

By Janet Hulstrand

Supporting International Students on U.S. Campuses

IN ADDITION TO CONTRIBUTING BILLIONS OF DOLLARS TO THE U.S. ECONOMY, international students contribute to both the academic community and society at large in many other ways, as educators well know. Given the current political climate in the United States, it is especially important to have plans in place to support international students as they arrive on and acclimate to campuses across the country.

Serving a Diverse Population

“Welcoming students from so many different backgrounds, cultures, and parts of the world can be very challenging,” says Dulce L. Dorado, director of the International Students and Programs Office at the University of California-San Diego (UCSD). “It is important to recognize the unique backgrounds and cultures that our students bring to our campus. There

may be a tendency to overgeneralize the international student experience and to expect existing campus services and programs to meet all of their needs.” However, she adds, despite the diversity, “There are common challenges that international students face. Being aware of what they are can help faculty and staff develop the sensitivities and skills needed to support students from a variety of backgrounds.”

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Part of making international students feel welcome on a campus includes facilitating social interactions with other students, as well as meeting their academic and health needs.

It's also important to consider the specific situation at each institution, says Ivor Emmanuel, director of the Berkeley International Office at University of California-Berkeley (UC Berkeley). "Schools should invest the time to engage in assessment, in order to better understand the needs of international students within their particular environment. Berkeley has engaged in such efforts on an ongoing basis, and we use that data to guide our work." For example, they have developed informational resources for students in advance of their arrival on campus, using a variety of social media tools.

Supporting Students' Academic and Social Needs

UC Berkeley has developed a robust program for the social integration of students as soon as they arrive on campus, including a popular peer mentoring program. "Ensuring that the unique needs of students are being met is a key role campus staff can play in support of international student success, and a close collaborative effort between academic departments and the international student office allows for a more nuanced and personalized experience for students," Emmanuel says.

The school developed a wide range of services designed to support both the personal and academic success of their international students and scholars. "One of our advisers has developed a program that focuses on academic success and provides students with tips on how to navigate the academic environment and the American classroom. Another is focusing on developing resources for academic advisers, to improve the advising experience of students," says Emmanuel.

In response to recent dramatic increases in international student enrollment, UCSD has also made a concerted effort to gather data and convene task forces and work groups consisting of administrators, faculty, staff, and international students, as well as student organizations with large international student populations, to evaluate their needs and concerns.

"What we have learned in the process is that the perspective of international students and the perspective of those who serve them are not always the same," says Dorado. "For example, faculty and staff identified English language needs and academic integrity as an area of growing concern for our international students. But the students prioritized availability of funding and on-campus housing for graduate students." She adds, "Both undergraduate and graduate students expressed concerns about being able to be meaningfully engaged, to make American friends, and to obtain gainful employment after completing their academic programs."

Dorado also emphasizes the importance of treating all student interactions as meaningful engagement that can help or hurt their experience on campus. "Taking the time to get to know students by asking them how they are doing and how they are adjusting






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to life in the United States can make a difference,” she says. “And it’s important to pronounce their names correctly!”

The International Students and Programs Office at UCSD also works with a language professor to conduct regular workshops for staff on how to pronounce Chinese names. “Some of our advisers have reported that students tell them that they are the first adviser that has actually pronounced their names correctly.” She adds, “Establishing rapport and trust is a very effective way to help students feel secure and comfortable on our campus. Hopefully, this will encourage them to return to that same person when they are seeking guidance in a difficult situation.”

Including Emotional and Mental Health in Campus Services

According to Emmanuel at UC Berkeley, a close collaborative effort between clinical counselors and international student

advisers is a key ingredient in working effectively with international students. “The student advisers can serve as cultural informants to the counselors, and together they can engage in outreach programs to help students and campus staff in addressing the mental health needs of students,” he says.

UC Berkeley developed a workshop to increase the sensitivity of academic advising staff who might need to have difficult conversations about academic progress with students. “It has turned out to be a very popular workshop that has been offered many times over,” Emmanuel says. He adds that placing clinical counselors in residence halls has also helped to remove the stigma for students who may avoid going to a counseling center for fear of being seen as having a “mental” problem. “This is a big reason why international students may avoid counseling centers and/or a Western style approach to getting help,” he says.

At UCSD, a collaborative partnership with Counseling & Psychological Services allows a counseling psychologist with expertise in international students to work in the international student office. Regular health and wellness workshops “help destigmatize the use of mental health services,” says Dorado.


Assuring International Students That They Are Welcome

In addition to the usual challenges for international students, recent changes in the political climate in the United States have introduced other concerns. “The travel bans issued last year targeting certain designated countries have had a negative effect on our international students,” Dorado says. “Many of them, especially those from the impacted countries, were very concerned about being able to travel and reenter the United States, complete their programs of study, and pursue employment after graduation. They also worried about travel for their family members, and about being harassed by government agents.”

In response to the travel bans, UCSD immediately sent out messages of support to all affected students, hosted community forums and information workshops with immigration attorneys, met with students to alleviate their concerns, developed wallet-sized emergency cards with key phone numbers and websites, and reached out by phone or email to affected students. “Although these efforts did not change the presidential proclamations, it reassured our students that they were welcome, supported, and appreciated on our campus,” says Dorado.

“How our international students are treated while they are in the United States can shape their opinion and impression of our country and our people. It is imperative that we continue to erode mistrust and misunderstanding, and promote good will to further world peace and mutual understanding.” ■

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