



Getting to Work

How Career Services Offices Are Helping International Students Launch Their Professional Futures

By Charlotte West

I**NTERNATIONAL STUDENTS** are increasingly focused on how a degree earned abroad will advance their career prospects, and U.S. universities and colleges are responding. Facing increased competition abroad and restrictions on immigration at home, international student offices are focusing on job outcomes, partnering with career services, and looking at employability as integral to their recruitment strategies.

When Cheryl Matherly was on a recent recruitment trip to India, the importance of employability for international students hit home through her conversations with alumni, high school counselors, and the parents of prospective students. “Families were expressing concerns about the ability of their sons and daughters to be able to get a job after getting a degree in the United States,” she says.

As the vice provost for international affairs at Lehigh University, Matherly has subsequently convened an international student career development task force that will be charged with finding ways to support Lehigh's 1,100 international students in their professional development. "We're not just adapting the programs that we already do for our domestic students. We are starting by looking at the needs of this population and thinking about how to design distinct programs and services to meet those needs," she says.

Matherly sees career services as part and parcel of the admissions and recruitment pipeline: "One of the things we're discussing at Lehigh is the very particular relationship between our ability to recruit and attract top international students and their expectations to be able to find a job after they graduate."

While still currently under development, Lehigh's career services that specifically target international students include job shadowing, extending the use of curricular practical training (CPT), and leveraging their international alumni network to create a mentoring program.

Dealing With Uncertainty About Postgraduate Training and Employment

The increased focus on future job prospects for international students at Lehigh and other institutions coincides with growing uncertainty about immigration and postgraduation employment options in the United States. While the value of a U.S. degree in getting a job is often cited as a factor in international students' decisionmaking, the current political climate has given the conversation new urgency, especially as countries like Canada have recently taken steps to make education a path to eventual citizenship. A recent survey by World Education Services (WES) found that 73 percent of international students said the ability to gain U.S. work experience before returning home or going to another country was an important factor in their decision to study in the United States.

In April 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump issued an executive order, "Buy American and Hire American," which suggested a tightening of rules related to the hiring of foreign skilled workers through the H-1B visa scheme. U.S. officials have subsequently increased the scrutiny of foreign workers and some countries, such as India, report increased visa denial rates since the order. There has also been concern among the higher education community that the current administration might attempt to rescind President Barack Obama's two-year extension of optional practical training (OPT), which allows international students in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields to work in the United States for up to 36 months after graduation.

"There are a lot of questions about what's going to happen with the H-1B program and the OPT STEM extensions. Some students who are doing STEM degrees are wondering if OPT will even be in place when they finish their degrees," Matherly says.

The effects of the uncertainty are being felt across all types of higher education institutions. According to the 2017 Open Doors

data from the Institute for International Education (IIE), there are 10,000 fewer new international students studying in the United States in 2017–18 than there were in the previous academic year. This is the first time new enrollments have declined in the last 12 years.

"In keeping with the national trends, we've seen the same decrease. This really boils down to the fact that students have concerns about investing time, money, and effort with a diminishing sense of the potential for opportunity to work in the United States at the end," says Ana M. Rossetti, assistant dean of academic administration and student affairs at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chicago.

Students are not the only ones experiencing anxiety. Career service professionals have seen an increased hesitance among the employers they work with. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) *Job Outlook 2018* report, the percentage of employers that expect to hire international students has dropped for three years in a row to 23.4 percent in 2017. In contrast, more than a third of employers planned to hire international students in 2015.

Some experts say this points to the need to prepare students for the possibilities of going home. The New York Institute of Technology (NYIT), which won the 2015 Simon Award for Campus Internationalization, leverages its alumni network to help students find job and internship opportunities in their own countries or globally. In China, NYIT also works with other U.S. institutions to organize career fairs in Beijing and Shanghai.

Employer Outreach Key to Creating Opportunities for International Students

Universities and colleges have recognized the need to educate both employers and students on immigration regulations and postgraduation work opportunities in the United States. A common practice at many institutions is to bring in an immigration attorney who explains the process in detail.

"A lot of employers are not really sure about what it means to sponsor students. So we invite employers to come and talk to the students and also invite an immigration attorney to talk to both of these groups and answer the questions that students and employers may have around OPT and H-1B. The attorney demystifies the entire sponsorship process and then [both employers and students] feel a little more comfortable about the process," says Shahzad Hussain, senior associate director of the Stuart School of Business Career Management Center at IIT.

Hussain says they also hold regular CPT and OPT workshops for international students so they can answer any questions employers might have about regulations during interviews. "Knowledge of CPT, OPT, and H-1B definitely helps the international students and alumni in advocating for themselves with potential employers. There are several employers who are unaware of the CPT and OPT provisions of the F-1 student visa and employers generally misunderstand that any time they have

to hire an international student they will need to sponsor the student,” he says.

Other institutions actively try to develop relationships with employers who are open to hiring international students. Mark Presnell, executive director of Northwestern Career Advancement at Northwestern University, says they routinely talk to employers about the ways in which they can hire international students—and the benefits of doing so. “Our goal is to connect students in our systems and at our events to employers that are supportive of their visa status,” he says.



Lehigh University’s Center for Career and Professional Development asked the Office of International Students and Scholars to develop a two-page guide for employers that provides basic information on terminology, different work authorization options, social security, taxes, as well as a list of the benefits of and myths about hiring international students. The guide was authored by the director of international student services, Samba Dieng, and is used by the career center in its employer outreach.

“We have tried to do [employer outreach] more in terms of getting good information out there and then focus on trying to help individual students with networking,” Matherly says.

Institutions Create Opportunities for International Students to Gain Practical Experience

The 2017 WES survey found that while international students were generally satisfied with résumé assistance and career-focused workshops provided by career services offices, they were dissatisfied with services that help connect students to jobs and internship opportunities. This dissatisfaction can often be exacerbated

by a lack of on-campus jobs, which is the primary form of employment available to international students.

To help ensure that international students can find on-campus jobs, NYIT allocates \$25,000 a year to fund positions for international students. According to Executive Director John Hyde, the Office of Career Services and Alumni Relations also tries to create unpaid volunteer opportunities for international students where they still have an opportunity to develop professional skills. For example, the institution has received a grant that allowed it to reimburse international students for transportation costs to get to and from volunteering in an after-school program.

Other institutions, especially at the graduate level, are building opportunities for students to gain professional experience into the curriculum. All first-year, full-time graduate students enrolled at IIT’s Stuart School of Business who have not completed at least six months of professional work in the United States must participate in the two-semester Advancing Career and Education (ACE) program. Completing ACE is both a graduation requirement and a prerequisite to do an internship later on.

In the first semester, students are required to attend workshops on cultural differences, workplace norms in the United States, goal setting, time management, interpersonal communication, and job search skills, among other topics. They also develop a résumé and participate in informational interviews and networking events. During the second semester, they are assigned to teams that work on a project for a local company. The opportunity to gain professional competence by working on a real project for a company is embedded into the program, says director Curt E. Allee.

Close Collaboration is Required

Professionals in both the international education and career services fields have recently recognized a growing need to serve international students. Career counseling organizations such as the National Career Development Association (NCDA) and the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) have increased their focus on international students. A 2015 NCDA survey of career services professionals found that more than half of career services centers offered customized programs for international students. However, a student survey conducted at the same time reported that more than half of international students responding to the survey had never utilized career services on their university campuses.

The 2017 WES survey similarly found that 43 percent of international students were unfamiliar with the services offered by career centers, which speaks to the need to do greater outreach