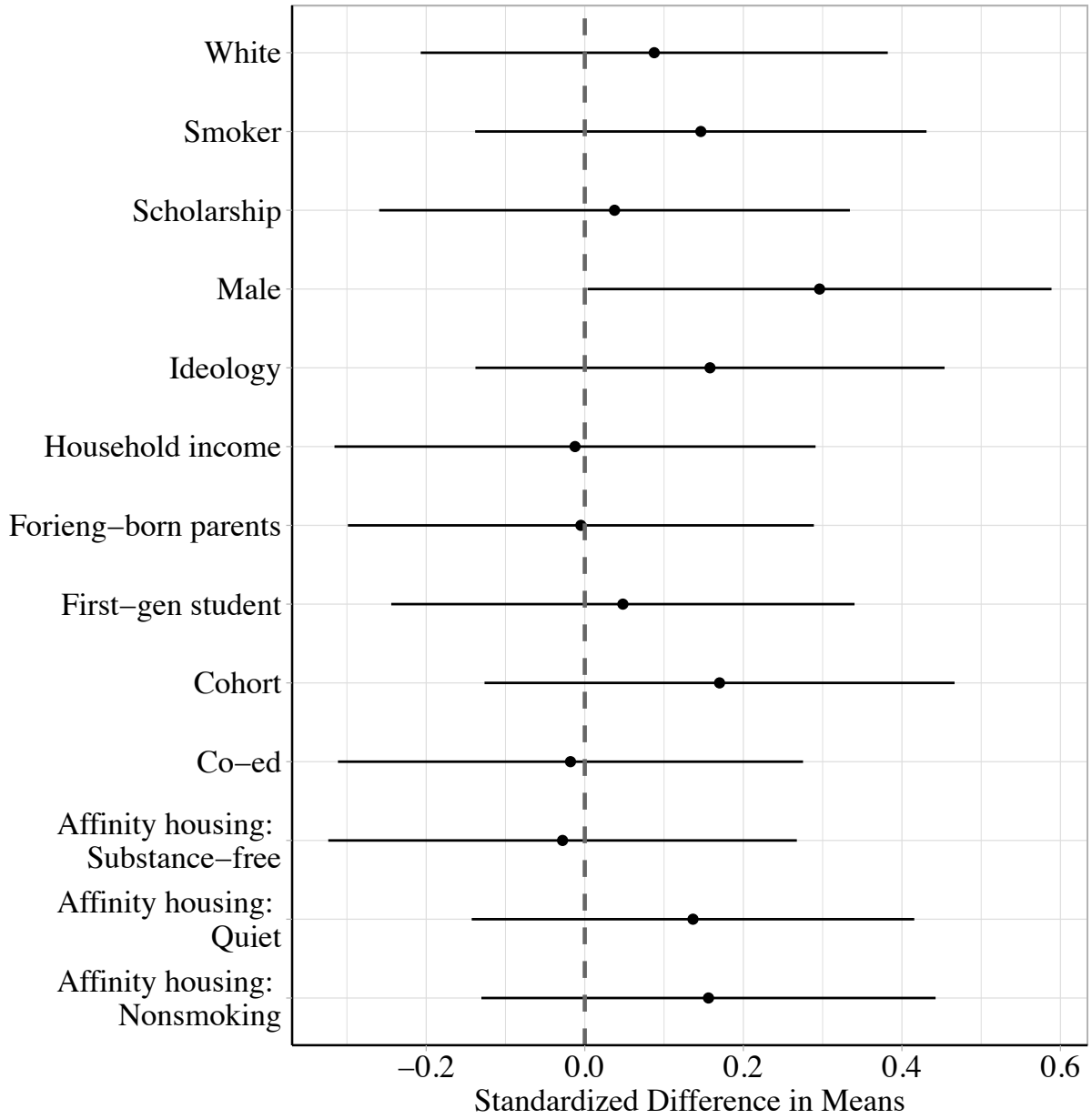
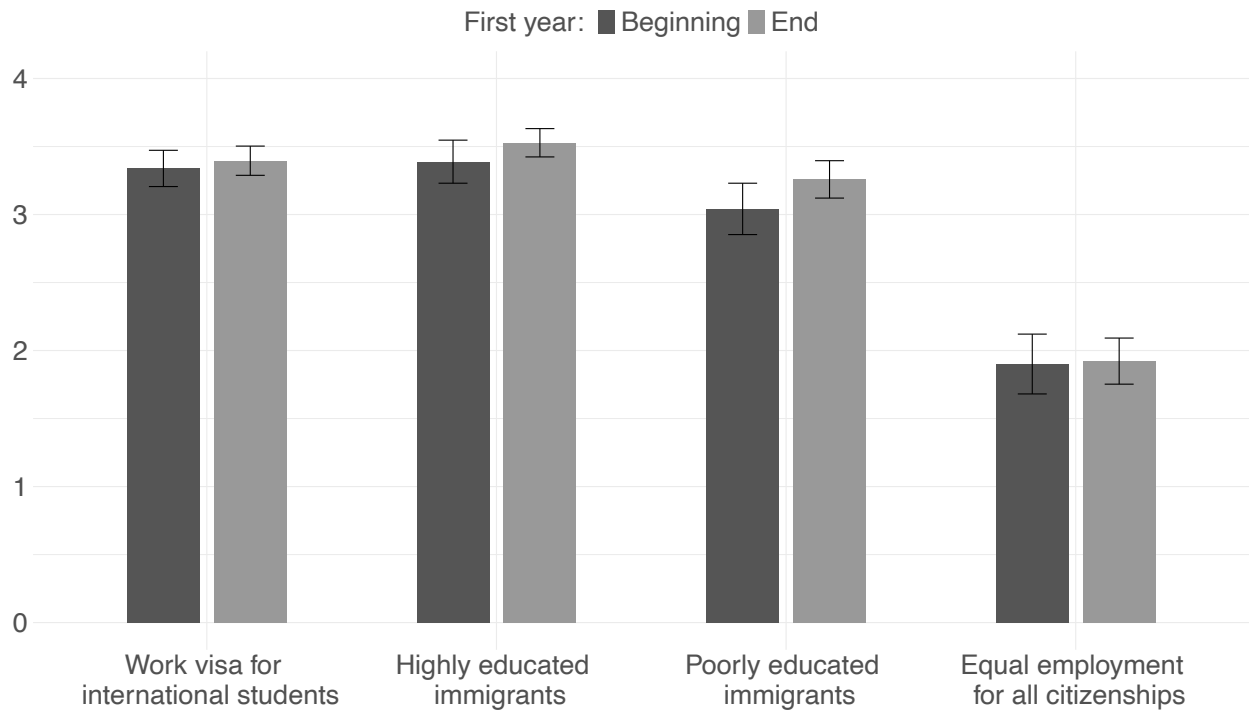
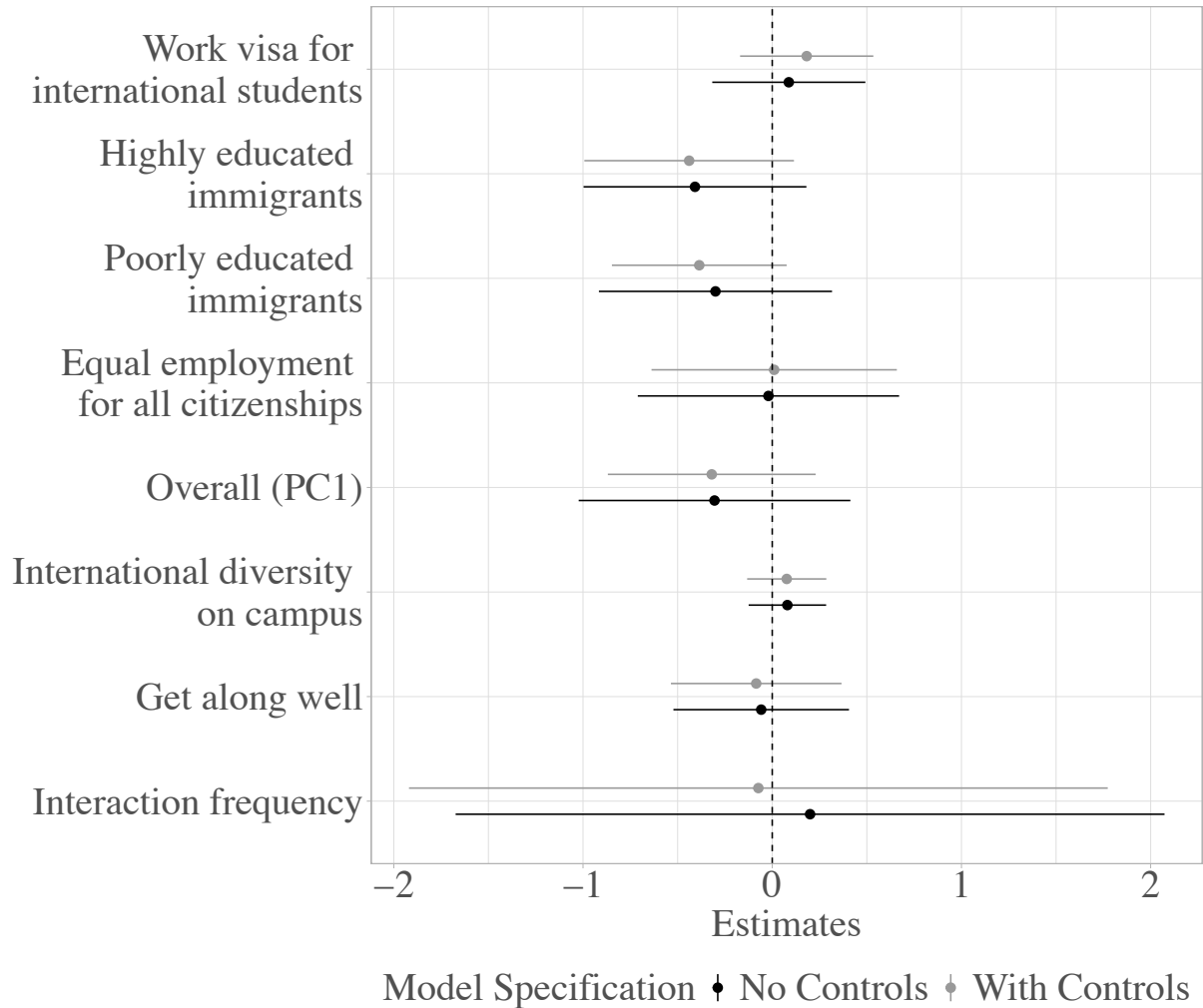


Figure A.4: American Students' Immigration Attitudes at the Start and End of their First Year



Note: The start of semester survey was fielded in September 2022, and the end of semester survey was fielded in April 2023. All variables are coded on a 5-point scale, where higher values indicate stronger support for immigration. “Work visa for international students” ranges from definitely not (0) to definitely yes (4); “Highly educated immigrants,” “Poorly educated immigrants,” and “Equal employment for all citizenship” range from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (4).

Figure A.5: Effect of International Roommates on Immigration Attitudes and Social Outcomes Among First-Year American Students



Note: "Overall (PC1)" represents the first component extracted from the four specific policy items. Higher scores indicate more favorable attitudes in all categories. Number of observation (N) = 93. Lines are 95% confidence intervals.

B Deviations from Pre-Analysis Plan

1. In our pre-analysis plan, we outlined two identification strategies: a two-wave panel survey of first-year students at the start and end of their first year (September 2022 and April 2023, respectively), and a one-time cross-sectional survey on all undergraduate students (April 2023). The first strategy failed because of a low response rate in the first-wave of the panel survey. Thus, the main analysis exclusively uses data from the cross-sectional survey.
2. We controlled for respondents' self-reported ideology at the start of college based on their recollection. While this measure is not strictly pre-treatment, it reflects their political ideology before they had meaningful contact with their roommates. The inclusion of this covariate does not change the results.
3. We controlled for respondents' race and ethnicity but did not control for the race and ethnicity of their roommates, as most international students were from Asia, primarily India and China.
4. We did not explore heterogeneous effects because of the constraint of sample size.