

CHRIS O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Good afternoon. Welcome to another edition of Let's Talk Ed with Professor Chris. If you haven't subscribed, please do subscribe. Today's edition has to do with international students, and it's a topic that is also dear to me as an international student, or somebody who's been an international student.

We have with me here, it's a great pleasure to have Miss Princess [Solomon], who's currently the coordinator for the International Stress Office. So, Princess, how are you doing?

SOLOMON: I'm good. How about you?

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: I'm great. Great to see you.

SOLOMON: You as well.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Like I said, take a deep breath. You'll be OK. This is gonna be very exciting. So, let's get right to it. Thank you for all you do for our international students, first and foremost. As an, as an international student, I know the rule you all play how, maybe I'm sure you've seen it, maybe you know, but as an international student, when you're especially thousands of miles away, you know, you become like the mom for, for us. That's, that's how it was for me.

SOLOMON: Right.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: So, I'm, I'm hoping, you know, this podcast is really, it's gonna help students, and I'm interviewing everyone and everybody that can help students. So, I'm hoping that, you know, we're gonna have a normal conversation and traditional student life and how you can help, you know, and any information they can get from that.

So, how did you get, what was the thought process when you were in school? Did you always say, "You know, someday I wanna be the international student coordinator." How did that all start for you?

SOLOMON: No.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: No?

SOLOMON: I didn't even realize this was a, a career. I didn't. I came from a small town. I'm a first-generation graduate from college, and so I think probably the 11th grade, I was like, "I'm going to accounting." And so that's, you know, what I went to school for. I have an associate degree in accounting. I was working at Walmart in accounting, and so it wasn't until I received my degree from Vance-Granville Community College that I said, OK, I was the accounting manager at Walmart, and that was kind of like the highest level unless you wanted to go and management. And so, at that time, I was like, "I think I want to do something different," and I applied to Wake Tech for the accounting department.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Interesting.

SOLOMON: And I didn't get it an interview. And so, when that didn't happen, I decided to go into the management program at Walmart. After finishing that training, I was like, "This is not for me," and I had been at Walmart for 7½ years, but being a manager just wasn't for me. And so, while I was a manager at Walmart, I received a call from Wake Tech saying they needed a temp for the Business Division. And so, I wanted out of Walmart, and so, I was, like, "OK, OK, I'll do it." And so, at that time, we had to talk to, you know, my supervisor and say, you know, "If I accept this temp position, I'm willing to close the store every night." And the rest of the managers were, like, "Oh yes, please do that."

And so, that's how I became to be employed at Wake Tech. And then I went from the Business Division to being a temp at Human Resources, and then that's when I realized, OK, I wanna stay at Wake Tech. And so, I started looking at the positions, you know, permanent positions, and applying, and the technical assistant in the International [Students] Office came up. Well, when I looked at the job description, I was like, oh no, because I kept seeing the word immigration.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Right.

SOLOMON: And so, I was, like, I don't know anything about immigration. I, like, I was, I just got scared. And so, what I learned was that all the training I need would be on-the-job training. And so, I was like, OK, I'll apply. I was blessed with the job, and so I did that for about four years before I was promoted to the coordinator. But I love every minute of it. It's different. It's unique. You come across different situations and to, you know, help the students get to where they wanna be. I'm, I'm happy that I made this decision, and I'm, I loving every moment.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: That's great. So, like I said before, when, I when I hear people say they love, you know, what they're doing, it's great, especially, you know, when it comes to international students. You have no idea, like I've seen students with, when I was a student, international students who said, "This place is not for me. I'm homesick," and will leave. I mean, it wasn't gonna be academic suspension or probation. They literally could not connect. It was a whole different environment and then will leave. So, I always felt like, whoever was in that position, you know, I'm sure you know it, students will gravitate to you because you are their first source of support and health. So, that's great.

I'm also very happy, actually, since I started doing this podcast. How many people, like I would think, oh, this is where you started doing, I mean, including myself, you know, I started engineering. I wanted to build bridges. Now, you know, academia. I never thought I would be doing this here. So, it's always interesting to hear how your journey started and now, you know, kind of where you are right now.

So, talking about international students, give me about five different internationals that you've seen. Where, where did the students come from mainly? Like Africa? Asia? Europe?

SOLOMON: Like, for instance, right now, we have 74 different countries.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: No way.

SOLOMON: Right. So it's, it's, it's, let's say the highest population, when we're talking about F-1 students – so, those are, you know, students that's in the U.S., and they're status is student status – the highest population that we have is China. After that is Vietnam.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK.

SOLOMON: But we have students from all countries. It may be one student, but they're from that country.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Right.

SOLOMON: So, a lot of people, when I say how many countries represent represented at Wake Tech, they're like, "Whoa, I didn't realize that."

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: 74, wow.

SOLOMON: Yes, yes.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: But that's, that's a very wide area. So, for those who probably don't know this here, tell us about F-1. You mentioned F-1. What is, what is F-1?

SOLOMON: F-1 is a student status. So, that's when a student has went to the American embassy in their home country or requested a change of status here in the U.S. So, they're in the U.S. under a certain status, and now they wanna be a student. And so, either the current status they have will not give them the ability to study, or that status is coming to an end, whether that period of time is coming to an end or the student is a dependent of their parent.

And so, before you turn 21, you have to have your own status, and so, you know, they may be going to school here already under the current status and it's like, "Oh, my 21st birthday is coming up, but I had to finish my studies." So, these students' purpose in the U.S. is to be full-time students, and hopefully, you know, take that education back home and, and, and be great, you know, in their home country.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: So, I told you, I'm always learning because I thought F-1 you can get from just the embassy in your home country. I didn't even know you could apply for an F-1. So, I know you generally talk about F-1 and then talking about I-20. What is that?

SOLOMON: The I-20 just is a certificate of non-immigrant student status. In order to receive that, they have to apply to an institution that is SEVIS certified. SEVIS stands for Student and Exchange Visitor Information System. You have to go through a certification with SEVP, which is Student and Exchange Visitor Program, and they, you have to give them all types of information, and if you are certified, then that gives you the ability to issue I-20s to students who want to study at your school.

And so, they apply to, give all the admissions information that's needed, and then your institution issues an I-20. With that I-20, they have two options: Go to the American embassy in their home country and,

and apply for the student visa, or if they're here in the U.S., they would send the change-of-status application to immigration, USCIS, to say, "I'm on this status, but I would like to be a student." And then, if they are approved, they come to your institution and they be a full-time student.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Wow. So, I always think I know all about immigration, and every time, when I talk to someone like you, I'm hearing a new development, right? I didn't mention before our interview that I know immigration has changed a lot since 9/11, right, but since you've been working, what do you think some of the challenges are? Like, when people go to the embassies, are they giving our visas more? Is it, what are some of the challenges that students are facing now as far as visa applications.

SOLOMON: Unfortunately, even though the institution issues the I-20, that's just giving them the ability to apply for that visa. It's not guaranteed because you have the I-20 that you're going to receive the visa. The embassy, the officers there or, you know, USCIS here makes the decision whether they are approved. And so, when you go, when the students go to the embassy, the officers are looking at two things: The non-immigrant intent.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK.

SOLOMON: Is your intent to go to the U.S., receive the education and return home. And then the financial ability. Do you have the ability to pay for the tuition, live in that area, you know, expenses, because you're applying for a student visa? It's not meant to go and just work. So, you have to have that financial capability. And so, that's kind of what you're doing at the, the, the embassy is proving to them through conversation that, "I'm going to Wake Tech to study and come back home."

So, sometimes, especially with the language barrier, students may not be able to articulate that, what their educational goal is here at Wake Tech or, you know, if the officer asks, "Why did you choose Wake Tech?" They don't have an answer. Or "Where are you gonna stay?" Don't have an answer. These things like this may cause the office to say, "OK, we're not convinced that that non-immigrant intent is there. Visa denied. Or, if your financial documents are not in order, you know, it may be denied. And unfortunately, you know, it could be where, if you have all your family here and you have no family there, unfortunately, sometimes that may cause it to be denied, because once again, they're thinking you're not going to return home.

So, those are the, the main challenges. So, when we issue I-20s, we try to provide guidance – know your educational plan, what is it that you plan to do with this education when you return home, and think about these things, why did you choose Wake Tech? Because you're gonna want to be able to speak to that and not hesitate when they're asking those, those questions.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: You mentioned two things. One is, we're gonna walk through the process here in a little bit, but if a student wants to come to Wake Tech, right, they apply. They go online, they apply and then you, because they're international students, that application comes to you. But you see it, and you go, "OK, I think this would be a good student." And then you issue the I-20.

SOLOMON: So, when they apply, we just make sure we have all the documents that we ask for for admissions. So, as long as the student submits all the documentation and everything is acceptable, we will issue the I-20 because Wake Tech is an open-door school. So, as long as I have the documentation, we're going to issue the I-20. We won't turn anyone down. And then, the only thing maybe is that, if they don't submit the document by the deadline, it may push them to the next semester.

The, the biggest issue that students have right now is the embassies don't have a lot of appointments because they're dealing with COVID just like we are. And so, you know, they wanna come for summer, but then they can't receive an appointment till September 2020. Well, that's not gonna help them. And so, that's the biggest challenge during COVID that I've seen is that the appointments just are not there to accommodate when they would like to come and study.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: So, you also mentioned that that I-20 or the F-1 status, when I was a student, I know you could only work within a certain vicinity. You couldn't work off campus.

SOLOMON: Correct.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: That's still the same.

SOLOMON: Yes. So, you know, F-1 students can work on campus, but they cannot work with any jobs that are federally funded because, as an international F-1 student, you're not supposed to accept any federally funded program. As far as working off campus, it depends. You have the option to, after you've studied for one year, if there's an economic need, an unforeseen circumstance that has happened with your sponsor, then you can apply with immigration to work off campus part time. But you have to submit documentation to prove that. The other way is internships. So, if you're doing an internship, your institution may approve the off-campus employment with that internship. Lastly, after you graduate with an associate degree, if you have not done option, optional practical training before, then we can submit paperwork to U.S. immigration for you to work in your field of study for one year.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK, so this is where it gets very interesting. Maybe times have changed, but when I was a student, international student leaving my country to come to the U.S., it was, you're gonna come here, be an engineer, be a doctor, be a lawyer, and don't come back with nothing else. What are the international students that you see, what are they majoring in these days? What, what would they really want to study sometimes?

SOLOMON: The top programs are the university transfer programs.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK

SOLOMON: So, they're transferring out to, you know, an institution to receive a bachelor's degree. Those are the top, top three, the Associate in Arts, [Associate in] Science and [Associate in] Engineering. When we're talking about applied sciences, Business Administration, the general Business Administration program, Advertising and Graphic Design and Pre-Nursing.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK.

SOLOMON: The Nursing program, which is, of course, a very competitive program. Those are the top programs they are studying in here at Wake Tech.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: So, now, what are some of the challenges that international students are facing? Like, I know I talked about the homesickness, feeling lonely. There's nothing we can do about that, but hopefully try to see if they can get some support and people around them. But what are some of the other challenges that, talk about language barrier.

SOLOMON: Language barrier, homesick, being away from, you know, immediate family. Sometimes, it does end up being finances. It may be where they really didn't have a lot of money in the beginning or life happens. So, you know, they, they have a sponsor, but, you know, the sponsor now has other obligations or loses their job, and things like that may happen. But I think the biggest thing is, is the, the being away, you know, because where, I guess, when I have a student come in and they're here, but back home, things are going on – a family member is sick, a family member has passed away and, you know, they're here. Or they're here, and they're going through life but their immediate family is back home.

So, those are, are or some of the, the challenges that they have because they have lives just like everyone else. And, if their close family members are not here or if they don't have any at all – I've had that happen a few times.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Tell me about it, Christmas and Thanksgiving, yes.

SOLOMON: Yes, yes. It, it is, it's, it's hard.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: You're right.

SOLOMON: And, you know, I remember there was a student going through something, and the mother ended up coming, and she wanted to meet with me. And as you mentioned earlier, she was, like, "Thank you so much because you're like her mother," and I said, "Ma'am, no, no. Please don't put that pressure on me." She was, like, "No, all she has is you here."

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: That's right.

SOLOMON: So, I was, like, thank you, but I was, like, oh my God. So, it's kinda hard, especially if a mother or father, grandmother or grandfather passed away, and they come in, and I do sympathize with them because, you know, I've lost all those people in my life. And so, I couldn't imagine being here and, and not being able to get home to see them and things like that. So, but yes.

And I think the last thing would be the American teaching method. You know, coming into America and trying to learn the way we do things and our educational system can be a little challenging at first.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: I'm happy you mentioned that as well. Like, you know, learning the educational system, the other part is the cultural part. So, I remember we had to go to orientation and I, you know, had friends in Brazil, you know, who they hug everything, everybody. I'm not trying to stereotype here, but we run into some issues where, like, oh, you know, we don't do that here. So, part of the international student orientation, you all kind of go through what could be like sexual harassment and all that, is that part of the orientation process?

SOLOMON: Yes, so what I have done is teamed up with Jeff Myers, and he does a session on American culture and dealing with domestic students. So, he does go over a lot of great information with them. You know, he travels a lot during the summer and everything, and so we do have that for them to, to learn a little bit, a little bit more.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: I know in the past some students have gotten in trouble, like, "Oh no, I didn't know. That's what we do back home. It's OK."

SOLOMON: Yeah, and the other major thing I see is plagiarism.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Good point.

SOLOMON: And so, that's the biggest issue. And so, you know, the deans of students will reach out and say, "OK, we have an international student." And so, that, that that's probably the biggest trouble that I see on that. You know, so they're like, "This person's F-1, oh." But the EFL Department, English as a Foreign Language, they do go over that, I think, in Composition 5 to try to prepare them before they go to English 111. But yes.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: We're gonna do a whole episode on international students and plagiarism. We discussed that, so let's get right into OPT. What is OPT? And then we'll start talking about that.

SOLOMON: That's optional, optional training, and that's where the student is able to work for one year and their field, field of study.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: OK.

SOLOMON: And so, there is a post- and there is a, a pre-completion OPT at Wake Tech. We just do the post-completion OPT after the student graduates, and so, during their last semester, I help them apply with immigration to say, "OK, I'm graduating. I wanna work." And so, if that is approved, then it'll give them the ability to work full time, but it's supposed to be in their field of study. And during that time, they have to find a job within 90 days, start date and maintain that, and maintain that employment. And they also are still considered F-1, they're still considered an F-1 student at Wake Tech. They still have to communicate with me while they're in OPT, you know, what their employment is, if it changes, if their address changes. So, we're still in contact with them after they graduate.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: I know that one of the questions I asked the very first time, this was on Teams when I saw you. I was like, when do they get OPT? And I think you said after every degree, so that they get an associate, they can get one.

SOLOMON: Yes.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: They get a BS.

SOLOMON: Yes.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Master's.

SOLOMON: Yes.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Ph.D.

SOLOMON: Yes. I think after...

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: What comes after Ph.D.?

SOLOMON: I think that's it.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Yes, that's it.

SOLOMON: But yes, after every degree, each higher level they can receive an OPT. So, a lot of times, we do have semester graduate, apply for OPT for one year and come back to Wake Tech for a second program. So, I warn them, "OK, I'm glad that you're coming back. But you're not, you know, be able to apply for OPT again because," and they're like, "Oh." I'm like, "Yes. Please come back, but what is your game plan after you receive that second degree?" Because you think it's gonna be work again, but you, you have to receive a bachelor's. And then they're like, "Oh." Or we may have that when someone comes from N.C. State and they have their bachelor's and completed OPT, and now they come to Wake Tech for an associate degree. I'm like, "OK, you know you don't qualify for OPT."

And so, like this, just making sure that they're aware because, in our office sometimes, we have to go beyond the present and prepare them for the future because they don't know to ask those questions. And so, when I see that situation, I try to say, "OK, what are your plans in the future because XYZ?" And then, it's like, "Oh, OK." Gonna give you time to think about it now so that I'm not saying all this at the time that you thought you could do something that's like, "OK, what do I do now?" And then I have to say, "Well, you might wanna go home." You know, so we try to go beyond the present.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH : Once a student applies for the OPT, they get it. Do they still stay in touch with you?

SOLOMON: Yes, they are still required to stay in touch with their, their international office. So, once they are approved – OPT can be denied, but hopefully they are approved – they receive an employment

authorization card, approval notice, Social Security card in they applied for that, and then they have to provide copies to me. And then it's like, OK, once you find employment, you have to provide that information me as well. And so, and then, if there are, you know, working and they switch jobs, they have to update that information, or if they move, they have to update their address and things like that. So, they are supposed to be still in contact in that year period.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: You said something that scared me a little bit. You said OPT can be denied.

SOLOMON: It can be. It can be denied.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Why?

SOLOMON: And I have not had one to be denied. So, I'm gonna keep going on this track, but what I've seen from other advisors from other institutions, because we have a listserv, some, some institutions are hands-off with the OPT application. We have taken that approach lately because the OPT application has switched to an online application. So, the International Office will issue the I-20 for OPT and give it to the student. Now, you have to handle it. If we do the endorsement for the OPT request and the student takes 31 one days to submit their OPT application, it's denied. You have to send it within a certain period of time. If a student applies for OPT too soon, it's denied because you have to apply within a certain period of time. You can't apply too early, you can't apply too late.

It may be, the only other thing may be is that it may be marked as, like, incomplete and they ask for more documentation if you miss something. I, I really haven't seen them deny because you missed something. They'll give you an opportunity to submit it, and if you don't, then, of course, it's, it's denied. But those are the main reasons that I've seen.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: So, we're coming pretty close to our interview here, but I just want to keep going and going and going because this is exciting. What, how excited are international students when they finally get here and, you know, are pursuing their degree?

SOLOMON: They, they're, they're happy. Usually see the smile, and it's like, "Oh, Miss Solomon!" You know, because we've emailed back and forth so much and that, when they finally arrive, they're like, "Miss Solomon," and, or if it's someone that I emailed a lot, I'm like, "You're here!" And so, it, it's good. My joy comes from, you know, that they're coming and they're so intimidated and it's like, "Oh, I don't know. I don't know." I'm like, "Don't worry about it. We're gonna get through it. I've been doing this for 15 years. We gonna make it." Or they're like, "Do you have someone that speaks?" And I'm like, "No, I only speak English, but don't worry about it. I'll promise you we're gonna get through it, and at the end of the check in, I'm like, "See? We did it." And then my, you know, my, my greatest joy is when they bring me the acceptance letter for N.C. State or they're graduating and, you know, about to apply for OPT. I have it when they come because they've had a baby. They're showing me the pictures.

Oh, and so, the latest one that almost made me fall on the floor was that he came in and was like, "Hey, Miss Solomon, I have a question," and I was like, "OK." I answered this question, and he was like, "I'm just so happy to meet you because you were my mother's international coordinator." I was like, "You

mother's?" and he was like, "Yes." And so, when I looked at his name and I thought about it, I was like, "Oh, I know your mother is." And he was like, "Yes, she was like, you know, she was like, I'm in good hands." But it was just for now it's her son. But I'm thinking, "Whoa, I'm getting old." But I was just like, wow. But it was just a joy to be like, oh my goodness, and, you know.

And so, it's, it's so happy to see that they're finally here checking in. This is their dream, and they are accomplishing it and, you know, going on to do good things, big things, you know. Even sometimes, I have, they bring me a copy of their green card, and I'm like, "Congratulations." And so it, it's, it's a joy. I love every minute, every minute.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Where can students find you?

SOLOMON: So, you can send me an email. It's pmsolomon@waketech.edu. P-M-S-O-L-O-M-O-N at waketech.edu. Our website is international.waketech.edu if you're here in the United States and would like to talk, then our phone number is 919-866-6800.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: So, before we wrap up, any advice, any suggestions you have for all the international students?

SOLOMON: Just never let anyone....

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Beside the fact that you are always going to be the mom.

SOLOMON: Just keep trying. Never give up. You know, if, if, if this is your dream and this is something that you want to do, just keep trying, just keep trying it. And then, once you're in the U.S., you have the opportunity, make the most of it. Don't let peer pressure come into play. You know, I do understand life things happen, but press through it and, and because, when you're on the other side, it's gonna be like, "I did it. I went to America, and I received the education that I've been wanting to receive."

And so, I'm just, I'm, I'm like, I don't even know if I could go to another country and, and, you know, and, and be there and get an education. So, my hat's off to all international students, you know. And so, just keep doing it. Don't, don't let anyone stop you, you know.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Well, once again, here's the end of another great podcast. Let's Talk Ed with Professor Chris. It's always a pleasure. Please do subscribe, and if you have any more questions, please send them to me, and we'll take care of it.

Miss Princess, I told you this was gonna be easy.

SOLOMON: Thank you.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: This is great. No, thank you for all you do – really, really sincerely from my heart – thank you for all you do. I'm sure, you're gonna keep doing a great job, and students will keep coming to you.

SOLOMON: Thank you so much for this opportunity.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Thank you.