

By Marian Kisch

International students have a difficult road, dealing with issues their domestic counterparts do not: adjusting to a new country's norms and culture, learning new skills, and abiding by numerous regulations to find work upon graduation.

# Helping International Students Navigate Career Options

**NAVIGATING THE WATERS** from a college degree to an internship or job in the United States is fraught with obstacles for international students. Networking is often an alien concept. Informational interviews are rarely on the radar. A simple handshake after an interview is not an automatic response for all. Add to that the myriad of government regulations.

Enter career centers and international student advisers, who help foreign students plot a course to jobs in the United States or abroad. Although most international students initially intend to return home after receiving their degree, many change their mind.

International students have a difficult road, dealing with issues their domestic counterparts do not: adjusting to a new country's norms and culture, learning new skills, and abiding by numerous regulations to find work upon graduation. Back home, many jobs are obtained through the extended family.

The numbers of international students coming to the United States are growing. In the last academic year (2013–14), international student enrollment increased 8.1 percent over the preceding year, bringing the number of international students in the United States to a record high of 886,052, according to the 2014 International Institute of Education's *Open Doors* report. At many institutions, there are substantial numbers of international students in the entire student population, which demonstrates the growing need for guidance from institutions about what they will do upon graduation.

### Balancing Expectations

Many international students feel a great deal of pressure to secure a job upon graduation, says Vera Chapman, Colgate's associate director for career development. Their parents have invested a lot of money to send their children to a U.S. university and they expect a lot in return. "For foreign families, having a respected position that earns a good salary may trump what the student is passionate about. We try to help students find a career that marries familial and cultural pressures with their passion. It's a delicate balance."

Martin Tillman, president of Global Career Compass and former associate director of career services at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C., agrees. "The principal driving force for international students is the return on investment. Costs for education are increasing and the marketplace is more competitive, making it more difficult for bright, motivated international students to secure good jobs."

### Teamwork Pays Off

While career offices concentrate on vocational aspirations, developing skills, and providing contacts, international student and scholar services offices handle compliance issues such as visas, employment records, and employment authorization. Together, they provide the tools an international student needs to obtain employment in the United States or abroad, or to go on for further education. One-on-one and group sessions, orientations, and workshops, as well as information on the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program—a one-year Department of Homeland Security (DHS) authorization for employment related to their major after graduation—are included.

Because of increasing numbers, some career services departments have designated a special counselor to work exclusively with this cohort. In 2013 Sarah Bang became the first career counselor for international students at Berkeley. Vanina Granell, an international student and scholar adviser from the Berkeley International Office, acts as a liaison, attending international student career programs and answering work-authorization-related questions. "It's a great opportunity for students to get their questions answered all in one place," Bang says.

Colorado's business school also has a dedicated international student counselor at its Career Management



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Center who works closely with the university's Office of International Programs and the University Career Center.

Campuses that align student affairs support services within their broader policies for recruiting international students are likely to be most successful, according to Tillman: "There is also a direct linkage between development of campus internationalization policies and support for allocating necessary services and support for international students."

### **Overcoming Cultural Hurdles**

"When working with international students, we have to perform a cultural dance," Cheryl Matherly, vice provost of global education at Tulsa, says. "We don't want students to get the message that they need to change their culture in order to work in the U.S., but at the same time we have to talk about how things work differently here."

This includes everything from résumés and interviews to dress style. For example, when a foreign student showed up at Colorado's career fair in elaborate native dress, the counselor delicately explained to her that this was not appropriate for a job interview in the United States.

### **Enhancing Job Skills**

The needs of international students—learning to write résumés, interview, and network

"in the American way"—are very different from those of domestic students.

In many countries, résumés include a photograph of the candidate, as well as a listing of work experience. In the United States, the résumé is seen as a marketing, self-promotion piece. Inclusion of specific accomplishments is a must to boost the value of international students. This can be difficult because it is considered "boastful" in some countries. But, Matherly says, employers are looking for people who are independent, problem solvers, and self-starters, so that has to be reflected on the résumé and cover letter.

In the United States, good interviewing and networking techniques are prerequisites for job seekers. Career centers spend a great deal of time prepping international students in these skills. Mock interviews are vital to increase self-confidence.

Maria Yusuf, who came to Colorado State from Nigeria, agrees: "The mock interviews taught me what to expect, how to sell myself, and how to show employers that my skills match what they are looking for."

"We also help our international students become comfortable with the small talk that goes on during interviews," Chapman says. "Those conversations are often not common in their culture."

Informational interviews are critical to helping international students learn about

a particular industry. Bang encourages one-on-one meetings, starting locally, with past interns, alumni, and professionals.

When Yusuf decided to change the direction of her career from finance to human resources, her counselor encouraged her to meet with the HR manager in the business department. That paid off. "The informational interview helped prepare me when I applied for an HR summer internship at an engineering company and led directly to my current job." When the business college HR manager took another position, the career center notified Yusuf, who was subsequently tapped for the opportunity.

### **Creating Connections**

All career counselors attest to the importance of networking, using every opportunity to make contacts with those in your chosen field, in both the corporate and nonprofit arenas. By bringing alumni and employers onto campus, career centers create opportunities for international students to connect with those who might aid in their job search. Panel discussions, career symposiums, and informal get-togethers provide insight into specific industries, as well as useful contacts.

At Berkeley, panel discussions made up of current international students who have had internships and have job offers, alumni, and employers offer practical information to

inspire students to seek out internships. “Alumni are eager to help international students because they know what it’s like and want to give back,” Bang says.

Networking events and career fairs in various cities such as New York City, Washington, D.C., Boston, and Chicago link international students with employers and alumni [all institutions mentioned in this article host such networking events]. Each year Colgate introduces students to diverse industries such as real estate, entertainment, and the nonprofit sector through two-day immersion trips to top U.S. cities.

Affan Mian, a Colgate graduate originally from Pakistan now working at Ernst & Young in New York City, credits his trip to Washington, D.C. with giving him the sense of the “larger world out there. I met with Colgate alumni from government and nonprofits.”

Mock interviews at the Colgate career center were especially helpful when Mian interviewed with the professional services firm on campus. He worked at Ernst & Young this year through an OPT visa but will continue full-time next year because the company is sponsoring him for an H-1B visa. Currently he is a business adviser, working on projects such as anti-money laundering. But he’s leaving his options open to work in nonprofits at a later date.

**Online Tools**

Online sites play an important role for international students. At LinkedIn, students can search by key words and put up their profiles. Sites that list employers who have hired international students are also helpful resources to peruse.

In January of this year, Berkeley created a LinkedIn group, UC Berkeley International Student and Alumni Network, so students and alumni can connect for informational interviews and career networking. Bang reports that the group currently has more than 800 members.

At Colorado State, international students use Going Global to search by country, industry, or native language. The site also provides information on visas, résumés, and work permits.

**Targeting Employers, Too**

Career centers also have another target audience: employers. Some may not understand what is involved in hiring an international student while others believe it will be too much trouble. Establishing relationships with business is important to the job search effort. Berkeley developed an online guide especially for employers on its website. *U.S. Employer’s Guide to Hiring UC Berkeley International Students* outlines the details they’ll need to hire an international student, either for an internship or a permanent position.

Counselors also gather feedback from employers and alumni that may prove valuable to their young charges, some gleaned from interviews employers have had with international students.

“We try to help companies understand why it is in their best interest to hire international students for internships,” Matherly says.

**Positive Outcomes**

Although career services offices have had many successes placing international students, it’s not a sure bet.

Bang recalls experiences with two recent graduates. An Indonesian transfer student wanted to get into the investment banking field. “She absorbed everything I told her, networked, and went to numerous information sessions with employers.” Although she had multiple offers in New York, she opted for a position in Singapore.

A Chinese student who wanted a job in a large accounting firm had low self-esteem when she first met with Bang. But after several meetings the student became more confident. She landed an internship in San Francisco and received a return offer. She is now eager to be on alumni panels to share her experiences.

Susan Schell, director of Colorado State’s Career Management Center, tells international students the probability of getting a job in the United States goes up the more they work at it. She recalls a “tenacious” Chinese student who made more than 100 contacts. She’s now working at a U.S. investment banking company.

**Being Realistic**

Although career counselors would like nothing more than being able to place all international students in jobs they’d like and in places they desire, the reality is that few accomplish that goal. The



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challenge, according to Matherly, is to manage student expectations. "We need to set realistic hopes regarding the likelihood of finding a job."

"We have to make sure they understand they have limited work eligibility and urge them to be flexible," Chapman says. When a senior was offered an internship, she turned it down because she thought she would get something better. She didn't.

"It's hard for us as career counselors," Schell says, "because we don't control the jobs. We're at the mercy of corporations and the country and their ability to absorb international workers. We want graduates to have hope but they need to be realistic, too. It's difficult to get through all the hurdles, especially when they are new graduates." Those with graduate degrees, in areas such as engineering, have an easier time finding employment.

Schell's team tries to help find OPT experiences so students can stay in the United States for at least one year.

According to Bang, large companies are often better able to sponsor international students, although some prefer those with graduate degrees. She urges international students to expand their options. "I try to encourage them to diversify the type of companies and consider other geographic locations. They should consider where the best jobs are: here, back home, or in another country."

If students don't secure a job, some will opt to continue their education. Yusuf, who says it would be unsafe for her to return to Nigeria at this time, hopes to get sponsored for a visa. If that doesn't work out, she plans to go back to school for a master's degree in HR management.

### Going Forward

Each university has a different policy regarding working with international students after they graduate. At Colorado's business school, "we own them for life," Schell says.

Many graduates stay connected through email, telephone, or Skype to find help with future job searches.

International students find their experiences with career services to be predominantly positive. "The experience I had with the career center was very constructive," Yusuf says. "They never got tired of me coming back again and again. Even if something didn't work out, they had my back. Each time they clued me in about the things employers were looking for in terms of specific skills, and helped me adjust my résumé to fit the new requirements."

"Our goal is to support student success," says Christina Khan, assistant dean and director of international student services at Colgate. "It's a collective effort that involves many campus partners." **IE**

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