



## How to Retain International Students

**IT'S A CYCLE MANY COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES WILL RECOGNIZE:** Year after year, international student offices invest significant money and staff bandwidth recruiting international students. But too many of those students ultimately struggle, pack their bags, and return home degreeless and vocally dispirited about the university. Rinse and repeat.

"It's ... a misstep to fail to recognize the impact that international student attrition has on the reputation of the institution abroad," says Elizabeth Matthews, assistant director of the office for international students and scholars at Michigan State University. "If a school is not perceived as providing a welcoming environment and high academic standards, they'll likely see applications from highly prepared and academically excellent international students fall."

The solution, institutions are finding, lies in thorough preparation, attending to international students' specific practical needs, and properly leveraging expertise.

### Put Problems in Perspective

International students are less likely than domestic students to drop out. But of course the ramifications of each international student dropout ripple much farther than a domestic student's does. Far more money is expended in recruiting each student from abroad, and more and more institutions are becoming dependent on the full-fare tuition dollars that international students bring with them. The number of international students in the United States has jumped 85 percent in the last decade. While universities are still working to overcome the challenges, they are beginning to reflect best practices in combating common attrition triggers.

Experts and practitioners say the first step toward better retention ratios actually starts before a student even steps foot on campus, when recruiters feel too much pressure to meet target numbers.

"The temptation to meet the needs of campus economies with marginal students who are likely to enroll can be strong, but must be resisted," says George Kacenga, director of international enrollment management at the University of Colorado-Denver: A student who drops out after just a semester or two because he or she isn't

prepared for the rigors of college-level work ultimately costs a university more money than it receives.

### Identify True Proficiency

Matthews says she has talked to many students who weren't prepared for how difficult the language would be. "They feel prepared, having studied English for many years and having watched American TV shows and movies their whole lives," she says.

One potential answer—pre-admission standardized proficiency tests designed to assess students' English-language and other proficiencies—is expeditious, but may not reflect a student's true abilities.

"Most institutions, for various reasons, take the easy route, but they may find that students aren't adequately prepared," says Maureen Andrade, associate dean of academic programs at Utah Valley University. The better solution, she says, is to use assessments that require writing and speaking samples, which can better predict students' English skills.

### Build a Firm Pathway

Once students are on campus, pathway or foundation programs can be an enormously helpful way for international students to acclimate and ramp up to the rigors of college-level academics, experts say, but they must be conceived and executed correctly.

Such programs are "all the rage right now," but "they aren't a one-size-fix-all," says Jamie Kanki, associate director of graduate marketing and recruitment at New York University's Tandon School of Engineering. "You can't take an academically unqualified student, place them in a pathway program for a year, and expect them to join the college student council and the debate team, carry a 4.0 GPA, and secure an internship at Google their first summer."

Given the travel, visa, and tuition expenses that parents abroad bear when they send a child to a U.S. college, international students often feel intense pressure to succeed, Kanki says, and administrators should be ready with extra tutoring and peer support.

She notes that while international students can have a particularly rough semester just like domestic students, they can't recover as easily from academic probation because they need to take a certain number of credits to maintain full-time enrollment status.

"They don't have the luxury of taking a step back and cutting down on the number of courses they take or taking a semester off to regroup that many U.S. students can do when they begin to feel overwhelmed," Kanki says.

### Recalibrate Integration Strategies

Making friends in a new environment can be difficult for anyone, and international students also have to cope with new sets of academic, cultural, and social expectations, along with homesickness. Part of the trouble, says Matthews, is that U.S. institutions are still undergoing a learning curve: Until roughly 2006, the bulk of international students were graduate students. With so many younger students having enrolled since then, she says, institutions are having to retune their offerings to offer a wider spectrum of assistance.

"Support services were geared towards older students who came to the United States with a clear academic and professional focus," Matthews says. "I think that U.S. schools are slowly coming to understand that undergraduate international students are like domestic undergraduate students in many ways, [including their level of] preparation for intercultural experiences, emotional maturity, career goals, and development of identity."

One successful program is at Georgia State University, which deploys trained domestic students it pays to serve in its Volunteer International Student Assistants (VISA) Leader Program. VISA students work intensively with small groups of new international students at specialized sessions, which include practical in-person help with registration, housing options, banking, campus life, and general information about adjusting to life on campus and in the United States. Many of these VISA students also develop lasting social bonds with their international mentees, forming a support

network that can become invaluable when homesickness, academic pressure, or other challenges might seem otherwise insurmountable.

### Sweat the Details

Experts encourage university officials to do everything they can, big and small, to make an institution feel more welcoming and its expectations more manageable.

Matthews recommends that universities help prepare faculty and staff for intercultural classrooms, tailor housing and dining services to "international tastebuds," and create buddy programs like Georgia State's. They also should provide intercultural training for members of the campus and the community, career services for international students that focus on the global job market, and service-learning programs for international students, she says.

Andrade, of Utah Valley, recommends that institutions trying to retain more of their international students look to the best practices of more internationalized higher education systems. For example, at Australian institutions—where roughly a quarter of students are international, dwarfing U.S. institutions' single-digit percentage of international students—pathway and other transition programs are handled differently.

"The departments and disciplines are responsible for developing these students' English language skills, rather than having a separate stand-alone program," Andrade says. "I don't know of anything similar in the United States, but we need to learn from [Australia] and adapt the model to fit specific institutions."

Heather Housley, director of international student and scholar services at Georgia State, recommends that institutions do a better job leveraging their data on international students' academic progress in order to flag potential problems.

"Using data to identify students who are struggling academically and then connecting them with the support and interventions needed seems to be pretty obvious," she says. "But not all schools access this data regularly, or share it with the offices and individuals who can best assist the students." ■

**MENACHEM WECKER** is a freelance writer in the Washington, D.C., area.