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FIVE THINGS



FIVE THINGS Student Affairs Professionals Can Do to Support **INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

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in Higher Education

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FIVE THINGS ISSUE BRIEF SERIES

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Over the past decade, colleges and universities have experienced unprecedented growth in the enrollment of U.S.-bound international students. Today, there are nearly 975,000 international students pursuing postsecondary study in the United States, representing more than a 60% increase in the total number of international student enrollees just 10 years prior (Institute of International Education, 2015b). Although more than half (58%) of all U.S.-bound international students derive from China, India, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia, it is important to note that other countries of origin are seeing rapid growth in the numbers of students pursuing study in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2015d). High year-over-year growth (from 2013 to 2014) is occurring in the numbers of international students originating from, for example, Brazil (78%), Kuwait (24%), Nigeria (19%), and Mexico (15%) (Institute of International Education, 2015c).

The increased numbers of international students, as well as the growing diversity of nationalities on college and university campuses, is met by a shifting landscape in the destination states of U.S.-bound international students. Although the latest data depict the long-standing trend that more than half (52%) of U.S.-bound international students study in one of five states (California, New York, Texas, Massachusetts, and Illinois), recent evidence demonstrates rapid year-over-year growth never before seen across these states (Institute of International Education, 2015a). Between 2013 and 2014, for example, Ohio's colleges and universities saw a 14% increase in the numbers of international students enrolled. Pennsylvania and Florida both experienced 11% growth and Michigan's international student population increased by 10% during the same time period (Institute of International Education, 2014). The recent and rapid growth in U.S.-bound international students—and the increasing diversity in their countries of

origin—prompts strategic thinking about practices that engender inclusive environments of educational excellence for all students.

Indeed, international students bring diverse cultural backgrounds that enrich campus life. Student affairs professionals possess the skills and long-standing commitment to support inclusive, diverse, and educationally rich learning environments. As such, it is important that student affairs professionals build support strategies that incorporate and reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds that international students bring to colleges and universities. In doing so, these professionals create rich educational experiences for international students and build on the vitality of campus life.

This brief discusses five ideas for student affairs professionals to consider when situating programs and services to serve international students effectively and affirm the valuable cultural diversity they bring to college and university campuses:

1. Offer language and academic support programs.
2. Promote positive social relationships between international students and peers.
3. Cultivate partnerships between international students and the community.
4. Create inclusive career planning and development services.
5. Establish campuswide partnerships to support holistic learning and development.

As readers consider these five things, it is also important to note that international students are diverse. To this end, creating inclusive educational environments will require student affairs professionals to intentionally build an understanding of the cultural diversity of international students and design strategies that reflect the unique needs and characteristics of all students.

FIVE THINGS

1 Offer Language and Academic Support Programs

English proficiency in oral and written communication is a significant barrier for international students as they adjust to study in the United States (Spurling, 2007; Yan & Berliner, 2011). In response, some colleges and universities in the United States have raised the requirements for Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores as a prerequisite for admission. Because there are cultural nuances in how the English language is used in academic and social settings, however, raising TOEFL or IELTS test scores will do little to address the language challenges that many international students face in adjusting to both academic and social life in the United States. International students from China

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provide a compelling example in that these students often receive no formal instruction on developing academic writing skills in English (Liu, 2011; Luo, 2006; Yao, 2000). This means that many Chinese international students must learn these skills in addition to managing their academic coursework and the transition to life in the United States.

To help international students adjust, student affairs professionals should develop programs and activities to promote the use of the English language, focusing especially on reading, listening, and vocabulary (Muller, 2011). To support proficiency with verbal communication, services and activities could include armchair traveler programs (i.e., domestic and international students pair up to exchange information about their respective cultures), host family interactions, and English as a Second Language (ESL) workshops. Student affairs professionals could also use a seminar setting to introduce learning activities or other forms of support that build on international students' existing English fluency and educate them about cultural nuances of the language (e.g., slang, sarcasm, other contextual considerations) that might help them adjust. In response to the need for writing support, student affairs professionals can also create peer-to-peer support groups for domestic students to help international students adjust to writing for course assignments (Sherry,

Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Yeh & Inose, 2003). These resources are critical because literature shows that language proficiency affects international students' adjustment to academic studies in the United States (Hijazi, Tavakoli, Slavin, Olga, & Lumley, 2011; Lin & Yi, 1997; Xue, 2013).

Coupled with learning interventions that build on oral and written communication, student affairs professionals who serve in international student support roles can help international students adjust to U.S. higher education by explaining cultural differences in educational delivery between the United States and other countries. These conversations can include how the different styles of educational delivery (e.g., student-centered vs. project-based coursework) may differ from their prior learning environments. For example, United States domestic students may find themselves more poised than their international student peers to adjust to the self-discipline and self-management focus of the majority of U.S. higher education institutions. In contrast, Chinese students, for example, tend to be more dependent on their professors (Xue, 2013). This is because, in China, classes are usually didactic and teacher-oriented, with little teacher-student interaction. In the United States, group work is often incorporated into classroom settings through small-group discussions and group projects. International students may experience difficulty adjusting to these new and unfamiliar instructional methods (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012; Xue, 2013), but student affairs professionals can help them adjust by building a bridge between cultures through guidance and support.

Student affairs professionals can lead support groups that connect international students to social activities and institutional resources throughout the year. This strategy can help student affairs professionals identify and address problems as they arise. These support groups can be organized with the help of student organizations that represent an international student's nationality. The support groups can cover a wide range of topics to build on international students' understanding of campus culture, effective learning and studying strategies, and where to receive resources and support for academic success.

2 Promote Positive Social Relationships between International Students and Peers

Student affairs professionals can develop supportive networks for new international students by connecting them to international or domestic student peers who have acclimated to campus life. Although research suggests that most international students have positive perceptions prior to their arrival on campus about what life will be like, once they arrive they often encounter feelings of loneliness and social isolation that quickly diminish their presojourn expectations (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsassser, & Kumar, 2014; McClure, 2007). The challenges these students often experience with using English in social settings also serve as a barrier to establishing a support network, compounding feelings of loneliness and isolation (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010).

As international students transition to study in the United States, difficulties in making friends with peers can lead to such issues as experiences of social loss, feelings of unremitting tension, or lack of confidence, which can undermine a positive sense of self and even affect perceptions of other people (Hayes & Lin, 1994; McClure, 2007; Yamazaki, Taira, Shun-ya, & Yokoyama, 1997). This social loss may occur at a time when these students are attempting to establish a support system in unfamiliar campus and community settings.

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Student affairs professionals can help students address feelings of social loss, engender self-confidence, and foster relationships with peers.

International student advisors, in particular, can organize programs and services to promote friendships and integration between international and domestic students. The Social Adjustment Model articulated by Heikinheimo and Shute (1986) offers an organized approach for student affairs professionals to consider when designing programs that foster social connections between international students and their peers (Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Trice, 2004; Yang, Teraoka, Eichenfield, & Audas, 1994; Zimmerman, 1995) (see Table 1).

The Social Adjustment Model describes inhibitors and stimulators to the adjustment of international students to postsecondary study in the United States. Avoiding the inhibitors and promoting the stimulators through the outcomes and design of campus programs and resources that seek to promote social relationships will enable international students to feel affirmed on campus. Facilitating events that enable international and domestic students to learn about one another’s cultures and common interests, for example, could lead to new social relationships that extend beyond organized activities and last through the college experience and beyond.

Student affairs professionals can also leverage resources to help international students manage the

emotions and stress associated with the transition and adjustment to college life and life in the United States. For example, stress reduction interventions, such as expressive writing and assertiveness training, can be effective tools for international students to cope with psychological problems (Hijazi et al., 2011). These interventions can enable international students to develop a sense of agency in navigating their success during and after college.

3 Cultivate Partnerships between International Students and the Community

Through their skill sets and campus responsibilities, many student affairs professionals are poised both to integrate the rich cultures and heritages of international students into U.S. campuses and to help these students learn about U.S. cultures. International students often experience culture shock upon arrival. Their values, beliefs, behaviors, and customs may be challenged in a new society, or they may experience social or cultural isolation. International students from outside of the Western world—countries such as Asia, Africa, and South America—are especially likely to experience culture shock or isolation as they transition from a collectivistic to a more individualistic society

Table 1. Inhibitors and Stimulators Affecting International Students’ Adjustment

INHIBITORS	STIMULATORS
Language difficulties	Curiosity about a culture
Personal characteristics	Common interests
Cultural aspects	Opportunities to learn English
Academic concerns	A desire to make friends with Americans
Perceived discrimination	Developing a social network for the future

Note. Developed from “The Adaptation of Foreign Students: Students’ Views and Institutional Implications,” by P. Heikinheimo and J. Shute, 1986, *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 9, 399–406.

(McClure, 2007; Shen & Herr, 2004). To address the needs of international students adjusting to life and studies in a new country, student affairs professionals can create programs and services that target cultural integration of international students into U.S. culture.

Student affairs professionals can also initiate campus- and community-based programs to cultivate a successful transition for international students and enrich the cultural vitality of the campus and community. The International Cultural Service Program at the University of Oregon, for example, has brought together a group of international students to provide the campus and community with valuable cross-cultural exchanges. International students collectively provide 80 hours of cultural and educational service to the community per year. In turn, these students receive scholarship assistance from community partners as well as the opportunity to learn about the communities in which they live during their time in the United States. The Purdue International Integration Initiative (P3i) at Purdue University encompasses many programming elements coordinated by the Office of International Programs. P3i seeks to provide cultural, educational, service, and social opportunities whereby international students enhance their American educational experience and contribute to the globalization of Purdue and the greater community. These are only two examples of programs that help student affairs professionals integrate international students into the community with the goal of fostering meaningful cultural exchanges that both enrich the presence of cultural diversity on campus and in the community and help international students connect to their new homes.

4 Create Inclusive Career Planning and Development Services

In many ways, the professional development of international students is different from that of American students. Factors affecting international students' career choices and decision making include immigration regulations, visa requirements, and the structure

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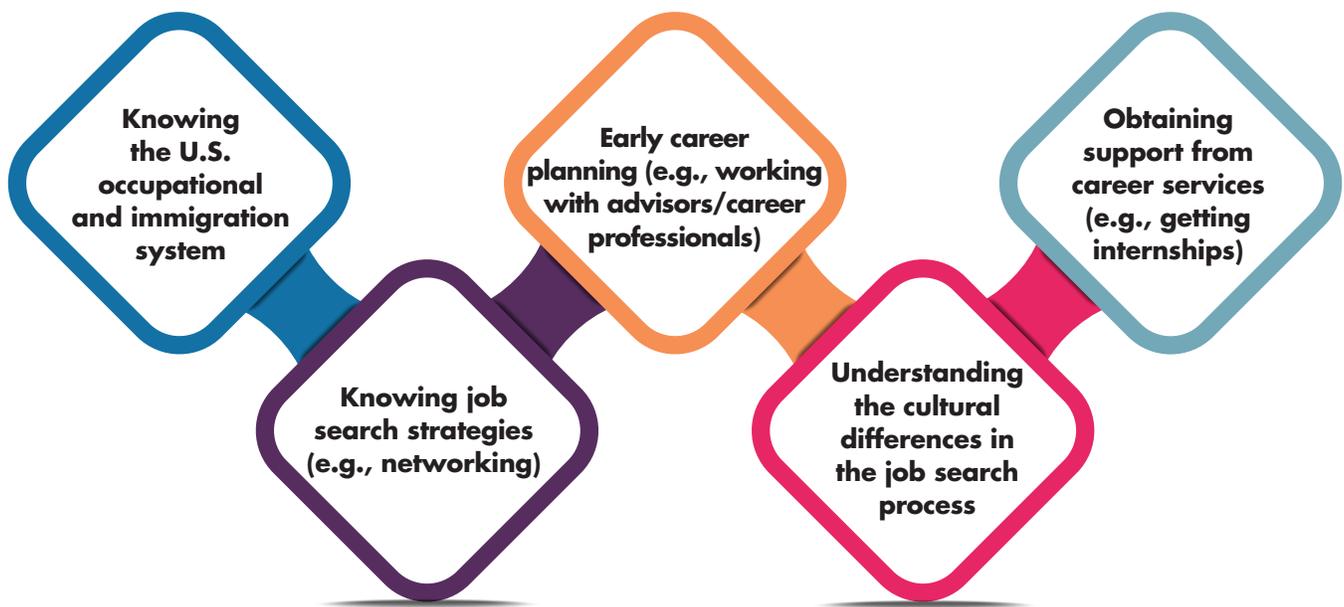
and norms of the job search process in the United States (Crockett & Hayes, 2011).

When making career choices, international students are faced with the decision to either return to their home country or stay in the United States and apply for a work visa (Singaravelu, White, & Bringaze, 2005). Career counselors should expand their international student career services to include assistance with career decision making. Further, when helping international students make career decisions, counselors should be mindful of not only their major but also the influence of their families, peers, and others.

Workshops, programs, and seminars that focus on career decision making for international students must be sensitive to their discernment process of choosing either to pursue employment or further study in the United States or to return home. Recognizing that some international students may be less prepared than others to make career-related decisions during the educational experience is also important. Figure 1 offers a framework that student affairs professionals may find helpful when developing career planning and job search resources for international students seeking employment in the United States. Using these tools, practitioners can accommodate knowledge gaps that international students may have about where to look for jobs in particular career fields; provide advice on proper etiquette before, during, and after interviews; and offer tips for negotiating salary after an offer of employment.

Career services professionals can build international students' understanding of cultural differences they may encounter in the job search process, as well as develop skills that are valuable both in the job

Figure 1. Five Practical Skills to Help International Students Career Plan



Note. Developed from "Understanding and Responding to the Career Counseling Needs of International College Students on U.S. Campuses," by S. A. Crockett and D. G. Hayes, 2011, *Journal of College Counseling*, 14, 65–79.

search process and in the workplace. International students can also benefit from guidance on how to recognize and respond effectively to language barriers in the workplace. Finally, student affairs professionals can also support the professional development of international students by ensuring they understand the ethical or legal commitments they may have to their local community (Crockett & Hayes, 2011).

5 Establish Campuswide Partnerships to Support Holistic Learning and Development

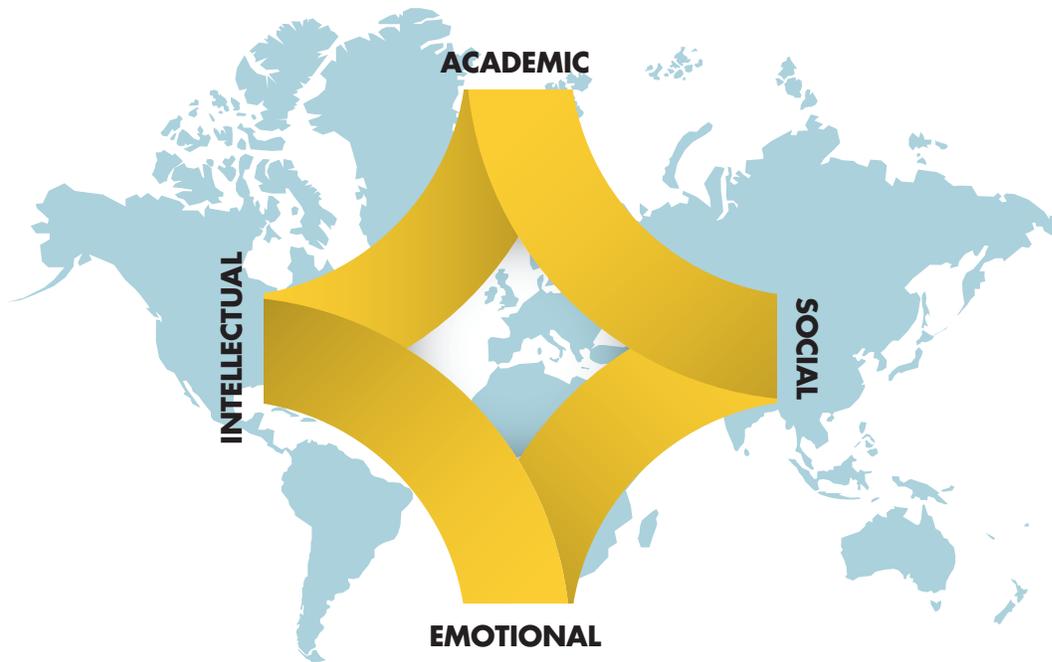
Student affairs professionals can foster campuswide partnerships with stakeholders in the success of all students to strengthen the learning and development of international students. This strategy should start with initiating a task force to determine the needs of international students, determine areas for progress or growth within and across campus units, and develop an action plan to improve areas that need attention. In

framing the areas in which campuses can build a comprehensive approach, Stier (2002) defined a fourfold classification system of academic, social, intellectual, and emotional needs to center action on holistic student learning and development (see Figure 2).

The task force should include stakeholders who educate and support international students on campus as well as international students themselves. Examples of appropriate stakeholders may include the following:

- Academic advisors
- International student advisors and support coordinators
- Vice presidents for student affairs
- Chief diversity officers
- Faculty
- International and domestic students
- Student activities coordinators
- Counseling center staff
- Internship coordinators
- Host family representatives and community partners

Figure 2. Stier's Developmental Needs for International Students



Note. Developed from "Internationalisation in higher education: Unexplored possibilities and unavoidable challenges," by J. Stier, 2002 (<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00002342.htm>).

Together, these stakeholders can routinely examine strengths as well as opportunities for improvement and develop campuswide approaches to address challenges. Further, these stakeholders can communicate progress or targeted needs within their respective constituency groups to promote campuswide engagement. Including the senior student affairs and chief diversity officers will also help ensure that needs and

priorities are communicated to institutional leadership, and a campuswide cross-section of stakeholders can help ensure that implementation of recommendations for action reach all areas of the institution and, where appropriate, the community. A campuswide approach that includes key stakeholders will support long-term approaches to supporting the learning, development, and success of international students.

CONCLUSION

The growing numbers of international students in the United States enriches our culture, enhances student life, and promotes international academic exchange. Student affairs professionals can take steps to build on the quality education that international students expect and deserve. As educators and mentors of international students, student affairs professionals can examine how to elevate practice to support the learning and development of international students.

This includes conducting institutional assessments to better understand the needs of international students. By considering the advice offered in this brief in conjunction with needs assessments, student affairs professionals can expand their understanding of today's international students and improve the delivery of programs and services for this important student population.

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