

Beyond the Comfort Zone

Large groups of international students from a particular country or region pose a challenge for international offices trying to ensure that these students can integrate fully with the host campus community.

WHEN JING CUI LEFT HER HOMETOWN of Sichuan, China, two years ago to study at Michigan State University (MSU), her shyness and struggles with conversational English made her more comfortable hanging out with other students from China—who comprise nearly one-half of the campus' entire population of international students. But Cui was intrigued by American culture, so she began seeking opportunities to meet Americans and international students from other countries.

"I felt like it was really important for me to communicate with American students since I'm in the U.S.," says Cui, a supply chain management major. "That's why I started doing something to make myself engage with American students and the environment and to experience different cultures besides the Chinese culture."

Cui began attending weekly international coffee hour gatherings hosted by MSU's International Student Association, where she developed friendships with students from the United States and other cultures. As Cui immersed herself in campus life, she sharpened her English skills and emerged as a standout student leader. A mentor in her residence hall, Cui serves as vice president of the International Student Association and is a tutor for a finance class. She also is a member of MSU's Chinese Undergraduate Advisory Group (formerly called Project Explore), which was formed for the purpose of advising MSU's Office for International Students and Scholars and the Asian Studies Center on assessing issues of concern for Chinese undergraduates at the universities and seeking solutions.

"I think the most meaningful thing about coming to the U.S. to study is to meet people from the whole world," says Cui, who interned at John Deere last summer. "It's a lot of fun to know the ways people are different from me and to know we have some similarities as well."

The Challenge of Integrating

As the international student population grows annually, so does the challenge for international advisers across the nation. According to the November 2011 *Open Doors* report—published by the Institute of International Education (IIE)—the number of international students at U.S. colleges and universities increased by five percent during the 2010–2011 academic year. The top three sending countries are China, India, and South Korea, whose citizens make up nearly half (46 percent) of the total international enrollment population in the United States. Additionally, an increasing number of students from Saudi Arabia have enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities during the past five years, thanks to generous support provided by a Saudi government scholarship program.

Cui's initial hesitancy to integrate with the broader campus community and to reach out beyond her cultural group is a common reaction among international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities—particularly among those whose school attracts large populations of students from their home country or region. It's easier and more comfortable to form friendships with people from similar backgrounds—and that also helps to ease homesickness and culture shock. Even so, international students who fail to assimilate into the campus community miss out on the full U.S. cultural experience they were seeking.



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international student counselor at the University of Rochester.

“If they choose to make American friends, they may alienate friends from their home country,” Jolliff says. “So it’s almost like choosing one or the other—which is a scary thing to do if you’ve just arrived.”

Last year, Jolliff surveyed all of her campus’ international students—nearly one-half of whom are Chinese—to determine their needs and interests. Overwhelmingly, she says, international students expressed a desire to form friendships with U.S. students but were unsure how to do so. That led Jolliff to enlist the help of 16 upper-class students (both international and American), who volunteered to connect via e-mail or Skype with all 200 incoming international students before their arrival on campus last fall.

“I think you have to catch students before they get settled here,” says Jolliff, noting that some of the new students continued the connections with their mentors throughout their first semester. “We wanted to make it a natural thing for them to integrate, and this exposed them to a variety of different activities where they could interact with domestic students and students from other cultures.”

Tackling Integration

With increasing numbers of international students on campuses across the United States, international offices are ramping up

“It takes a great deal of effort [to integrate international students], and it’s a constant challenge that we all face,” says Heidi Gregori-Gahan, director of international programs and services at the University of Southern Indiana (USI), which has enrolled a large group of students from the Middle East—particularly Saudi Arabia. “I suppose it would be possible for someone to be here four years, get a degree, and go home, having only stayed within their own cultural group; But I think there is so much more to be gained and learned by interacting with people who are different from ourselves—learning from and teaching one another. The richness that happens when people share at the true level of cross-cultural understanding can open their minds and hearts, and they can become citizens of the world.”

Oftentimes, international students enrolled at a school with a large group from the same country or region will simply fall into a comfort zone of speaking in their native

tongue, says Rochelle Wallace, director of international relations at Otero Junior College.

“That shuts other people out, but they often don’t recognize it,” says Wallace, whose international student population of 24 consists of a large number of Latinos, including six from Venezuela. “They sometimes feel like they don’t have to speak English, but it does exclude some people.”

Wallace has tried overcoming that barrier by requiring all students who take daytrips with the International Relations Organization to speak only in English during the van rides.

“You may spend several hours riding in the van, and that’s a good time to bond,” Wallace says. “If we have an English-only policy, everyone has a chance to talk and jump in on the conversation.”

Students also may hesitate to mix in with the broader campus community out of fear of facing backlash from members of their native cultural group, says Molly Jolliff, an

programs and services that may provide outlets for international students to interact with their peers from other cultures. At MSU, for example, the Chinese Undergraduate Advisory Group—of which Cui is a member—has been a huge success in giving voice to the university’s fast-growing population of Chinese students and generating ideas about encouraging their involvement in campus life, says Peter Briggs, director of the Office for International Students and Scholars. Members of the group, which meets for two hours each week, are compensated and selected through a highly competitive application process.

The group has made numerous efforts to reach out to MSU’s Chinese students, including establishing a Renren site (the Chinese equivalent of Facebook, Briggs explains) as a forum for communicating about campus activities and disseminating important notifications. Two years ago, the group began hosting summer predeparture programs in China. The students plan and lead the program with support and supervision from Briggs’ office, hosting Q&A sessions for incoming Chinese students and their parents on a wide range of topics, such as U.S. culture and higher education, how to pay bills, obtaining health insurance, and moving into the residence halls. Last summer, the programs were conducted in Shanghai, Beijing, and Chengdu, with more than 400 incoming Chinese freshmen and their parents attending. They have been evaluated as a success, Briggs says, and will continue.

“The Chinese students are part of the solution, and it’s about letting them own the problem and advise us,” says Briggs, admitting that despite their proactive approach, some international students will choose not to fully embrace the U.S. study abroad experience. “The relationship we have with them, it’s such a deep and trusted relationship, and I think making them insiders to the nature of the problem is one of the rules of thumb to success.”

Greg Grassi, assistant director of the Office of International Students and Scholars at the University of San Diego (USD), observed that his campus’ large population of international students from Kuwait, Saudi

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Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, tend to be “clannish,” primarily associating with and seeking support exclusively within their group. He recruited Arabic-speaking students to send welcome e-mails to newly accepted Arabic students and involving them in orientation sessions. That has encouraged current Arabic students to become more involved on campus as well.

One of those students, Mohammed Al-Bader—a finance and real estate major from Kuwait—did not participate in on-campus activities when he first enrolled at USD in January 2009. After some time, however, Al-Bader decided to become more involved and was selected to be part of USD’s International Torero Squad, the group responsible for organizing and implementing orientation activities for USD’s international student community.

“When I first arrived, I was scared what American students might think [of me] if they knew I was from Kuwait,” says Al-Bader, who now lives with two American students. “People are different here, and the culture is very different from mine. It gave me more confidence and made me more outgoing to live with Americans.... I feel very welcomed and everyone is super nice.”

Bridging cultural gaps also is important for encouraging greater participation on campus. For the current academic year, 70 out of 200 international students at USI hail from Saudi Arabia. However, Gregori-Gahan and her staff began preparing the campus

for the uptick in Arabic student enrollment about five years ago, after winning a grant in 2006 from the U.S. Department of State to develop cross-cultural training materials and curricula. The effort included providing “frontline” training for campus personnel in areas such as housekeeping, security and food services, as well as developing a training video for law enforcement agencies.

“We knew this increase in the population of our Arabic students was happening,” Gregori-Gahan says, “so we decided to be proactive in terms of helping them engage in our community and helping the community understand Arabic culture.”

Shelby Harrington, an international student adviser in Santa Barbara City College (SBCC)’s Office of International Programs, developed International Student Ambassadors, a student leadership training program that recruits high-performing international students to mentor new international students. The students go through an eight-module leadership training program centered on cultural consciousness. This group sponsors activities such as volleyball tournaments, tailgate parties, and community outreach projects.

“Their focus is to develop events and initiatives to help new international students become more comfortable on campus and find their way into organizations or groups that fit their interests,” says Harrington, noting that SBCC hosts large populations from Sweden, China, and Japan. “We work on training the students in an outreach style, to find an authentic way to reach out to students and invite them personally to events.”

Creating a Positive U.S. Experience

Though some international students are more wary than others about participating fully in campus life, experts say integrating into the larger campus community is key to facilitating their adjustment to life and education in the United States.

“International students come here with the hope and assumption that they’ll make American friends, and they also want to learn more about American culture,” says Pam Haney, director of community connec-

A Population that Often Remains in a Silo on Campus— THE CHINESE

IN RECENT YEARS many institutions of higher learning have pursued an Asian recruitment strategy out of an earnest attempt to fulfill well-considered strategic plans to globalize their campuses and curricula, with the long-term goal of preparing U.S. graduates to compete in an interconnected global economy—an economy that will be increasingly dominated by China. To this end, U.S. college officials anticipated vibrant cross-cultural interaction through an array of international festivals and programs, as well as stimulating classroom discussions infused with Chinese perspectives on a spectrum of topics from politics to philosophy to business. On many campuses, this alluring dream has not been realized. Instead, many Chinese seem segregated and alienated from their U.S. peers and professors, creating a situation frustrating to all concerned, including the Chinese students themselves.

U.S. universities need to look inward to consider whether their staff, faculty, and student body might directly or indirectly be communicating a less than welcoming message to their Chinese student scholars.

A great challenge facing U.S. higher education today is how to engage Chinese undergraduates. The way forward appears to lie in a two-pronged approach of (a) creating a more inclusive academic and social environment for Chinese students, and (b) empowering them to move beyond a near total dependency on their Chinese peers. Achieving the first will require buy-in from senior administration and all key stakeholders, as well as a financial commitment. A number of universities opened the doors to a wave of Chinese undergraduates without first putting in place the essential infrastructure in terms of orientation, support services, and faculty training. As a starting place, initiatives colleges might consider implementing include:

- Redesigning new student orientation programs to address the kind of adjustment challenges (social, academic, and psychological) that are unique to Chinese students, assigning them U.S. “ambassadors” to help them settle in and find their way around campus during the first few weeks of the first semester.
- Providing cross-cultural training for academic advisers, office staff, faculty, and students¹
- Creating living-learning dormitory communities around a Sino-American theme, with U.S. residents carefully selected and trained to ensure a harmonious, welcoming, and interactive atmosphere²
- Hiring bilingual (Chinese/English) counselors so that in times of personal crisis, students might articulate their concerns without fear of miscommunication.
- Tracking student performance in courses outside of their major and, in consultation with the campus intensive English program, establish a recommended sequence for taking distribution requirements based on the language demands of given courses (for example, identifying for first-year students those classes with lighter reading and writing loads and those requiring less prior schema about Western philosophy, literature, history, government, etc.)

Such first steps might go a long way toward conveying to arriving Chinese undergraduates that the institution is invested in their success and well-being.

This is excerpted from “Chinese Students in Undergraduate Programs: Understanding and Overcoming the Challenges” by Scott G. Stevens, which is available online at www.nafsa.org/chineseundergrads.

ENDNOTES

¹ S. Z. Nassim, “The World Is Knocking on Our Doors: Examination of the Experience of First Year Undergraduate International Students and Support Services Programs Available to Them at the University of Delaware,” (Unpublished dissertation, 2011).

² Ibid, page 121.

tions in Global Education Office at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), which hosts large groups of international students from India, China, and Saudi Arabia. “Though their main focus is to achieve their academic goals, we don’t want them to lose

sight of the fact that having new experiences and meeting new people—from the U.S. and other cultures—are things that help shape them and are great things to take home with them. We want them to have a well-rounded experience here, we want them to

have a positive experience here, and that is not just in the classroom, but outside the classroom as well.”

Grassi, Harrington, and Briggs emphasize the importance of involving the upper class to international and domestic students in outreach efforts. These student leaders can be effective at generating ideas and at identifying solutions to encouraging greater participation by other international students.

“Leveraging student resources is a great way to reach out to students and is a huge step in making connections in the community,” Harrington says.

Carola Smith, senior director of international programs at SBCC, also recommends maintaining a balance within the international student populations. Her office works closely with SBCC’s admissions department to limit any one nationality from becoming “disproportionately large,” (or approximately more than a third of the total international population).

“If any one group becomes disproportionately large, we think that is not a good learning environment for students from that particular country or the other students,” says Smith, noting that more than 70 nationalities are represented at SBCC. “It may not be a popular approach at all institutions, but we think it’s important in the long run to have a viable program that can be diverse.”

Fredrik Lunderquist, a third-year SBCC student from Sweden, believes that international students should embrace the education abroad experience and integrate fully on campus. For him, doing so has developed self-confidence and created a lifetime of happy memories.

“Every day, I am so happy that I took this step of moving away from my family and being in charge of myself and growing as a person while learning a new language more fluently and just pursuing my education,” Lunderquist says. “To me, it’s important to get out in society and spread your wings and become someone.”

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