



Bridging Perception and Reality

By Karen Doss Bowman

The Value of U.S. Higher Education to International Students

AS A GRADUATE STUDENT from Karaj, Iran, Zhara Ameli Renani appreciates the sense of “somebodiness” she feels at Western Michigan University (WMU). In a speech to WMU’s Board of Trustees in June, Renani used the term—coined by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in describing the impact of the civil rights movement—to portray the feeling of respect, belonging, and worth she has experienced at the university.

Speaking in her capacity as vice president of WMU’s Graduate Student Association, Renani cited examples of how faculty and administrators have created a welcoming environment for international students, including creating a space for Muslim students to pray, pointing international students to campus resources for personal and academic support, and addressing students’ concerns promptly and with compassion. For example, a few days after President Trump imposed a travel ban on several Muslim-majority countries in 2017, one professor organized a panel discussion to answer students’ questions and address their fears.

“Somebodiness’ [comes from] these precious gifts all of you have been generous enough to share with us,” Renani told the trustees. “We have left so much behind to come here as international students....Despite all these struggles, our nervousness, moments of hesitation, and our uncertainty about what is waiting for us in the future, we are still here....Our presence comes along with hope, happiness, satisfaction, and a high sense of ‘somebodiness.’”



“I believed I would flourish here,” says Renani. “Coming to the United States has been a turning point in my life.”

The reality of Renani’s experience at WMU has, for the most part, matched the expectations she brought upon arrival in the United States 3 years ago. She had been told by family, friends, and colleagues that U.S. faculty members are generally accessible and interested in forming close working relationships with their students. Renani, who completed a bachelor’s degree at the University of Tehran, also had an image of U.S. citizens as welcoming and tolerant.

Like Renani, many students pursue higher education beyond the borders of their home countries, seeking additional educational and career opportunities and the chance to broaden their horizons. They come to the United States with high expectations for academic success, professional development, and personal growth. Are U.S. institutions meeting these expectations?

For Renani, the answer is “absolutely.”

“The United States is a country of countries—multicultural with different nationalities—and I believed I would flourish here,” says Renani, who will complete her master’s in marriage and family counseling next spring.

“As a Muslim woman, I had a great life in my country, but I didn’t have the freedoms I wanted, coming from a conservative country,” she says. “With that cultural background, I think it was harder for me at first to find myself here. Faculty members and others on campus have helped me to discover my talents, my interests, my skills. Coming to the United States has been a turning point in my life.”

The United States Remains the Top Destination

Though the number of new international students coming to the United States declined by 3 percent during the 2016–17 academic

year, the United States remains the top destination for international students, according to the 2017 *Project Atlas* report published by the Institute of International Education (IIE). IIE’s 2017 *Open Doors* report found that U.S. colleges and universities hosted a record high of 1.08 million international students—reaching beyond a million for the second consecutive year. This population comprises 5.3 percent of total students enrolled in U.S. institutions.

Why do so many international students choose to come to the United States for higher education? What do they perceive as the value of a U.S. academic experience?

The British Council’s 2018 *Student Insights* report offers clues to what prospective international students expect from their experiences abroad, as well as motivations for studying outside their home country. These expectations begin with the application process, says Michael Peak of the British Council.

“A key theme which arose from the data was the high value participants placed on their time,” says Peak. “This was evident in the rising number of institutions applied to at once and the shortening length of time by which applicants expected a decision to be made on their visa/university application, amongst other examples.”

Many international students are drawn to the United States because of the opportunity for a high-quality education and academic freedom, and a wide range of hands-on learning opportunities. Diversity in U.S. higher education is also seen as a strength. Often, international students are interested in a study program that is not available in their home country. They may desire, like Renani, to cultivate broader cultural and academic experiences, develop stronger professional skills, or boost their career options. The British Council report found that the top three factors that prospective students consider when choosing where to study are quality of education, enhanced career prospects, and desire for an internationally recognized qualification, says Peak.

“It is increasingly clear that students have many more choices regarding international study destinations, and so consider the complete ‘package’ on offer—not just the course, but the living environment, student experience, safety, career prospects, and employment opportunities whilst studying,” he says.

High-Quality Academic Programs

Academics are top of mind for many international students as they choose a study destination. U.S. higher education has a reputation for strong academic programs that emphasize the open exchange of ideas and access to resources, and many institutions provide additional academic opportunities students may not find in their home countries.

Deep Parikh, an international student from India, was intrigued by the United States’s reputation for having world-class educational facilities; diverse student populations; and leadership in innovation, research and development, and the business

of life sciences. A recent graduate of Keck Graduate Institute in Claremont, California, with a master's of business and science degree, Parikh believes that his U.S. educational experience has given him the professional skill sets and knowledge to be successful in the field of life sciences.

Now a sales intern with a biotech company in San Diego, California, Parikh says that his "expectations [for studying in the United States] have been validated" and that the overall experience has been "enriching."

U.S. colleges and universities offer an array of resources to help students succeed, particularly the ones who are struggling. These resources are especially helpful for international students who are often adjusting to an unfamiliar culture, language, and educational system.

When Siqi Wang arrived at the University at Buffalo (UB) from Changchun, China, she struggled to communicate with faculty and peers. She sought help at the university's writing center and engaged in formal and casual conversations to improve her English language skills.

"The quality of my work wasn't as good as my cohorts' work," says Wang, a PhD candidate in sociology who also earned a master's degree at UB. "I realized I needed to be better. It was tough, and I had to work on it. The support from individual faculty members and people in the [international student and scholar services] ISSS office was valuable."

Expanding Career Opportunities

In addition to strong academic programs, professional development and work opportunities in the United States play a large role in attracting international students like Parikh and Wang. "It's clear that career prospects are high in the minds of students when making their decisions about international study," says Peak from the British Council, based on the *Student Insights* report. Other research has shown that international experience in education can help to develop skills valued by employers, as well as strengthen global knowledge and intercultural understanding.

"There's a certain prestige that international students expect if they come to the United States and participate in a higher education program, get a degree, and perhaps go on to work for a U.S.-based employer," says Tina Rousselot de Saint C eran, director of international services at Clemson University and international scholar advising network leader for NAFSA. "That can often open doors for employment when they return to their home countries."

A second-year drama student at The Juilliard School, Rosie Yates believes that she will have more performance opportunities in the United States than in her native Australia. And she expects that the time spent honing her craft in New York City—home to Broadway and other renowned theatrical venues—will open many doors in the future.

Aspiring actress Rosie Yates came to the United States from Australia for the career opportunities that an education from The Juilliard School could provide.



"I'll be the first person to defend Melbourne, my hometown, and I love it to pieces," Yates says. "But it was really important for me to leave because I think America is opening the doors to a lot more diversity in the arts. That's really, really important and something I wanted to work with. So, it was just for the greater work opportunity that I left, and also Juilliard's reputation precedes it."

Like Yates, many international students come to the United States in hopes that their education will lead to internships and job opportunities upon graduation, whether in acting or accounting. While some hope to stay in the United States long term, others want to go back to their countries of origin to make a difference.

For Ricardo Saint-Aime, a Laspau Fulbright Scholar from Carrefour, Haiti, the desire to pursue an MA in the United States was sparked by his experience working for a decade with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in his country. Wanting to help solve the challenges Haiti faces with climate change and waste management, Saint-Aime enrolled in Clemson University's master's of science program in plant and environmental sciences to support his career goals.

"I'm aware of the challenges that Haitian agriculture is facing, and I wanted to have appropriate educational tools to help sustain agricultural production," says Saint-Aime. "I wanted to further my knowledge in conservation agriculture and community work development."

Preparing International Students for Employment

The prospect of employment in the United States seems to be a strong draw for international students. A study by the Pew

Research Center found that almost 1.5 million foreign students who graduated from U.S. institutions obtained Optional Practical Training (OPT) visas. Of those, 53 percent sought employment in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.

It is critical for colleges and universities to help students develop the professional skills and knowledge they will need to be competitive in the job market. The University of North Texas (UNT), located in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area, strives to build partnerships with local corporations, as well as tap into the expansive UNT alumni network to provide job shadowing, mentoring, and networking opportunities. These resources can help students gain practical training and guidance on résumé writing and interview skills.

“Our students are really hoping for an education that’s going to lead to career prospects,” says Lauren M. Jacobsen, director of UNT’s international student and scholar services and NAFSA Region III chair-elect. “They’re looking for training and education that then is going to translate to them getting their dream job. They can learn the skills and professionalism that they will take back to their home countries or continue working here in the United States.”

Cory Owen, assistant dean of international advisement and diversity initiatives at Juilliard, starts working with students from day one to educate them about work visas they may pursue upon graduation. Most Juilliard students will apply for an O-1 visa, a special type of documentation for international visitors who possess extraordinary abilities in the sciences, arts, education, business, or athletics. The visa application requires extensive documentation, including proof of performances at renowned venues, a collection of positive reviews in major media outlets, and evidence of awards received for performances.

“We try to be very proactive so that by the time our students graduate, they at least have the foundational knowledge to plan ahead,” Owen says. “Because performing arts is so much about doing practical experience, it is so vital for them to get their names out there and get those reviews before they graduate.”

Overcoming Challenges for International Students

For decades, the United States has enjoyed a reputation as an open and welcoming place for international students. However, the current political climate and uncertainty surrounding immigration laws are chipping away at that perception.

“The current negative is the trepidation that some students have about what the future is for immigration in the United States,” says Charter Morris, director of international student and scholar services at the University of Alabama and NAFSA Region VII chair-elect. “The news that they get has led them to conjecture about what the next steps may be. And whether that’s rooted in



The Juilliard School in New York City draws students from all over the world who want to pursue careers in music, dance, and drama.

reality or not, there’s some real fear about their chances of being able to seek potential employment or training opportunities in the United States after graduation.”

When students share their concerns with Nusha Shishegar, international student adviser at Keck Graduate Institute, she takes the time to explain the realities of current laws and the lengthy process that goes into changing those laws.

“When we have those opportunities, I think we’re able to better assuage some of their fears,” Shishegar says. “I try to explain that administrations come and go, and the United States has gone through these sorts of changes in the past but, overall, has remained a great place for international students.”

At Appalachian State University (ASU), the International Friendship Program was created to help ease students’ concerns about their safety while studying in the United States. The program pairs international students with local families for friendship and support. A similar program on campus, iPALS, matches international students with current domestic students at the university.

“We promote these programs in our welcome letter that we send with their I-20 [form] and really just try to send the message [before they come to campus] that there are plenty of Americans who are curious about our international students and want to get to know them,” says Lindsay Pepper, assistant director of international student and scholar services and outreach at ASU. “We are eager to welcome them to the community.”

Despite the changing geopolitical environment, many international students still view U.S. higher education as a great value.

“Amidst changing perceptions about the United States—especially among international students—it still remains the best country in the world to pursue higher education,” Parikh says. “It provides a fertile ground for professional and personal growth of students.”

Proving Value

Support international students—and help U.S. higher educational institutions deliver on students' expectations—by boosting their chances for success. Here are a few areas to start, based on areas of importance to international students:

Campus Engagement

Living and studying in a foreign country can be overwhelming and, at times, lonely. Add value to international students' experience on campus by helping them make meaningful connections with U.S. students and the larger community.

"Inclusion and engagement are certainly a need of all students—but for international students, it's even more important because they're so far away from their support networks," says Tina Rousselot de Saint Céran, director of international services at Clemson University and international scholar advising network leader for NAFSA.

Clemson University offers programs and services that encourage international students to engage on campus and meet other students. For example, a peer mentoring program matches newly enrolled international students with upper-class students who offer information, support, and friendship. Other activities such as coffee hours, excursions off campus, and international festivals can also help students form connections. (Read about more ways to do this on page 48.)

Academic Support

International students cite strong academics as the top value they seek in pursuing education in the United States, but they often grapple with adapting to a new academic environment and expectations. Deliver on their perceived expectations and ensure they are aware of the support services available, such as tutoring and writing centers. Educate faculty members on some of the common challenges international students face in the classroom, especially in relation to academic integrity and writing styles.

Though many international students may be proficient in English writing, they may struggle to carry on conversations

with native English speakers or understand classroom lectures. Offering English language and culture workshops or classes can help international students practice their listening and speaking skills.

Career Development

In addition to their studies, international students expect their educational experience in the United States to propel them into better career opportunities after graduation. International advisers can help them develop an understanding of U.S. workplace culture by offering training in areas such as business etiquette, networking, and interviewing.

Many international students plan to apply for Optional Practical Training and H1-B visas to be able to work for a few years in the United States. International advisers should communicate immigration rules, regulations, and changes on a regular basis. At the University of North Texas, for example, international students can attend workshops or receive one-on-one support to understand their visa status and learn how to explain it to potential employers.

Sense of Community and Belonging

Help maintain the perception of the United States campuses as welcoming places to international students and enlist fellow students, faculty, and staff to create a positive experience. Not all international students will head straight for the international student services office, the writing center, or student counseling services when they need help. They might talk to a work-study supervisor, a resident assistant, or a peer instead. Make sure everyone is informed about the resources and support services available on campus, and help them recognize when international students might need a referral.

"That's a campus-wide effort to make sure that they are really engaged," says Jane Blyth, executive director of the Haenicke Institute for Global Education at Western Michigan University. "Everybody on campus is doing their best to give the students as much support as they need. We take it really seriously."

Supporting the International Student Community

Recruiting international students—and helping them navigate a meaningful experience on campus—is critical. That is why it is important for institutions to regularly assess international students' needs, expectations, perceived value, and the challenges they are facing. Experts suggest talking to students, conducting focus groups, and sending out surveys. The results can guide the creation of programs and resources that address students' interests and concerns.

"One of the biggest mistakes that we as administrators often make is we think we know what our students want," says Ravi

Ammigan, executive director of the University of Delaware's Office for International Students and Scholars. "That's good to some extent, based on our expertise, but it's really important to ask the students themselves what can contribute to their successful, meaningful experience on campus. And students talk about the experiences to their families and friends. So, institutions who invest in the international student experience, that has a great impact on the ability to attract talented students back to the institution." ■

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