

© *Journal of International Students*
Volume 9, Issue 4 (2019), pp. 993-1008
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
Doi: 10.32674/jis.v9i4.346
ojed.org/jis

An Inventory of International Student Services at 200 U.S. Universities and Colleges: Descriptive Data of Pre-Departure and Post-Arrival Supports

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ABSTRACT

During the spring semester of 2018, a survey of international student support services was conducted on 200 randomly selected U.S. universities and colleges using the International Student Support Services Index. Survey results identified the most and least commonly provided international student support services in addition to common patterns of institutional practices around international student support across the US. The research results are complimented by researcher notes and observations in addition to school administrator quotes. This article concludes with recommendations and implications for practice. Colleges and universities wanting to recruit and retain culturally and academically prepared international students may benefit from learning how other institutions offer integration support services.

Keywords: integration, international students, pre-departure, post-arrival, support services

In the 2017–2018 academic year, more than 1,094,792 international students studied in the US (NAFSA, 2018). This was a 1.5% increase from the previous year (Institute of International Education, 2018), and although the student growth is very much

welcomed by U.S. higher educational institutions, school capacity for hosting and supporting the influx of international students must be considered. For the purposes of this research and article, an international student is defined as any person studying in the US on a non-immigrant, temporary student visa that allows for academic coursework, including both degree and nondegree students. International students have unique integration needs beyond those of their domestic peers and additional support services can help them navigate a matrix of diverse and unfamiliar interactions, language, customs, campus policies, academic expectations, and U.S. laws. One way to address these needs is to provide effective pre-departure and post-arrival international student support services that help manage first-year challenges while establishing a sense of belonging and value in the students' new community.

International student support and integration services have been found to increase cultural knowledge, adjustment coping skills, health and safety, and student satisfaction (Ammigan & Jones, 2018; Madden-Dent, 2014; Pitts, 2009; Sanchez, Spector, & Cooper, 2000; Shim & Paprock, 2002), yet there is still a need for research on which services higher educational institutions are providing these services and when the services are provided within various integration stages (e.g., pre-departure stage or post-arrival stage). The following article will introduce research findings from a survey of 200 U.S. universities and colleges' international student support services to identify patterns of practices at schools across the US. The findings help illuminate how U.S. schools invest, or do not invest, in integration support services that aid with academic and cultural adjustment of their international students.

This article addresses two objectives. The first objective is to provide descriptive data through an exploratory study that contributes to new understandings of support services offered by U.S. universities and colleges. The second objective is to provide observations of survey patterns found across the 200 institutions, organized by pre-departure and post-arrival adjustment stages. This article includes a discussion of implications for practice and concludes with a section on future research needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

By 2025, more than 8 million students are projected to be studying outside their home country (Chow, Gutierrez, Baumgartner, & Sato, 2009), contributing to campus diversification (Sahin, 2008; Ward, 2001), and providing significant economic contributions (Lyman & Rogers, 1994; NAFSA, 2018). While international students enrich U.S. higher education, they add to the increasingly complex matrix of intercultural interactions on campus and the need for unique support services to ensure matriculation, engagement, and success (Cetinkaya-Yildiz, Cakir, & Kondakci, 2011; Cho & Yu, 2015; Glass, Gomez, & Urzua, 2014). To ensure that international students become familiar with U.S. campus policies, culture, communication styles, and laws so that they can safely integrate into U.S. campus and community networks, U.S. institutions can initiate new strategies that better address relocation and integration needs during pre-departure and post-arrival adjustment stages (Madden-Dent, 2014).

This transitional time is especially turbulent if international students have little or no knowledge of, or experience with, U.S. educational systems, laws and policies,

culture, communication and interaction styles, cuisine, healthcare, transportation, weather, jet lag, and environmental variables (Berry, 2006; Leong, Mallinckrodt, & Kralj, 1990; Mori, 2000). Research has demonstrated that international students can experience psychological issues during transition including stress, depression, homesickness, loneliness, identity confusion, and fear (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). Moreover, Fritz, Chin, and DeMarinis (2008) demonstrated that international students are more likely to experience anxiety, homesickness, and stress than domestic students. These challenges lead to academic problems, and as Weng, Cheong, and Cheong (2010) stated, "Poor academic performance is often indicative of difficulties in adjusting to university environment and makes dropout more likely" (p. 337).

If challenges are unaddressed, poor integration experiences often stifle academic pursuits (Weng, Cheong, & Cheong, 2010), and have been found to negatively impact international students' sociocultural adjustment (Ward & Kennedy, 1994), health and psychological well-being, (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Shadowen, Williamson, Guerra, Ammigan, & Drexler, 2019; Tochkov, Levine, & Sanaka, 2010; Yoon, Lee, & Goh, 2008), first-year academic experience (Freeman & Li, 2019), communication (Shah, 1991), and persistence (Gardner, 2007). Without institutional support unique to international students' needs, this student demographic can experience problems with academic success, socialization, language development, professional development, and psychological well-being (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002; Madden-Dent, 2014; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wang, 2004; Zhou, Frey, & Bang, 2011).

Research indicates that integration training increases awareness and coping skills for better cross-cultural transition and adjustment (Neill, 2008; Pitts, 2009; Shim & Paprock, 2002; Yan & Sendall, 2016;), increases intercultural communication and understanding (Altay, 2005; Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2011; Shemshadsara, 2012), and strengthens intercultural sensitivity (Altshuler, Sussman, & Kachur, 2003). However, most U.S. colleges and universities provide international students with integration training only immediately after they arrive in the US and only in an orientation format (Madden-Dent, Roskina, & Wood, 2018; Martirosyan, Bustamantea, & Saxon, 2019). Additionally, the services that institutions provide are often underdeveloped, inconsistent, optional (Hser, 2005), or not available at all (Madden-Dent et al., 2018).

U.S. schools can better address integration issues by identifying and aligning gaps between the international students' expectations and their actual experiences (Kegel, 2009; Mukminin & McMahan, 2013). In addition, they can offer better integration training and support services that promote integration to local academic norms and expectations (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). With a better understanding of the U.S. academic system and culture through intentional study or training, international students can develop more accurate expectations of college life and may develop more effective methods for coping with host country norms (Pitts, 2009).

When it comes to student satisfaction, integration training may support better international student experiences (Cho & Yu, 2015). Student satisfaction often proves critical in today's highly competitive higher education markets when schools compete for international students. As international students have greater choice of college or university they will attend, students seek institutions perceived to facilitate their social and academic adjustment, integration, retention, and academic successes (Cetinkaya-Yildiz et al., 2011; Cho & Yu, 2015). One recent study utilizing data from the International Student Barometer (ISB), measured 45,000 international undergraduate students' satisfaction at more than 100 U.S., European and Australian institutions (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). The findings showed that students were least satisfied with institutional support services, which suggests that institutions may benefit from enhancing integration support services to improve the overall learning experience and thus, student satisfaction (Ammigan & Jones, 2018).

To address what types of support services are available to international students throughout their transitional experience (e.g., pre-departure stage, initial arrival/onboarding stage, post-arrival stage), this study's goal was to investigate international student integration support services provided by 200 randomly selected U.S. universities and colleges that hosted international students during the 2017–2018 academic year. The investigation was structured by three research questions:

RQ1: What are the most commonly provided international student support services offered at 200 higher educational institutions in the United States?

RQ2: What are the least commonly provided international student support services offered at 200 higher educational institutions in the United States?

RQ3: What common school practices and patterns emerge from the data related to how schools are communicating those services?

METHODS

School Sample

In an effort to investigate international student integration support services provided by U.S. universities and colleges, 200 schools were identified within a purposive sampling pool of higher educational institutions that hosted international students during the 2017–2018 academic year. The study was conducted from January 1 to May 26, 2018. The schools were selected from the International Institute of Education's 2017–2018 Open Doors membership data consisting of 3,000 institutions, including associate, bachelor, masters, and doctoral degree-granting schools in addition to specialty schools (e.g., medical educational institutions, theological schools, music/fine art/film schools). From the overall school listing, the researchers intentionally chose a random sampling of schools on two variables: institution type and size of international student population. An equal number of schools were selected from each of the degree-granting categories and then

randomized by size of international student population. Each school type was equally represented in this study within the total school sample size ($N = 200$).

After schools were selected, each of the three researchers was assigned a third of the randomized school list to examine using a three-step data collection protocol (see below). Every 2 weeks, researchers discussed the independent school investigations and came to consensus on data points to ensure rater reliability of the data collection.

Data Collection

This study used three data collection approaches. The first included an internet search of the institution's website to identify services listed on the International Student Support Survey Index (ISSSI). The ISSSI includes 48 international student support services found in literature and industry practices. The second data collection approach was a phone call to the institution's office responsible for international students as a way to confirm the website findings were accurate. The third data collection approach was an email confirmation of data findings to the Director or Assistant Director of the office responsible for international students. In some cases, if the institution did not have an office dedicated to international students, an alternative email confirmation was conducted with the most appropriate office (e.g., Student Support Services). In all correspondence, participants were notified that participation was optional and that this was a research study with full anonymity. The following section describes the data collection process for each approach.

Website Data Collection

For each of the 200 higher education institutions that were selected for this study, researchers completed the following three-step website assessment. The first step included identifying the school's website address from a general internet search inquiry and verifying it was the correct institution (and campus) of interest. The second step was for the researcher to visit the school's home page and find documented evidence of specific services for international students referenced. The third step was for the researcher to locate the school's supporting webpages that corresponded to international students, international scholars, international admissions, international student clubs, student orientations, student support services, transportation, career services, etc. Researchers completed the ISSSI index (described below) during all three steps.

Phone Call Confirmation

In some instances where website content was ambiguous, researchers conducted a phone call to confirm website findings. The phone calls were made to the office responsible for international students and/or scholars. Researchers contacted individuals in positions ranging from student workers to office managers, international student advisors, English language coordinators, assistant directors, and program directors. Length of phone calls ranged from 10 to 30 min.

Email Confirmation

As the third data collection approach, researchers sent an email request for confirmation to provide school representatives with an opportunity to confirm and/or correct the ISSSI data collected from their school website and the confirmation phone call findings, where applicable. The confirmation emails were sent to a Chief International Officer (e.g., Director, Assistant Director), the person responsible for managing office correspondence (e.g., Office Manager), a generic main international student office email, or an international admissions email, in the instances when it proved impossible to locate other contact information. School responses either confirmed that the researched findings were correct, provided corrections or updates, or provided notes about future plans to develop new services. This allowed the researchers to collect data about student services that may not have been clearly identifiable on the school's website but did indeed exist at the school. This third confirmation approach added additional reliability to the data collection process by allowing a school representative to review the accuracy of collected ISSSI data as applicable to their particular institution.

International Student Support Services Index

This study's three-step data collection protocol utilized the International Student Support Services Index (ISSSI). The ISSSI is a list of 48 international student support services developed into a checklist survey based on international student services found in literature and industry practices. The ISSSI was created and piloted in 2014 at the University of Nevada located in Reno, Nevada and then developed over time to include consistent and current services. In addition to identifying support services, the ISSSI includes search variables on facilities and resources directly related to international student integration. Lastly, the ISSSI is organized into three categories of transitional stages based on when international students receive or experience the support services (e.g., pre-departure, initial arrival/onboarding, or post-arrival).

The first category, pre-departure stage, included international student support services provided by a school before the start of the first semester to international students still in their home country. The second category, the initial arrival/onboarding stage, included international student support services provided by a school within the first 30 days following a student's arrival in the US. The third category, the post-arrival stage, included the international student support services provided by a school throughout the first year and beyond.

RESULTS

The purpose of this research study was to investigate international student integration support services provided by 200 U.S. universities and colleges that hosted international students during the 2017–2018 academic year to advance previous research and increase understanding of what supports are available for international students in the U.S. This section provides a summary of findings that emerged from the data and is organized into two categories: most and least provided international

student support services, and common patterns found within institutional practices. The support services listed in Table 1 are defined in the Appendices section.

Most and Least Provided International Student Support Services

This first theme that emerged from the survey is the most and least commonly offered types of international student support services. This theme is demonstrated through the percentages of schools that offered each student support service type that are described below. Both the support service and percentage are organized into corresponding integration stages: pre-departure, initial arrival/onboarding, and post-arrival (Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage of Schools Offering International Student Support Services by Integration Stages

Integration Stage	Type of Support or Service	Percentage
Pre-departure	Online reading materials	70%
	Required on-campus visit or tour	10%
	Optional on-campus visit or tour	40%
	Parent outreach	31%
	Targeted language services	26%
	Online orientation	12%
	Integration preparation class	6.5%
	Online mentor buddy system	9%
Initial arrival/onboarding	Required Office of International Students and Scholars check-in	69%
	International student orientation	56%
	Airport pickup service	27%
	General housing offered	59%
	International housing offered	13%
	Off-campus housing assistance	46%
	Move-in assistance	11%
	Banking and cell phone assistance	37%
	Driver's license assistance	33%
	Mentor/buddy system	29%
	Welcome packet	26%
	Bridge/integration class	17%
Language partners	12%	
Post-arrival	Office of international students	71%
	Cultural events or activities	66%
	Field trips	22%
	City tours	16%
	International student clubs	59%
	Mentor/buddy system	29%

Access to a kitchen	23%
International foods on campus	17%
Grocery store assistance	12%
Off-campus transportation	32%
Rental cars	7%
Driver's license assistance	33%
Psychological and emotional support	10%

Common Patterns of Institutional Practices

This theme represents common patterns found in content provided on institutional websites. Although 89% of the surveyed U.S. institutions had a webpage designed for international students, many of these schools often provided generic or incomplete web pages that contained minimal information for prospective and current international students. The study's findings identified the least posted topics on U.S. institutions' websites: information about the campus office responsible for international students; information about the offices' staff and their direct contact information (e.g., email or phone number); social media or blog weblinks; information about transportation and lodging; information of campus support services specific to international students; and a 24-hour contact for emergencies.

One common pattern among U.S. schools, regardless of their rank or the number of hosted international students, was to not include staff contact information. Overall, it was a common practice for institutions to only provide a generic email address instead of staff emails or phone numbers. Of the surveyed institutions, 71% with a designated office responsible for international students ($N = 141$), posted general office email addresses instead of specific office staff contact information. In contrast, 29% ($N = 59$) disclosed staff contact information, bios, and photos. These schools often encouraged international students to connect with their office representatives through email, phone, or social media (e.g., WeChat).

Another pattern found was that many institutional websites provided student support services for both domestic and international students, without consideration of the unique needs of the international students. When discussing this theme with interviewed school administrators, some indicated through phone calls and email responses that they were aware of the website's impact on international student applications, attendance, and persistence but expressed feeling frustration from a lack of time, personnel, institutional capacity, or funding to update the website. Some administrators expressed difficulties justifying the added expenditure of updating school websites to school executives over other school priorities. It was common that an administrator expressed feeling frustrated with their school websites and the lack of current information for international students and their families. For instance, one school administrator described her website had been outdated for a year when she stated, "We do that [support service], but we don't have it on our website." This was a repeated finding from U.S. schools who offered new services but did not communicate them via their website.

Timing Matters

There was a clear imbalance of when international student support services were offered. The majority of international student support services offered at the 200 surveyed U.S. institutions were provided during initial arrival and post-arrival stages (e.g., new international student orientation). The pattern of having little or no mention of integration preparation and transitional support was a common theme across all surveyed intuitions. Only a few schools provided information and resources related to U.S. classroom and campus rules, traditions, expectations, personal safety practices, linguistic support, health and wellness resources, cultural competency preparation, and social-emotional development. Furthermore, there was an absence of support around international relocation assistance related to transportation and lodging.

When discussing this theme with U.S. school administrators, some indicated through phone calls and email responses that they were aware of the imbalance of when support services were provided. Many administrators expressed having no awareness to predeparture or post-arrival international student support service options. For example, one school administrator described that her school offered very few predeparture supports and was not familiar with evidence-based support practices. She stated, “I didn’t know that service was even a thing. Maybe we should offer it.” This was a common sentiment from U.S. school administrators who were not offering pre-departure integration support services. Some school administrators even expressed interest during the data collection process, when asking researchers, “Can you come to my school and present what other universities are doing? We need to know this.”

DISCUSSION

This study sought to provide answers to its three research questions. The first two questions provide insight into what international student support services are being offered at U.S. higher educational institutions from pre-departure through post-arrival stages. The third research question addressed how the services were being communicated on the U.S. institutions’ websites.

Research Question 1

What are the most commonly provided international student support services offered at 200 higher educational institutions in the United States?

The findings indicate that the most commonly provided international student support services included posting online reading materials (e.g., international student website, newsletters, translated brochures), new international student orientations, required Office of International Students and Scholars check-in meetings, language partners, and cultural events. These are important support services for international

students to increase cultural awareness and integration coping skills for better cross-cultural transition and adjustment (Dekaney, 2008; Neill, 2008; Pitts, 2009; Sanchez et al., 2000; Selmer, 2001; Shim & Paprock, 2002; Ying & Liese, 1990; Zhu, 2008).

Research Question 2

What are the least commonly provided international student support services offered at 200 higher educational institutions in the United States?

The findings indicate that the least commonly provided international student support services are pre-departure support services. These services can include integration preparation for U.S. academics and cultural expectations, health and wellness resources (e.g., Title IX personal safety lessons), cultural competency training, and international relocation assistance. This finding is problematic for international students with little or no previous knowledge of, or experience with, the U.S. educational, academic, and political systems, which can lead to more challenges during first-semester experiences (Berry, 2006; Leong et al., 1990; Mori, 2000). Without these services and information, Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994) found that international students can experience psychological issues during transition including stress, depression, homesickness, and loneliness. Weng et al. (2010) stated that, "Poor academic performance is often indicative of difficulties in adjusting to university environment and makes dropout more likely" (p. 337).

Research Question 3

What common school practices and patterns emerge from the data related to how schools are communicating those services?

This study's findings identified the most and least offered services and the timeline for when these services are offered. The consideration of most and least offered services demonstrated that many U.S. schools lack websites specific and updated to international student needs. School administrators often shared frustrations with their websites and wanted more updated resources posted but lacked time and staff to keep the websites current. Some school administrators expressed the need to know how other schools were supporting international students.

The timeline theme describes when the 200 surveyed U.S. institutions provided international student support services. The majority of international student support services were provided during post-arrival stages (e.g., new international student orientation) compared to the pre-departure stage. When discussing international student support services with U.S. school administrators, many indicated through phone calls and email responses that they were aware of their school's lack of pre-departure support services and wished they had more. This pattern is consistent with research demonstrating that many U.S. schools lack integration training and support services (Hser, 2005), even though U.S. schools can better address integration issues by aligning expectations with actual experiences (Kegel, 2009; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

Limitations

This study has recognized limitations related to data collection processes. The first relates to the differences in the amount of time that each researcher invested in phone confirmation calls with school administrators about the website survey findings. These differences could have affected the amounts of collected data that was analyzed and reported. The second limitation relates to school administrator participation in phone and email confirmation since some administrators provided both while others provided one or the other.

Implications for Practice

International student support has been demonstrated as critical for international student success (Cho & Yu, 2015), and this study's findings advance literature on what type of international student support services are being offered at U.S. higher educational institutions from pre-departure through post-arrival stages. International student support services vary widely across institutions. The clear imbalance of when support services are provided (more during post-arrival stages than pre-departure stages), highlight areas of opportunity for schools to improve their support initiatives. The post-arrival imbalance is consistent with the findings of Martirosyan et al. (2019). Educational leaders can take inventory of what services their school offers and when they are offered to identify which integration stage needs additional support. By dispersing international student services across a longer period of time, international students will have a greater opportunity to develop integration skills and awareness earlier, and prepare more accurate expectations of post-arrival experiences. Another implication for practice generated by this study's findings relates to how institutions communicate which international student support services are available on campus. School websites were found to be outdated or lacked international student-centered content. School administrators may want to consider updating and enhancing their campus web content, social media, and staff contact information.

Future Research Directions

Future research directions may include the examination of relationships between specific international student support services, as well as the time period for when the service are offered, and retention rates, graduation rates, student satisfaction, and student academic success. Findings of such future research may contribute to international student recruitment, retention, graduation rates, health/safety, and professional development. Furthermore, as noted in the findings, many university websites provided inaccurate or outdated information about their international student support services, so future research could address international student perception of website experience that influences their school application and/or persistence decisions.

Recommendations

This study's findings indicate that U.S. higher educational institutions provide inconsistent and underdeveloped international student support services, especially during the pre-departure stages to address integration, retention, and academic success. For this reason, a recommendation would be for schools and educational providers to provide skills-based academic and cultural integration support services during the pre-departure stage that allow earlier preparation skills that prevent negative transitional conflict around academic, linguistic, professional, cultural, linguistic, health/safety, and social-emotional needs. Moreover, based on this study's findings it is recommended to provide support services ongoing throughout students' entire experience (pre-departure through repatriation). Lastly, from the research and this study's findings, a recommendation includes to regularly update available support services and content on international student-centered school web pages, offer content in multiple languages where justified and feasible, and reinforce with direct staff contact information.

CONCLUSION

International students face many challenges when transitioning from home countries to U.S. educational institutions but the growing base of evidence suggests that integration support services and programs help international students overcome academic, cultural, and social challenges (Cetinkaya-Yildiz et al., 2011; Cho & Yu, 2015; Glass et al., 2014; Madden-Dent, 2014). The current study reveals that 200 randomly selected U.S. colleges and universities provide a variety of international student support services on academic, cultural, linguistic, professional development topics in efforts to address these challenges; consistent with findings from previous related research (Madden-Dent et al., 2018; Martirosyan et al., 2019). Additionally, this study provides patterns found within school administrators' quotes and researcher observations that contribute valuable insights into current practices for overcoming common integration barriers to guide future directions. These findings are encouraging, but more researched is needed to better understand which international student support services are the highest impact on whole-student success.

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