

Part 2:

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETH

The second half of a two-part series on declining international enrollments explores how a combination of strategies can help keep international students coming.

To keep international students coming to the University of Colorado Denver - Anschutz Medical Campus, international enrollment management staff brief senior leaders to prepare for multiple scenarios.

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By Mark Toner

IT'S A LONG WAY FROM KATHMANDU TO KENT, Ohio, but this past fall, seven friends from Nepal—six undergraduates and one MBA student—all found themselves attending Kent State University. It's unusual for so many friends to attend the same U.S. institution at the same time, but they got there in an increasingly familiar way: another friend who had previously attended Kent State told Anit Kunwar about his experience there, Kunwar told his friends, and they all came to Ohio.

"Each of us is encountering our own once-in-a-lifetime experiences, but we have the advantage of being able to share them with each other, too," Kunwar says.

Nepal is a relatively new source of international students for many U.S. institutions, but Kunwar's experience serves as a reminder that, despite current challenges and ongoing shifts in student mobility that have slowed the overall growth trends in international education, not everything has changed.

"Even with all these shifting trends, when our students are happy, they will recruit for you," says Salma Benhaida, Kent State's director of international recruitment and admissions.



The power of word of mouth: A friend's recommendation brought these seven Nepalese students to Kent State University.

COURTESY KENT STATE UNIVERSITY



COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO DENVER

To be sure, the recruitment process is becoming more complex. For many institutions, it now involves greater investments in a wider range of countries and employing a broader mix of strategies. For others, it has involved a redoubled commitment to internationalization and support services. Above all, it has reinforced the commitment to internationalization on many U.S. campuses.

"I feel strongly this is not the time to reduce opportunities for dialogue and interaction for students abroad," says John Wilkerson, director of international admissions at Indiana University-Bloomington (IU). "This is a time to recommit to supporting those conversations."

Reframe Expectations

For many institutions, a starting point for rethinking international enrollment strategies has been stepping back and introducing campus leadership to a possibility that has been almost unthinkable for the past decade—that the flow of international students may slow, or even reverse, on their campuses.

"[International enrollment management (IEM)] professionals will be serving their institutions well by not always forecasting growth but being prepared to have a real conversation supported by data about where they may have plateaus or declines, in regions or overall, and getting ahead of that information," says George Kacenga, director of international enrollment management and international affairs for the University of Colorado Denver – Anschutz Medical Campus (CU Denver).



COURTESY UC BERKELEY EXTENSION (3)

It is important to involve senior leadership and finance officials in these conversations, he adds, so that "up or down in enrollment, the university is in a position to make the most of whatever situation is in front of us."

"It's about being prepared for what's to come," says Kacenga, who has involved CU Denver administrators in conversations about the potential budgetary impact of shifting enrollment trends. "It's more important to be able to plan for a known decrease than to continue a false expectation."

Reemphasize Commitment

Institutions may face a scenario where, as Wilkerson puts it, "we are likely to do more for less in terms of student return." To that end, IU has focused on in-country recruitment in a record 60 countries this year—covering both the top sending nations and emerging markets on "every inhabited continent," according to Wilkerson, but he argues that the rationale has as much to do with institutional mission as meeting projections.

"The work shouldn't be measured solely by the number of international students we enroll," he says. "There's much more at stake. The institutional commitment is really toward creating a global learning community. We're not going to shy away from our mission, regardless of what's happening politically."

And institutions are finding that committing resources to recruitment still reaps benefits. At the





Opposite page and left: To boost its international outreach, the University of California Berkeley Extension invested heavily in new staff and programming.

University of California Berkeley Extension, officials noticed an uptick in interest in its short-term programs for international students a few years ago and opted to invest significantly in new staff and programming to bolster international outreach, says Eddie West, assistant dean and executive director of international programs.

“Without realizing it, we started quickly swimming upstream,” says West.

But the commitment must extend beyond devoting new resources to recruitment and encompass broader internationalization efforts, which include changes in curriculum, programming, and supports for all students. At the University of Delaware (UD), for example, IEM and International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) officials collaborated to develop a capacity study of the college’s student affairs department and other services to support growing numbers of international students.

“It’s one thing to compete to get international students here, but in the event numbers grow, are we still equipped to be sure they have what they need to be successful?” says Ravi Ammigan, the institution’s ISSS executive director, whose own research focuses on the issue. “That’s an ongoing dialogue here, and that’s refreshing.”

Diversify—But Don’t Give Up

Many U.S. institutions began actively exploring recruitment efforts in new and emerging markets well before

recent international enrollment shifts. Now, admissions officers caution that the danger is in shifting strategies too quickly.

“We want to be very careful that our reactions are measured,” says IU’s Wilkerson. “There’s enough in flux right now that behaviors are shifting quickly. We’re giving ourselves enough time to gather new data and understand how the changes are impacting students in the countries where we interact and using that to inform new strategies.”

Effectively recruiting in new markets, however, requires new investments in everything from in-country events and recruiting to other forms of targeted outreach. “You have to have a presence there and a strategy,” says Kent State’s Benhaida. Paying for such initiatives “does require resources,” she adds.

At the same time, countries and regions impacted by global economic and political shifts should not be abandoned. For example, following cuts to Saudi Arabia’s generous scholarship program, Kent State worked with the country’s Ministry of Education and the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission to attract Saudi educators for a grant-funded immersion program; the program began at two U.S. universities and is now growing.

“Institutions should not pull their resources from those markets,” Benhaida says. “Other opportunities may come to you.”



COURTESY CU DENVER (2)



Shift Investments

Colleges and universities across the United States are also reallocating resources to prioritize face-to-face communication, particularly among the students most likely to attend.

Temple University held admitted student events in seven different countries this spring, including Brazil, Vietnam, Taiwan, and South Korea.

During these events, prospective students and parents meet face-to-face with officials, alumni, and parents of current students, as well as Skype with current students on campus.

Jessica Sandberg, director of international admissions at Temple, admits that the high yields from the events represent a bit of a chicken-and-egg question because the admitted students who attend are already leaning toward attending. Nonetheless, Temple has increased the number of these events from just one in China several years ago to multiple cities in China and India, as well as in emerging markets.

“Being able to go out in person makes a big statement about our commitment,” Sandberg says.

At the same time, controversies about working with education agents for recruitment continue to abate. According to surveys conducted by World Education Services, more than 20 percent of students worldwide use agents, as do about a third of U.S. institutions, according to Ian Wright, director of partnerships.

The issue that remains, however, is finding the agencies that align with institutional values and best practices. At CU Denver, agents’ commission structure is focused on retention over at least two semesters, according to Kacenga. The longer-term commission structure helps to deter a focus on quantity over qualified students.

Make Data-Driven Decisions

Investments in new regions and strategies can strain institutional budgets, so growing numbers of institutions are embracing data analysis and business intelligence systems focused on the return on investment (ROI) of recruiting.

Starting in 2014, CU Denver began analyzing different engagement strategies, including virtual platforms, social media, and campus visits, in order to answer the question of ROI on specific recruitment tactics.

“We realized we could not say \$10 spent on this platform resulted in five additional students because these students engaged in several modalities,” Kacenga says. But by tracking expenditures and student touchpoints over time through surveys and focus groups, CU Denver now has a much clearer picture about what engagement efforts work best—even if the students don’t.

“Word of mouth is the primary reason that our students say they decide to come to our institutions,” Kacenga says. “We can see with our data all the pieces coming together to have them think it was word of mouth. A lot of work went into that.”

At CU Denver, which attracts students from 75 countries, data have indicated that students who enroll are more likely to engage with at least two, and often more, modalities, according to Kacenga. “We need a diverse portfolio to attract these students,” he says.

Kacenga and others have developed a website with examples of ROI models that others can adapt; see page 31 for more information.

Prioritize Safety and Parent Outreach

U.S. institutions have responded to concerns about safety and the political climate with a unified voice to address the needs of prospective international students. The #YouAreWelcomeHere campaign, which has now spread to more than 330 institutions, communities, nonprofits, and organizations, presents a powerful message with a personal touch.

In James Madison University's video, for example, President Jonathan R. Alger recalls his own experience as a foreign exchange student in Japan, saying, "I understand the feelings of anxiety traveling to a foreign country can produce." The personal narratives from students, advisers, and faculty highlighted throughout the campaign reinforce messages of empathy and appreciation.

A social media survey found that more than 1 in 10 prospective international students are aware of the campaign; of those, 91 percent had a more positive feeling about the United States as a destination for their studies.

"I feel comfortable saying it's become the slogan for U.S. higher education abroad," says Temple's Sandberg, who worked to spread the campaign nationwide.

One surprise has been the impact on current international students and their families. One student told Lisa Meritz, Temple's director of international communications, "I knew it was a welcoming place and I didn't have any worries, but it meant a lot for my parents."

However, it is also important to speak to specific questions about safety—and not sugarcoat the answers. IU's Wilkerson says he has lost track of how many times he has been asked by prospective foreign students if he carries a gun.

"We have to be prepared to have very candid conversations with students," he says. "That's not where you can gloss things over and point to a pretty brochure."

Assuring parents about safety concerns is one way that institutions can develop good relationships. At Seattle University, Dana Brolley, director of international admissions, has developed the nickname M2—short for "Mum 2"—among her international students.

"This is a very personal experience they're going through—having their children far away," says Brolley. Particularly with more recent safety concerns in mind, "it's important to build that connection with a parent and let them know someone is going to care about their child," she says.

Temple's admitted student events represent an

opportunity to meet with parents "who are not necessarily on the receiving end of the campaigns during the year," says Sandberg. "It gives them a sense that we are committed to internationalization."

Develop Uniform Approaches

As international students become more attuned to the U.S. admissions process, institutions are moving to align recruiting, application, and scholarship processes with the ones followed by domestic students. For example, IU's International Admissions Department has spent three years working with its domestic counterpart to identify overlapping student populations, such as international students attending high school in the United States and U.S. students attending international schools abroad.

"What we have found is that providing service to students based on where they are rather than where they hold citizenship is a better experience," Wilkerson says. Admitted students attend hybrid campus visits and other programming and receive similar communications about the application process and scholarships.

Focusing on these overlapping student populations also helps admissions officers identify the students who Wilkerson calls "natural ambassadors."

"They know how to interact globally, how to create cultures and communities based on their experiences," he says.

Aligning the admissions experience often means increasing access to scholarships and financial aid for international students.

"Schools are looking at barriers to access for students and adjusting those where possible and increasing incentives," says Brolley. "That's increasingly going to be important as ROI becomes part of the decision-making process."

Create Transparent Online Models

Global students are growing more sophisticated about the entire admissions process and expect greater clarity and faster transactions.

"There's a generational and technology shift whereby all people have an expectation for quicker transactions," Temple's Sandberg says. "While there's traditionally been a mystique around the selection process, international students in particular are not as invested in that idea."

"International applicants and parents are becoming much more savvy," Benhaida says. "When you're presenting your schools to them, it has to be in greater detail."

Among other things, that means that it has become increasingly important for institutions to clearly

specify minimum accepted GPAs and SAT scores, as well as describe the application timeline in detail. Online platforms provide an opportunity to post extensive details about the process, including student profiles and admittance rates.

Building robust digital experiences isn't limited to applications processes. Hybrid and online models that provide pathways for virtual exchange programs are growing in popularity. Online-only programs are an opportunity to attract a growing cohort of international students who are older, place-bound because of family or career obligations, or price-sensitive.

"You have to segment your market," says Benhaida. "They're not the same student."

Some of these students may already participate in existing online programs; at CU Denver, for example, the number of international students enrolled in online business school programs was a surprise. But intentional efforts are needed to support international growth in online programs. At Kent State, a committee is working to target nontraditional students in India for online programs, including conducting focus groups to identify the right platforms, pricing, and technology for the market.

"We already have the products, but we're trying to tailor them and find the right marketing angle," she says. "There's a lot of legwork before you can launch."

Build Relationships

When CU Denver saw an uptick in applications from Nigeria, Kacenga held focus groups with Nigerian students on campus, but he also began overtures with colleges in the country to strengthen those ties. CU

Denver has dozens of memorandums of understanding with international institutions—most of which are focused on specific academic programs or faculty—that will ultimately reap benefits in terms of both international student recruitment and study abroad programs for domestic students.

"These things build over time," Kacenga says.

IU's overall strategic plan has focused on creating regional Global Gateways in China, Europe, India, and Mexico to foster research, academic, and business partnerships to expand the institution's global reach. While recruiting isn't the primary focus of the gateways, they provide a focal point for student events—and tangible demonstrations of IU's investment in the world.

"If you are going to be a global university, you have to be a global university—it can't just be nice words and admissions statements," says Wilkerson. "There has to be action, and it has to be rooted in academic betterment and civil engagement."

Beyond international partnerships, many U.S. colleges are focusing efforts on international alumni groups, which can help with recruiting and internships.

Highlight Unique Benefits

As international audiences become more knowledgeable, opportunities exist to tout what makes the U.S. educational system unique. At Kent State, for example, Benhaida and staff discuss the lack of the rigid education/career tracks that characterize education in many countries.

"Now that schools are getting out and educating students, some are going 'I'm interested in music and can start over and am not locked into that track,'" she says.



Agnes Scott College developed a signature curriculum that emphasizes global perspectives and leadership development.

COURTESY AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE



The Summit curriculum was “designed for today’s woman,” says Nazanin Tork, Agnes Scott’s associate director of admissions.

COURTESY AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

As is the case with domestic students, it is becoming increasingly important for schools to differentiate. Agnes Scott College, which as a women’s college already has a niche, developed a signature curriculum called “Summit” as a differentiator. Now in its fourth cohort of students, Summit includes an emphasis on global perspectives and leadership development.

“It wasn’t designed for any one subtype, it was designed for today’s women,” says Nazanin Tork, associate director of admissions. However, when discussing the program with prospective international students, Tork and staffers focus on leadership opportunities such as internships and the opportunity to study abroad in a third country.

“Leadership development is important to them, so we do a good job of documenting what international students are doing in terms of internships,” she says.

Consider Alternatives

For some institutions facing declining international enrollments, it may be time to rethink the focus and redefine what internationalization means on their campus.

“Some are going to have to have a really honest assessment [as] to what extent they can expect to internationalize via international student enrollment—they may find that’s not a sweet spot for them,” says West at UC Berkeley. However, that doesn’t mean that these campuses should abandon internationalization.

“We tend to forget why we have international students on our campuses,” says UD’s Ammigan. “Originally it was to attract students and support diversity and add a set of values for students who don’t have the option to travel.”

To that end, institutions could refocus efforts to develop global curricula, education abroad programs, and customized short-term programs that give students from international institutions the opportunity to study and participate in U.S. internships that play off regional strengths. For example, UC Berkeley Extension has partnered with an Australian university to create a custom short-term program focused on entrepreneurship and innovation, building on its location in the Bay Area.

Above all, it is important to think through the strategies that work for a specific institution.

“Rarely is one solution going to solve an institution’s problems,” says UC Denver’s Kacenga. “We have to be smarter about understanding the students who are coming to us and the places they’re coming from to make sure the streams continue to be productive for us.” ■

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

#YouAreWelcomeHere Campaign
bit.ly/IE-YAWH

Return on Investment in International Education
bit.ly/IE-ROIIE

A Collaborative Programming and Outreach Model for International Student Support Offices
bit.ly/IE-Briggs

Saudi Arabia Building Leadership for Change Through School Immersion Program (past RFP)
bit.ly/IE-SAImmersion

IU Global Gateway
bit.ly/IE-IUglobal