

By Susan Ladika

Getting Through: How International Education Leaders Can Let International Students Know They're Welcome

FOLLOWING AN UNPREDICTABLE and in many ways challenging 2017, international students who are considering study in the United States have plenty of reasons to feel as though the U.S. welcome mat has been rolled up.

"The biggest concern that I'm hearing is uncertainty," says Martyn Miller, assistant vice president in the Office of International Affairs at Temple University in Philadelphia. Miller travels the world on recruiting missions. Prospective students want to know, "If I come, will everything be fine? Will I be welcome? Do people want me there?" he says.

But U.S. campus leaders, from the president's office to the senior international officer to international enrollment managers, are working overtime to counter that perception. From person-to-person connections to specially tailored welcome videos to greeting international students at a distant airport, colleges and universities want students and parents abroad to know they will be joining a campus and community that want them to be there.

Reaching Out

Temple University in November 2016 released the first of three videos in the #YouAreWelcomeHere campaign. The videos use the hashtag to reinforce the message that international students are welcome at U.S. institutions. So far, more than 300 colleges and universities from around the United States have gotten on board the marketing and social media campaign.

"The more voices that join our campaign, the louder and stronger our message will be," says Jessica Sandberg, director of international admissions at Temple, who spearheaded the campaign.

"Students panicked over the first travel ban, regardless of what country they are from," says Cassy Tefft de Munoz, the director of international programs and services who serves in the senior international officer role at Michigan Technological University in Houghton, Michigan.

That need is also fueled as "the tragic events that have occurred in other parts of the country challenge our nation's values and the advantages of an American

education," Tefft de Munoz says.

One way that Michigan Tech, located in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, works to create a welcoming environment is through its International Arrivals Program. New international students are met at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago by a group of current international students and then transported to a venue where they are served food and regaled by Chicago-area alumni with stories of their student days. The new students then travel by overnight bus to the university's campus, Tefft de Munoz says.

There, they receive goody bags filled with snacks and are connected to local resources, such as cell phone and banking services. They also take part in field trips, ice cream socials, and bonfires on the beach, she says. "The entire university community comes together to ensure that new international students are both welcomed and integrated into our community."

Information about those welcoming experiences is being shared by word of mouth in countries such as India, where many of the Michigan Tech international students come from, Tefft de Munoz says.

Safety First

Parents of prospective international students seem to be particularly concerned about the situation in the United States. "Safety is of course paramount," Miller says. "But the environment on the ground is not quite what they hear about in the papers."

Institutions such as Temple are showing the #YouAreWelcome video when staff attend international recruitment fairs.

Sandberg spearheaded the campaign after seeing a video that the Study Group produced for six of its university clients in support of diversity. Temple produced its own video—and "just begged people to steal it," she says.



Now Temple has produced three videos—one featuring current and prospective students, one interviewing people in Philadelphia about what international students mean to them, and one with U.S. students and faculty discussing why it's important to have international students. “The spirit of welcome is not just isolated to the international student office,” she says.

At the University of Florida, President W. Kent Fuchs offers a welcome statement tailored specifically to international students and their parents, and featured on the university's website. The statement is also handed out at international college fairs and visits to high schools. “We felt it was necessary to jump ahead of this. We want them to know the University of Florida is a welcoming environment,” says Chandra Mitchell, interim director of freshman and international admissions.

The university also has produced videos featuring current international students, describing what their experiences have been like at the Gainesville, Florida, school. Newly admitted students will be able to Skype with alumni to discuss their concerns about life and education in a new place, she says. “Seeing someone face-to-face to talk helps them relax and ease their fears.”

Warming the Welcome

The University of Pennsylvania has also launched a number of programs to help international students feel welcome. “We have to provide support and services in this climate that will make them fully integrate into the United States,” says Rodolfo Altamirano, director of international student and scholar services, who himself was an international student from the Philippines in 1983.

When the travel ban was first introduced, Penn brought

in lawyers, pro bono, to provide advice for students.

Indian and Chinese students who have been accepted to the university can take part in Forerunner, a one-day orientation session offered in their home countries. The program allows incoming students and their parents to learn more about the university and life in the United States from current students and alumni.

Other programs include the International Leadership Program, which provides a forum for conversations between international student leaders and Penn administrators. “Students feel heard, welcome. Administrators feel connected to the students,” Altamirano says. Meanwhile, the Intercultural Leadership Program, which brings together international and U.S. students, is designed to make the transition easier for international students.

At Michigan Tech, new international students take part in a mandatory, seven-week noncredit acculturation class, where they learn about such diverse topics as how to watch out for scams, Title IX regulations, the best way to prepare a car for winter, and how to make American friends, Tefft de Munoz says.

The class “frames their experience in a positive way,” Tefft de Munoz says. “If it starts out on the wrong foot, it's hard to turn around,” and the school has seen transfer rates decline as a result of the course.

The administrators, alumni, students, and faculty working together to welcome international students at Michigan Tech have come to see “international students are the responsibility of the entire campus,” Tefft de Munoz says. That helps international students “adjust and acclimate more quickly, in a better way.” ■

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