

Working toward Successful Retention Strategies with an Influx of International Students: What, Why, and How

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According to the Institute of International Education (2011), the United States has witnessed a continuous increase of 24.1 percent in the enrollment of international students from 2006 to 2010. The total number of international students was 582,984 in the academic year of 2006/2007, compared to a new record number of 723,277 in 2010/2011.

There was a considerable increase in the number of international students from both Asia and Oceania between 2010/11 and the previous academic year. Students from Asia have always been the majority non-US student body, comprising 63.9 percent of all international students studying in the US in 2010/2011. Despite a slight decrease (-1.4 percent) for students from South and Central Asia from 2009/2010 to 2010/2011, all other regions in Asia including East and Southeast Asia have had a steady increase of 9.9 percent and 5.0 percent respectively (Institute of International Education 2011). In 2010/2011, China was the single largest source country of international students in terms of number and percentage increase, reaching a total number of 157,558, which is a stunning 23.5 percent increase from the previous year. During the same timeframe, Oceania, despite a small base number, also saw an increase of 10.2 percent. This increase is primarily due to Australia and New Zealand from which 88.1 percent of all Oceania students originate.

Unlike the substantial data made accessible by the concerted effort to collect international student enrollment data, the retention data for international students is not as readily available. From the vague statistics, six-year graduation rate for international students was

59 percent, which fared marginally better than those of American students by 2 percent (Andrade and Evans 2009). So why bother focusing on retention, since international students seem to be more likely to stay than domestic students?

First of all, retaining international students ensures financially sustainable higher education institutions. This is a particularly helpful strategy at a time of economic recession when the state and federal funding is tight. International students contributed significant revenues to public and private institutions. During the academic year of 2010/2011, the United States received approximately US\$20.2 billion from international students and their dependents (NAFSA 2011).

Secondly, institutions recruit and retain international students for educational gains beyond financial reasons. For example, more than one-third of engineering faculty with a PhD in the US is foreign born. Furthermore, evidence illustrates that around 12 percent of the parents whose children became finalists of a national science competition came to the US as international students (Anderson 2005). Foreign-born professionals and their off-spring make up an important pool of talent. They contribute to the continuous advancement of science, technology and global competitiveness.

Finally, while it is acknowledged that international students have made sizable contributions to America's economy and education, neither the recruitment effort nor the quality of retention programs has appeared flawless. Due to external competition, recruitment and retention of international graduate students have become more challenging (Srivastava, Srivastava, Minerick and Schulz 2010). Other host countries, such as Australia, the UK and Germany, have progressively recruited international students, posing a potential problem of shrinking the market share of US higher education

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players. Other challenges include promising job opportunities for students in their home countries, more esteemed program offerings provided by the home institution, or joint programs supported by reputable international providers. What is more of a concern is the quality of retention programs that intend to promote an international student college experience. The Noel-Levitz Report (2008) noted 33.9 percent of four-year public institutions in the US had retention programs for international students, however, only 6.8 percent of the respondents found them very effective.

A number of studies have provided insightful strategies (academically, socio-culturally and structurally) to enable the creation of effective retention programs and a pleasing environment in which international students can thrive. In Chee Khei Kwai's (2009) dissertation regarding factors influencing international student retention, he proposed improved quality of academic advising and tutoring services may be beneficial to the persistence rate of international students. It may also help to enhance the retention rate by reaching out to international students who do not typically use the services. Based on her qualitative research, Parvin Behroozi-Bagherpour (2010) also pointed out that increased retention and graduation rates can be achieved through an interactive and engaging learning environment. She further elaborated the many academic changes have yet to be made to improve the retention and graduation of international students. Suggestions included more effective advising and counseling, mandatory student orientation, better communication and training for personnel across different departments, academic progress tracking, validation and evaluation of retention programs, language proficiency testing, as well as job placement.

Other researchers, like Krishna Bista and Charlotte Foster (2011) took a more culturally and socially-oriented approach to promote student retention. They realized the importance of student non-academic needs, including services for addressing legal issues of sojourning, transportation and entertainment support, funding, as well as creating culturally educated communities.

Structural change in service provision at all university levels has also been identified as a key component

in student persistence. Bista and Foster (2011) suggested streamlining various programs and service functions under one roof by setting up an Office of International Student Retention. Behroozi-Bagherpour (2010) proposed establishing an Office of International Student Support Services at each college level to engage international students. Other researchers suggested structural changes on a smaller scale, for example, to create positions that specifically deal with international student well-being (Smith and Demjanenko 2011).

In conclusion, rigorous retention efforts for international students need to be on par with that of recruitment. Ensuring international student retention and graduation brings long-term financial and academic gains to US higher education institutions. Future retention strategies can focus on academic, social-cultural and structural changes within higher education institutions.

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