

By Dana Wilkie

Alumni are key players when it comes to recruiting and retaining international students at U.S. universities.

# A Remarkable Resource— International Alumni

**TWICE A YEAR**, Eduardo Ulloa sits in a roomful of American University graduates—international students who may soon return to their home countries to find jobs or continue their studies—so he can prepare them for what they’re about to encounter.

Their approach to the world—from their newfound sense of independence to their humor—may now be dramatically different from that of the people they left behind. It could be jarring to discover that they no longer enjoy the living space they’d grown accustomed to while abroad. They may find it hard to blend in, and may even feel alienated from the friends and relatives they once knew so well.

“Having left Colombia right after high school, most of my adult life had been spent” in the United States says Ulloa, who earned his bachelor’s in finance and accounting from Bentley University, an MBA from George Washington University, and a graduate certificate in international economic relations from American University (AU). In between his studies, he spent 15 months back in Colombia. “By living again with my family, I was no longer the 18-year-old who left nine years earlier, but an adult with opinions and ways of doing things. It was challenging to all of a sudden lose the space and independence I had acquired. So it was natural to have conflicts.”

Ulloa, now a marketing and business intelligence manager at Envision Consulting LLC in Alexandria, Virginia, participates in a program AU started in 2009 that supports young men and women who are returning to their homelands after graduating from a U.S. institution. Alumni talk about their own experiences and suggest ways students can find support back home as they search for jobs and re-acclimate to their home country.

Alumni such as Ulloa are key players when it comes to recruiting and retaining international students at U.S. universities, and helping them make a relatively smooth transition when they return home to a country that may have changed politically or socially—or may not have changed enough to keep pace with the students’ experiences—and to relatives and friends who may have difficulty understanding the experiences students like Ulloa encountered while abroad.

“What you don’t realize is that while you are away, you are changing—knowledge-wise and professionally,” said Senem Bakar, who is director of AU’s International Student and Scholar Services Office and who started the 2009 program.

A native of Turkey who attended postgraduate programs at D.C.’s Catholic University of America and at AU, Bakar returned to her homeland as a government economist for about two years.

“I was so excited about sharing what I had learned with my [Turkish] workplace, but no one seemed to be interested,” she recalls.

Bakar had changed socially, and that became a source of some friction when she was back in Turkey.

“I had an office colleague who was a heavy smoker, but I didn’t say much about that” before leaving for the United States, Bakar said. “When I returned, I found myself more assertive and I voiced my concern that it was bothering me too much. [The colleague] didn’t receive that very well because in traditional Turkish culture, you don’t say things directly.”

Bakar piloted her alumni program after several graduating international students slipped into her office, closed the door, and confessed their worries about returning home. Since then, the program has become a regular fixture on campus.

Connecting graduating students with alumni from their homeland also “strengthens the alumni network by adding another connection,” said Sandy Soohoo-Refaei, who is director of study abroad for Point Loma Nazarene College in San Diego, California. “This can ease the stress of reentry, increase the number of job opportunities, develop friendships, and encourage a common bond and loyalty to the institution where they have shared an experience.”

## Overcoming Obstacles

Just as challenging for international students as returning to their home country is acclimating to a U.S. university, where different instruction styles, social norms, living arrangements, and even dating protocols can prove daunting. At international recruiting events, it's the alumni who can speak knowledgeably about these issues, and do so in the native tongue of prospective students and their parents.

Robert Hardin is assistant director of admissions for international recruitment at the University of Oregon in Eugene. He learned after a few bumpy experiences with international alumni at recruiting events in Asia that it pays to do your homework.

For instance, one University of Oregon alum from Hong Kong volunteered for a recruitment event and, without Hardin's blessing, walked around the room actively inviting attendees to Hardin's table—an overly aggressive move that led the event's organizer to reprimand Hardin.

After that, Hardin and his team began using Skype to interview alumni who wanted to help with recruitment, and to train them before they showed up at recruitment events.

"Not everybody is suited to sit behind a table and talk about a university," said Hardin, who has held recruitment events in Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuwait, and Bolivia, among other countries. "Skype allows you to see a person face-to-face. We also want to ensure that accurate information is getting out; we don't want to inflate anything. If somebody says, 'I have a 2.5 GPA and I want to get in,' the alum behind the table may want the kid to apply, but he can't say, 'Oh, you can totally be admitted.' That's just not true. We don't want to give people false hope."

Hardin also wants to give prospective parents an accurate idea of what to expect should their child move thousands of miles away to attend college.



"Often, young people are totally psyched to study in the U.S., but their parents are more reserved. They have to understand that they're basically not going to see [their children] for four years."

Last year, Hardin asked international alumni to participate in a prearrival orientation for accepted students from China to help prepare the newcomers for their university experience.

"The alumni were the ultimate key to the success" of the event, Hardin said. "We didn't anticipate some of the questions, like, 'Do we need to bring a pillow?' Having alumni there to talk in the local language to parents about where to shop—Bed Bath & Beyond, Target—was very successful."

Gretchen Dobson is a global alumni relations consultant and author of *Being Global: Making the Case for International Alumni*

*Relations* (CASE Books, 2011).

At recruiting and new-student events, she said, international alumni can ease anxiety with applicants by sharing their stories and tips for the application process, and for acclimating to a new school during the first year.

Alumni have "the most realistic understanding of what it means to be an international student—how it feels to apply, be accepted or rejected, the transition period preparing to leave the home country, and the early weeks at a new university and in a new country," Dobson said.

Ulloa tells new students to prepare themselves for sometimes lengthy, bureaucratic, and stressful processes when, for instance, finding a place to live.

"We don't realize that not having a credit history or Social Security number can make renting an apartment or getting a cell phone challenging," he said. "We never realize that getting a driver's license can be a complicated process."

And they must also anticipate social, cultural, and classroom differences.

"A very noticeable difference was the expectation by faculty that students should be active participants during lectures, and do a great deal of preparation in advance of each class," Ulloa said. "This can be particularly challenging for international students whose first language is not English, and they can find it difficult to balance a large workload and integrate into social life. I couldn't believe that I was responsible for reading north of 100 pages for each lecture, including many legal cases, and be prepared to discuss them in class."

Abe Schafermeyer, director of international student and scholar services at the University of Oregon, travels frequently to events hosted by university alumni chapters around the globe. There, he enlists former students to speak at predeparture orientations in

Beijing and Shanghai. That's particularly important for international students thinking about studying on a campus like his.

"This is the home of the Grateful Dead," he said. "This is where the hippies came in the '60s and it's a real alternative lifestyle, which isn't the image international students expect to see when they arrive in the U.S. International alumni talk about differences in our academic style—that [foreign students] can speak up in class, ask questions, and challenge the professor—who wears sandals and jeans and whom you call by their first name. I've heard Chinese alumni say, 'Get ready for this; it will seem strange at first.'"

Moreover, alumni are invaluable in advising new international students about how to get the most out of their social experience at school.

"I routinely hear [alumni say] 'I'm going to speak to freshmen about what I would have done differently had I arrived now,'" Schafermeyer said. "They could have benefitted from more clubs and organizations, and by making more American friends. There's a group on campus that started an 'I Love My Accent' campaign—a series of YouTube videos demonstrating that they were once afraid to order coffee or to raise

their hand in class because of their accents, but have now learned to love their accents."

### Recruiting Alumni

A few years back, alumni interested in recruiting students "just kind of fell into our laps," Hardin said. Today, his office is more proactive about building a network of former international students who can recruit newcomers. Three years ago, Hardin hired an assistant director for alumni recruitment who was charged with building an international recruiting network.

EducationUSA—a U.S. State Department program that promotes higher education in this country for international students—is an excellent resource for international alumni, Hardin said.

Many campuses have international peer adviser groups, which consist of current international students who help new students adjust to campus life, says Soohoo-Refaei. Advisers participate in student orientation seminars and are typically assigned a group of students so they can help them navigate their first week at school.

After Evelyn Levinson, AU's director of international admissions, first arrived on campus, she reached out to the school's ro-

bust network of international alumni living outside the United States and invited them to attend events with prospective students and parents. The latter "want to ask, 'Were you employable upon graduation?'" she said. "They want to know if their son or daughter will be in a safe environment and whether the investment they make will pay off. We want our alumni to be genuine; we never censor or screen what they say. So alumni get up and say, 'Everything's not perfect. Look, the dorms were a little shabby.'"

Dobson used to work at Tufts University in alumni relations. One of the first places she went to learn about including international alumni in recruitment and retention was the school's admissions office, where she found that alumni who were willing to interview prospective students were organized by regions around the globe. These international recruiters were able to cover much ground in Asia and Europe. She also found that one of the best ways to recruit alumni was to advertise on the school's website. While at Tufts, she had an online volunteer form that alumni could fill out if they wanted to attend recruitment or predeparture events for accepted students in their home country.

There are some approaches that don't work, Dobson advised. For instance, she warns against relying on a homogenous group of international alumni for recruitment, no matter their tenure or commitment.

"We want applicants to feel they can connect with those they speak to about the opportunity to attend the university," she said, noting that while at Tufts, some alumni volunteers in their 60s and 70s "still wanted to own and manage [the program] and meet the students, waxing nostalgically about the good old days at Tufts. So a prospective student is 18 and says, 'I need to know what things are like today.' We started to recruit younger alumni who graduated in the last 10 years." **IE**

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