

Issues of International Student Retention in American Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper focused on issues of retention and the individual needs of international students at a southern university through videotaped group interviews with six students from Africa, China, India, Japan, Jordan, and Nepal. Students were asked questions concerning their first experiences at the university, experiences out in the community, academic issues and concerns, and other needs. Asking for and paying attention to the details that support international students in their quest to receive an American education will support the students where they need it and also provide an atmosphere that will encourage more international students to follow.

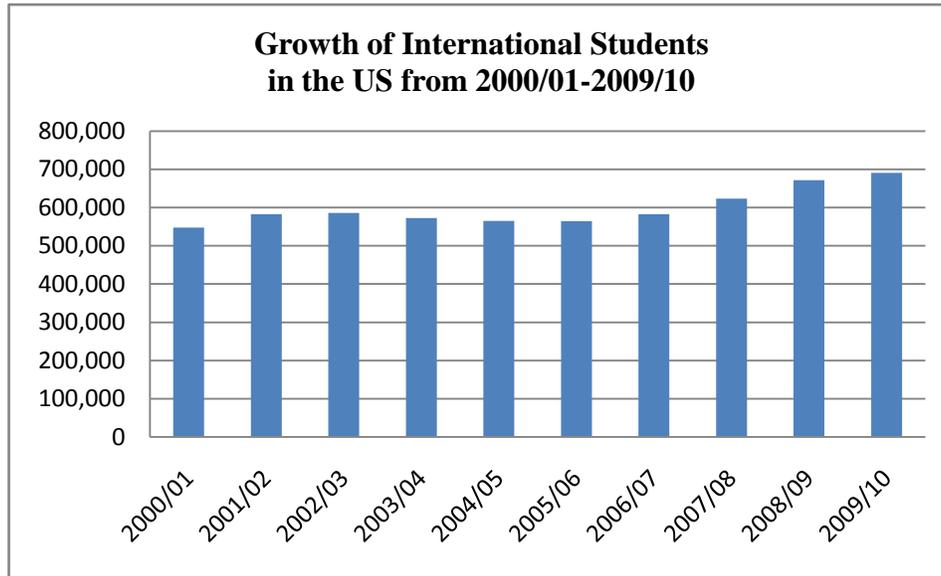
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Introduction

The number of international students attending institutions of higher education is on the rise in the United States. The foreign student population rose from 547,867 in 2000 to 690, 923 in 2010 (Open Doors, 2010). In 2010, the growth was primarily driven by a 30% increase in Chinese student enrollment in the United States, making China the leading sending country. Indian students represented 15% of all international students in U.S. higher education. Besides these, the significant enrollments were from China, India, Saudi Arab, Vietnam, Turkey, and the United Kingdom (Open Doors, 2010).

Many overseas students attempting to study in a higher education setting face obstacles such as financing the education, balancing work and study schedules, finding the self-discipline to persist, and many other obstacles that can make attending college a difficult task. In addition to these multiple obstacles, international students face challenges related to language, cultural, and personal barriers although many still manage to persist and even succeed in studying abroad. Fortunately for North American universities, many students from foreign countries are dedicated to receiving a degree in higher education and carry out their studies in spite of the additional difficulties.

Table 1
Growth of International Students in the US from 2000/01-2009/10



Source: *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*, 2010

With institutions committing an increasing amount of financial resources to oversee recruitment, many colleges and universities still neglect to recognize the importance of retaining these students. The Noel-Levitz Report (2009) noted 33.9 percent of four-year public institutions had programs specifically designed for retention of international students, but only 6.8 percent of the respondents felt the programs were very effective.

According to the latest survey (October 2010) by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, sixty-one percent of surveyed institutions reported taking special steps to recruit international students including offering new programs, providing additional staff, increasing recruitment trips, and increasing marketing. All of the included steps may lead to increased attendance of international students, but do not necessarily address the retention of said students.

This paper focused on the individual needs of international students at a southern university through videotaped interviews with six students from Africa, China, India, Japan, Jordan, and Nepal. Both graduate and undergraduate students were interviewed through a semi-structured interview process. Students were asked questions concerning their first experiences at the university, experiences out in the community, academic issues and concerns, and other needs as expressed by the student through the interview process.

What matters to international students?

The retention of international students is dependent upon meeting the needs of the individual students that college support staff serves, internationally or locally. Basically, international students value the quality of their education (Domville-Roach, 2007; Ikwuagwa, 2010). They want their faculty knowledgeable in their fields, and strong in instruction within their areas of study. Campus life issues such as athletics, activities, organizations, are not highly valued by international students, however, these areas should not be ignored (Ikwuagwa, 2010). International students mostly worry about campus safety and security. Due to federal laws, and non-immigrant student visa (F-1) status, most international students do not have the privilege of applying for financial aid.

Welcoming International Students

Many students arrive at the university and find that they have held misconceptions concerning the American university experience from the initial pick up at the airport to housing to availability of familiar food, and so on. Many universities attempt to provide services for international students on the surface, but fail to meet the real needs of the students at a more practical level. One student, arriving from Nepal, was greeted at the airport by a complete stranger. The stranger had no university identifiable information and was also an international student from another country. The new international student was scared to leave the airport with a complete stranger and began asking questions of the stranger. The stranger got frustrated with all the questions and the international student was forced to call the local police to help sort out who she should ride to the university with. After the police made the correct phone calls and assured the student that she would be safe riding with the stranger, she did. It was a long ride to the university with a stranger that was not too happy with her. The student from Nepal said: "I waited for the shuttle for several hours in front café at the airport. I did not see any staff from the university with a name card or university t-shirt. After hours of waiting a person came and asked me to walk to the parking lot. I was scared and I asked the police for help. I also told the police to make a call to the university to make sure he was proper driver. I spoke with the school adviser, and only then was sure of riding the shuttle." This is just one example of the university providing a service to the international students, but not really an effective service. Universities could assure new students that they are welcome by providing proper identification, a sign with the student's name and university logo, and a university t-shirt for those assigned to retrieve international students from the airport.

Without a procedure to evaluate support systems that are already in place, universities may think they are doing a better job than they actually are. First impressions are most important and universities want to put their best foot forward in welcoming international students. New students expect to be entertained, informed and well received by their international staff, students and teachers throughout the first a couple of weeks. Once they are familiar with their particular campus building, cafeteria, library, apartment, they can assimilate much easier (Ikwuagwa, 2010; Kuo, 2011; Montgomery, 2010).

Before their arrivals, the offices of international students should make enough communication with these foreign students so that they ensure of their housing, things to bring with them, college fees, friends and flights. Some colleges have developed CDs of college information especially focusing on international students which, in fact, could be helpful resources for them. Strategies of marketing are so important to recruit foreign students, so are to return those admitted students when they start their studies in the colleges and universities. In preparing abroad study, foreign students need more additional and accurate information. Sometimes, they happen to land in another place because they may not know the different places of America with the same name or sister campuses of the university. For example, a student landed in Troy of New York though he was attending Troy campus located in Alabama because he did not know there was another campus at the University because of miscommunication of received information.

Legal Issues and Communication

For most of the international students, college rules and regulations are unclear at first. New international students need to know important information when they arrive in the U.S. College I-20s, immigration policies regarding full time and part time course work, pre-requisite course work, English language requirements, compass tests, on and off campus employment, college terminology such as credit, grade, transfer and assignments are all important information that each college student should know. Given this information in advance can save foreign students a lot of trouble and may increase their chance of continuing at the university. College culture is different in Asia and other continents because educational systems including teaching, learning and assessment are different. For example, in many Asian colleges and universities, assessment is based on annual examinations in which they are graded in per cent instead of GPA or letter grade.

Students Need Forum

International students like to share their problems and comments related to university experiences and experiences through online forums. One student from Zimbabwe stated her frustration at not being able to make appointments to meet with faculty or staff to resolve problems. This student was told by the office staff to come back later, which was an inconvenience for the international student. Many international students have time-sensitive problems relating to visas and other papers that need to be addressed quickly. The African student did not feel comfortable filing a complaint because of a fear of future retribution and felt that she had no voice in this issue. She suggested a forum for her and other international students to be able to openly express their needs. Over 600 international students that participated in online study (Bista, 2011b) openly expressed concerns about academics, personal, administrative, and other areas that they may not have felt comfortable expressing in person. An online forum for students to speak out gives them a voice and allows the university the opportunity to address the needs of international students which may lead to retention. These forums would allow foreign students a place to express their needs. Forums would also serve as a tool to help students make new contacts and establish friendships.

Transportation and Entertainment

During separate interviews with Jordanian and Chinese undergraduate students, both expressed concern about the lack of access to entertainment at the university. Both students, young men, were used to public transit systems that were easily maneuverable and accessible to students to get from campus to the mall, movie, or amusement park. Many universities provide a bus that takes the students to and from popular places in town, but the busses mostly run on limited schedules. International students spend at least double the hours studying that traditional students spend and have a much smaller amount of time to work with transportation issues. Universities in smaller communities may benefit by meeting regularly with international students to assess their transportation and entertainment needs.

Sometimes because of not having access to public transport or shuttle services, students become unable to explore activities that are available in the local communities (Bista, 2011b, Ikwuagwa, 2010). When they do not have access to local places such as theaters, shopping, lakes and parks, they may become bored and lonely, and consider transferring to another college or university. In an interview with Indian student, she said "Jonesboro was boring bro! There were no places to go around, but later my friends took me around... I saw many lakes and parks. At least I was able to go and relax."

Some inexpensive alternatives such as providing understandable lists of local resources or organizations outings with reasonable fees would be options a college or university would offer. Sometimes, international programs can organize short and long distance trips with reasonable fees. International students are not able to go in such tours or trip because they are very expensive. A Chinese student said, "One time I went to Florida from the university but it was very expensive...but I went because I was bored. I did not have other friends from China in the tour. They did not go there because it was very expensive...but there were 15 other students".

On-Campus Employment and Scholarships

Many undergraduate students from foreign countries rely on family financial support to pay for their university experience. One undergraduate student expressed his concern for his parents continuing to send money to support him here in the states. After being at the first American university for a semester, he had already made the decision to transfer to another university in a larger city where he was better able to share expenses with other family members. Working without authorization in the United States is considered a violation of immigration status. Nonimmigrant students (F-1) are not eligible to be employed in federal work-study positions, and federal regulations strictly limit both the kind and the amount of other kinds of work that international students can do in the United States.

Many international undergraduate students disregard the federal laws and find illegal work in order to continue their university expenses. As the rule of the Homeland Security, these students are not allowed to work off campus, yet they are compelled to work. Those who do not get on campus employment, transfer to other colleges where they see the possibility of getting work. A large number of students from Nepal, India and Pakistan transfer to community colleges from the universities for the off campus work. A graduate student from Nepal said, "I went to every department for a graduate assistantship position but I did not get. I tried the whole semester for a job but it was almost impossible for me. This semester I transfer to Texas. My friends work there, and I will get a job". Some Asian businesses will secretly hire foreign students to help with bills.

International graduate students are normally offered Graduate Assistantships, but these are not available for undergraduate students. Seventy-eight percent of four-year public institutions use student employment as a strategy to engage or retain undergraduate students and reported this strategy as minimally to very effective (Noel-Levitz, 2009). Providing an alternative to illegal employment for international students is another key to international student retention.

Culturally Educated Community

Creating a culturally educated community can be another way to increase the retention of international students (Ho, 2007). A Jordanian student trying to figure out how to take the local city bus to a grocery store was met by a bus driver who would not answer questions or even look at the student. Some people in a community do not appreciate the cultural diversity brought into a community by the international student population and may react negatively out of fear and ignorance. The Jordanian student rode the bus for four hours until he finally ended up at the grocery store where he was headed. Universities that take a role in educating the community on the benefits of hosting international students will provide a welcoming community and support the retention of the students.

Universities and colleges can support special relationships with local community people to offer international students home stays, happy families, volunteer opportunities, American parent centers, and other activities to allow foreign students to feel home when they arrive first time in the U.S. To ease the pressure of the red tape, colleges should help these students feel support from the community. A graduate student from India said, "We don't have any welcoming programs in the community. One time I was ready to participate in a food festival at the Hispanic Center but when the day arrived they told me they did not need me. I bought food and I was ready."

Colleges, therefore, should have several programs of community outreach where students can engage in many activities which eventually help to both host families or organizations and students. One suggestion for universities to consider in addressing the needs of international students is to offer an ongoing forum for international students to express their needs and concerns. Universities may have a plan in place to support international students. A plan in place is the first step; a plan stated, not perceived that effectively supports international student needs is the next step. Some deeper questions for universities to consider may be:

- Is the transportation system that is in place meeting student needs?
- Do international students have entertainment requests that we can accommodate?
- In what ways can we assess the cultural education of our community?
- How often are we requesting input from international students on improving services?
- How satisfied are our students with our services?

International Student Retention Office

Recently, many universities have set up an office of international student retention to assist these foreign students. On the website, Kennesaw State University mentions the mission of the International Student

Retention Services is to "assist [international students] while [they] are in the United States and attending Kennesaw State University (KSU). These retention efforts involve assisting with and/or making referrals regarding admissions, visa concerns, registration, ESL (English as a Second Language), math, personal, and social issues. KSU has services in place to help with your adjustment to a different culture. The Office of International Student Retention Services cannot take the place of your home, but it strives to make you feel at home while you are here".

An office of International Student Retention could serve many purposes on a university campus. With one of the major causes of attrition for international students being a misconception between student expectations and academic programming, a retention office could support the communication between the students so that the misconceptions are cleared before the student makes it to the university and then decides to transfer. Student rapport between the foreign and domestic students is another area that a student retention office could support by offering social, cultural, and entertainment activities. While assisting foreign students with admission referrals, visa concerns, registration and other academic issues that arise, staff and educators at the International Programs bring a big change in college and university. Finally, the student retention office at a university can become a home base for the foreign student which offers support of almost any nature, support that will support the foreign student throughout the transitional times.

These offices should strengthen their support systems such as timely counseling and advising, updates on visa and part time employments along other physical facilities for international students that are available in the campus. In the *Handbook of the Institutional Student Retention Assessment* (Swail, 2010, p. 20), the following points are recommended to work on retention:

- Positive interaction with a person or activity that boosted self-confidence.
- Quality instructions, relationship with faculty, interactions, feeling of connectedness
- Relationships with faculty, advisors, peers; Interaction with outstanding faculty/staff
- Connecting with some group, academic growth
- Engaged, meaningful connections (personally, with peers or superiors, academically, etc.)
- Relationships with key people: instructors, students, administrators (US TOO)Portland State

International programs can also generate private and funded scholarships to draw the brilliant students. Portland State University (PSU) welcomes students from other countries to pursue higher education in Oregon. Along

with regular private scholarship, PSU has offer, the International Student Retention Scholarship, made possible through funding from the State of Oregon, offers partial tuition scholarships each year to a number of deserving students from many countries throughout the world.

Conclusion

Unlike the students in past, each year colleges receive brilliant and diverse international students from different countries, and they need special support while in the U.S. International students want to be welcomed and supported, very much like traditional American students. Asking for and paying attention to the details that support international students in their quest to receive an American education will support the students where they need it and also provide an atmosphere that will encourage more international students to follow. Having foreign students colleges can have diverse culture, language and educational experiences which is beneficial for American students and professors. These students also help colleges generate higher revenue in terms of tuition and other fees. In addition, international students are opportunities for American students and community people to learn more about foreign languages, cultures and traditions.

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