Best Practices in Hosting International Students in the U.S.

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Abstract

The number of international students attending U.S. higher learning institutions has decreased over the past decade (excluding students from China and Saudi Arabia) from 40 percent to 30 percent. These students are an important resource for the U.S. and their native countries in terms of education, culture, and economy.

Differences between international and domestic students currently enrolled in a private university were assessed using a new American College of Testing Survey of Student Opinion combined with a socio-cultural adaptation scale. Those analyzed results were incorporated into a customized 18 question survey and interview process to assess international and domestic students who had not graduated. These analyzed assessments identified and increased the understanding of needs—academic and non-academic—so that recommendations could be made to the university on how to better satisfy those needs and thereby recruit and retain more international students.

Key words: International students; Practices; Recruitment; Retain

INTRODUCTION

The number of international students attending U.S. higher learning institutions has decreased over the past decade (excluding students from China and Saudi Arabia) from 40 percent to 30 percent. These students are an important resource for the U.S. and their native countries in terms of education, culture, and economy.

International students often experience a period of adjustment known as culture shock. Some students may have the opportunity to travel with other students from their home country, or may have traveled before, but many travel alone for the first time. Disparities between what students expect as compared to what they can achieve continue to influence their adjustment. Some students discontinue their studies when experiencing difficulties and problems. Finding a way to acculturate these students into communities and campuses will not only enrich their lives, but will increase the possibility of retaining them as students and allowing them to complete their educational goals.

1. INTEGRATING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT AND CAMPUS LIFE OFFICES

When international students arrive to their main destinations in the U.S., international student office is the first place they go on campus as a source of support and guidance. And usually the head of international student office is the first person they meet and interact. The international student office's job is to protect and help international students throughout their educational life in the university. This office is the first port of call for most international students, with or without problems, and should be an office that every international student feels at home and welcome in despite any concerns or difficulties. This office should also be the focal point for international student activities, academic or non-academic, and actively coordinate with other offices to facilitate and/or resolve problems. Therefore, integrating the International Student Office into campus life is essential. Orientation programs incorporating both

international and domestic students should originate from here and expand into international student fellowships, clubs, and other cross-cultural experiences.

International student orientation is crucial to international students' transition and is a significant part of a multi-faceted approach to their retention. A comprehensive international student orientation program strives to integrate the university's mission and the personal growth of entering international students and in addition, help international students adjust to the academic and social environment. International orientation should not only orient students but also prepare students against the issues they may face later on their study life. Orientation should be reiterative—before, during, and after—and include both international and domestic students to facilitate adaptation and meeting non-academic needs.

Developing and implanting an overall orientation program that begins prior to the students' arrival and continues until earning the specified degree should focus on some key issues. First, the International Student Office needs to be co-located more centrally, both administratively and geographically, to the Registrar, Admission, and Student Life.

2. ROLE OF ACADEMIC ADVISORS

It is essential to assign and keep academic advisors/ mentors throughout the students' programs to facilitate and insure the availability of required program courses to meet academic needs, including mandatory meetings and documented records for performance and other concerns. It is also crucial to develop and implement a strong and viable sponsor program where assigned sponsors can provide the personalized attention students need in dealing with the everyday problems they encounter in the college environment.

3. INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND STUDENT GOVERNMENT

International students are a growing contingent, just entering double digits, but are not represented in the student government. Their concerns differ from domestic students, so by including and allowing international students to participate in student government will make sure that international students have a voice on all student life and academic issues. Student government would then better represent the students at the university, not particular nationalities. Besides, allowing international students to become a part of student government, the international student office can take a more active role in terms of voicing international concerns and issues. This voice, even if it is small, will facilitate and engender integration while still allowing identity of culture.

By appointing at least one international student to the Student Government Association, a sense of belonging for international students could be promoted and possibly increase the degree of satisfaction, especially in terms of overall services, the second largest issue that trouble international students when it comes to the value received for the amount of money they pay. Developing and articulating appropriate and fair policies where international students are either required or allowed to live on or off campus may benefit and promote cross cultural understanding.

4. HOUSING AND FOOD SERVICES

After moving to a new country, experiencing different languages and food, and beginning their academic studies, international students need a place they can call home, one where they can relax, and call their homes. After learning about their new environments and surroundings, international students did not develop a sense of home. The size and services provided at the dormitories were insufficient to promote this sense of home. Students did not have their own bathroom and felt restricted in their own space, compounded by the unfriendliness of staff and support services, resulting in international students wanting to be elsewhere, but not having a choice.

Moreover, basic services as cafeteria and dormitories should appropriately accommodate students' needs. In this regard, adapting living standards are more amenable to different cultures while still maintaining cleanliness and customer service may aid in further acclimating international students. In addition, it is essential to improve and tailor menus and availability of food services to acclimate international students into the college environment as well as providing some similar national foods intermittently. Insuring standards met in both cleanliness and customer services may allow the international student to more readily claim the dormitory as a place he or she can call home and possibly reduce feeling homesick or alienated.

Therefore, university once again needs to act as a salesman and compete with surrounding restaurants, especially when a meal plan is mandatory. If the university improves the quality of food with more selection, students will be more satisfied with the university's food service.

5. COUNSELING FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

It is essential to incorporate academic and non-academic needs to expand cultural and social activities facilitating student adjustment and socio-cultural adaptation. Moreover, as a support system, counseling services should be readily obtainable and available from student life and counseling offices to resolve differences in

cultural values that students might have, maintaining contact throughout the academic programs to identify and divert potential problems, and recommend trained cross-cultural practitioners. Most students go through a process of adaptation when they move into a new culture. Many things make this adaptation process very difficult. These difficulties can lead to confusion as well as to other uncomfortable feelings. Along with stress caused by being in a new culture, adjustments to university life can be difficult for all students. Therefore, the university must have a counseling center which will be available to help students as they face such challenges and the university should emphasize on counseling which is very important for the newcomer students.

6. DIVERSITY TRAINING FOR FACULTY, STAFF, AND DOMESTIC STUDENTS

With increasing student diversity, the faculty may find themselves limited in serving and educating and promoting higher education in general. The collective identity of the faculty, defined by Aguirre (2000) as a sub-culture (values, professional goals, and collegiality) may be challenged on what actions should be taken. Diversity does not just happen and planned change must occur to meet diversity challenges and opportunities. Organizational and individual commitments are part of the mix. These commitments involve participation and leadership at all levels. The expressed readiness to change needs to translate into collaborative actions (Alger, 2000).

Communicating more effectively with international students may help faculty or staff to understand some of the underlying causes of miscommunication with international students and then to develop techniques and skills to improve communication. Universities must have cross cultural communication workshops which may make sure participants to experience the feelings and reactions they might encounter when traveling in another country or interacting with people from other cultures. An interactive faculty workshop to look at issues of cross cultural communication and cultural differences in the multi cultural classroom can be effective and help instructors identify potential problem areas, develop strategies for preventing those problems, and create a more cohesive classroom environment.

Diversity training is one of the most effective tools for effecting attitudinal and behavioral change (Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 1997); however, diversity training is not isolated to large corporations and profit margins; it is about how people are affected. "A commitment to diversity is a commitment to all employees," states R. Roosevelt Thomas in Beyond Race and Gender (1991, p. 170). Diversity and tolerance programs focus on helping faculty and staffs become allies to students who need extra support, such as international students. Integrating recurring diversity training and cross-cultural workshops for both faculty and staff is essential to understanding cultural differences and diverse learning preferences, and in developing, and implementing curriculums that benefit both international and domestic students. These programs may also develop a capacity to identify and respond to international student concerns and how to further integrate lessons learned into teaching and learning.

In a more general sense, the above recommendations need to be analyzed for incorporation to the overall strategic enrollment plan of the university (Rowley, Lujan & Dolence, 1997) and the organizational culture of the university should be used to transition to a more international culture on the campus, one that can be experienced by both international and domestics students (Kezar & Eckel, 2000).

In conclusion, the study provided valuable information in terms of differences between international and domestic students' drop out behaviors. Determining similarities and significant differences between enrolled international and domestic students was crucial in the first stage of the present study. Using this understanding and following up in both the second and third stages with students who discontinued their studies, determined more definitive relationships and differences between why the students left the university. As a significant finding, domestic students' reasons were found to centered on financial and personal educational goals, whereas international students' reasons centered on having the ability to become a more vital and recognized entity on the campus, including participating or being represented in the student government.

CONCLUSION

The United States of America is called a melting pot, which is established by melting many cultures together, and has evolved in a society accommodating many cultures; however, it can be improved upon. International students bring a mix of diverse culture to U.S. universities that increase the overall quality of life in the universities and promote international education.

Universities desiring to internationalize their institutions are actively seeking international students, directly through enrollment, sister university agreements, and the establishment of other campuses in addition to the main campus. Retaining international students is critical to this objective. As universities in the United States plan and execute strategies to recruit more international students, diversity, revenue, and other global education issues must be considered and planned for to retain them along with domestic students.

Also critical to this objective is recognizing the differences and learning how these differences can promote diversity and future benefits. Differences do not mean different treatment between domestic and international students in meeting and exceeding non-

academic and academic needs. Equal treatment and the inclusion of international students on the campus and community environment will increase retention and make education a universal and international language.

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