

RETAINING INTERN

Mounting dependence on international undergraduate enrollees means that, for

BY KYNA RUBIN

LAST YEAR an international student who'd gotten all A's during first semester was about to transfer out from Marymount University. Why? Money. She came straight from an intensive English language program and hadn't taken the SAT, so didn't get into the Virginia campus's scholarship pool. "She was coming from the French system, where A's aren't easily earned," says Aline Orfali, the school's director of international student services. Orfali helped her with the appeal process, and the school granted the scholarship. International students at Marymount who appeal for financial aid have about a 90 percent success rate, yet "the appeal is not well advertised," says Orfali.

Well publicized or not, actions like Orfali's to retain individual international undergraduates—whether making special efforts to provide financial support or decrease a student's loneliness during breaks by setting them up with a local host family—is widely cited by international office directors as key to bolstering retention rates. The one-on-one attention staff can give foreign students at a small school like Marymount may not be possible for large universities with thousands of international students. But combining broad, visible retention policies with the latitude and staff to target individual students' needs pays off in higher retention rates, say university international staff.



INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

at these institutions, each student's overall campus experience counts now more than ever.



Why does retention matter so much right now? After all, many schools report higher retention rates for international undergraduates than for domestic enrollees.

International undergraduate enrollments in the United States rose 37 percent between 2004 and 2012, according to World Education Services. At a time when the number of U.S. high school students is declining, institutions' reliance on foreign students is growing.

"Universities are struggling with enrollment numbers," says Aline Orfali. Tuition-driven schools like Marymount that lack a big endowment are on "reset," leaning more and more on international students, she says.

How can campuses effectively serve so many new international undergraduates, and what are the consequences if schools place more focus on recruitment than retention?

"Some institutions are reporting integration challenges with international students, and that can hurt the potential pipeline for recruiting future students," says Rahul Choudaha, chief knowledge officer for World Education Services and the lead researcher of a 2014 NAFSA report on retention (see page 35). Schools that don't complement recruitment efforts with corresponding investment in retention services can harm their brand and that of the United States, he argues.

One State's Unique Investment in International Student Retention

"I believe we're the first organization in the nation that focuses on international student retention as an economic development strategy," says Athena Trentin, program director of the Global Talent Retention Initiative of Michigan (GTRI). Founded in Detroit in 2011 and funded by the state and a local granting agency, GTRI grew out of the Global Detroit study, which looked at the role of immigrants in the regional economy. One of its recommendations: retain international students as an economic driver.

Michigan faces a mismatch, says Trentin, between its large number of unemployed workers and the engineering and IT jobs available within the state's fast-growing IT hub and revitalized auto industry. "The majority of unemployed are manufacturing and construction workers who will continue having a difficult time until we

can fill these other jobs, which create new products and technologies requiring new facilities," she says. If the high-level jobs don't get filled, Michigan companies don't grow and could move to another state or country, she adds. Who's mainly studying those high-demand fields in Michigan? International students.

GTRI helps universities retain international students by connecting them to internships and post-graduation employment. "The career offices at universities are finding they don't know how to direct these students to the employers willing to hire them," says Trentin. "International students get turned away from seven out of ten tables at a career fair," leaving them disheartened and likely to go home or transfer.

The organization currently partners with some thirty universities, in part to bridge their career and international

offices. Yearly GTRI presents cultural-specific sessions to help students from partner universities prepare for internships and the job search. More than a hundred GTRI-certified GO (global opportunity) employers willing to consider international student job applicants are listed on the group's Web site. Students know they can trust these employers not to turn them away because of their immigration status, says Trentin. It's often staffing agencies, working for Ford, Chrysler, or GM that approach GTRI looking for help hiring international students, says Trentin, despite a strong hire-American, union mentality.

A new GTRI registry system, planned to go live in fall 2014, aims to reduce disappointment on both sides by allowing students to post their profiles so employers can search for applicants based on desired cultural and linguis-

tic background, academic degree, and work authorization status. One company, says Trentin, recently asked GTRI for a Chinese engineer whom it would train in the United States for two years, then send to China to manage operations there. The registry, which will track student-employer communications, will help GTRI develop marketing materials that partner schools can use when they recruit students, says Trentin.

GTRI began with a Detroit focus but quickly went statewide. Other cities and states have contacted Trentin's office expressing interest in the model. The organization is working on establishing nonprofit status, and Trentin hopes to expand into other states. With swelling numbers of schools, students, and employers using GTRI services, she figures her office must be doing something right.

Why Retention Matters

Even at Kent State University, for instance, where the retention rate hovers around 90 percent, according to David Di Maria, director of international programs and services, staff are concerned about word of mouth. Recommendations from friends or family are crucial to a student's decision about where to attend school, says Di Maria.

But strengthening an institution's bottom line aside, he adds, "The retention rate may be that glance in the mirror of how one is really doing" vis-à-vis an institution's level of internationalization or level of accommodating cultural difference.

However, the larger issue at stake, says Rahul Choudaha, is U.S. competitiveness. The United States is still the number one destination for international students. "But we can't rest on those laurels because we know the market share has been consistently declining every year in the last decade," when it fell from one-fourth to one-sixth in terms of global student mobility, he says. When students talk about a negative experience at their institution, he says, they're talking about a negative experience in the United States. "That's detrimental to the long-term sustainability and viability of the leadership of the U.S. in attracting top talent from around the world."

So, what retention strategies work? International office directors cite a slew of steps, large and small, that they have found promising in keeping international undergraduates happily rooted, academically and socially, on campus. There's no one-size-fits-all solution, but the experiences of various schools are telling.

Creating New Courses and Workshops that Address Vital Student Issues

The University of Dayton's international student numbers leaped 10-fold between 2003 and 2014, from 200 to 2,000, says the school's Ya You. There, Ya You's very position—international education specialist—was created as a means of supporting international students and helping faculty understand how to meet these students' academic and language needs.

Toward this end, the university offers a series of "global success" workshops where foreign and some domestic students, led by trained student peers, meet to discuss with department guest speakers how to improve reading and writing skills, how to write a research paper, the meaning of academic integrity. After a speaker talks about plagiarism, for instance, students divide into small cultural groups to discuss why their cultures value the ownership of ideas. "Middle Eastern students [say] it's because their religion has taught them to be honest with other people," says You.

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"They use their native language to make the connection between their own culture and the concept, instead of us telling them, 'you should do that.' It's really powerful for our international students to understand why instead of how."

In addition, as of spring 2014 the University of Dayton offered an optional two-credit, letter-graded, semester-long course called Learning Connections that teaches international students how to become more effective learners and understand their individual learning needs, she says.

At The College of Wooster last year, a combination of swelling language problems for Chinese students (who nationwide make up a large portion of international undergrads) and a reduced international orientation from four to two days helped spur the school to find ways to get to know international students on a personal basis and identify language issues early on. One of the results, says Jill Munro, director of international student and scholar services, is a two-year pilot course called Global Engagement Seminar, to be offered in fall 2014.

The for-credit elective course will meet twice a week. One day a week will focus on topics such as U.S. health care, race relations, and the meaning of a liberal arts education. The other day will delve into how that topic affects the international student at Wooster. For instance, what is plagiarism in the United States and what's Wooster's policy? American students will be included, per her dean's request, says Munro, to expose domestic students to cross-cultural experiences and have peer-to-peer discourse. Students will keep weekly journals that the international office will read and the writing center will assess in order to catch students struggling with language, says Munro.

The Community College Experience

Community colleges face similar retention challenges, says Teter Kapan, director of international programs at Oregon's Chemeketa Community College, where 150 of the 40,000 individuals a year served are international

students. Kapan ascribes her school's relatively high retention rates—about 85 percent for college-level students—to a small international student population and high staff-to-student ratio. Importantly, the college, she says, “figures it's cheaper to retain students than to recruit them.”

One way the school retains students is through a career planning class. Community college students, domestic and international, says Kapan, are typically first-generation college. Their resources are meager and they often need career guidance upfront. Chemeketa offers a required, two-credit, first-semester career planning course for which the college does not charge. The course, says Kapan, teaches students skills for managing college systems: how grading is done, how to hold oneself and the school accountable, how to communicate with professors, what's the goal and how will the student get there?

To formalize joint efforts to uncover and address international student needs, in 2010 Kent State created an integration committee whose three-times-a-semester meetings are attended by about thirty representatives from each of the school's ten colleges, including students, and any office with which students would have contact. Says director of international programs and services, David Di Maria, “It's a way I can hear about what members are seeing in their colleges and student affairs offices and learn about potential problems before they fester.” It's also become a platform for sharing ideas and best practices, he adds. At meetings he can hear about new policies, say, in housing, that may affect students. “It's also a way to empower colleagues to be advocates for international students in their own staff meetings and offices, because I can't be in all these places.”

“Holistic developmental advising” is enabled by a sort of one-stop set up. Housed in her office is an admissions officer; a college-level advisor who handles academic advising, housing, medical, and immigration issues; and an English language institute coordinator who advises students and does curricular development.

“It really makes a difference, because then international students have the ability to say, ‘OK, my parents want me to do this, but I want to do that, but this [career] makes money,’” she says. “They tend to work out their conflicted thoughts and work on what their options are and understand what the American system can do for them.”

Chemeketa is intrinsically designed to focus on retention: its international programs lie within Student Retention and College Life and Kapan reports to a dean of retention. What she calls “holistic developmental advising” is enabled by a sort of one-stop set up. Housed in her office is an admissions officer; a college-level advisor who handles academic advising, housing, medical, and immigration issues; and an English language institute coordinator who advises students and does curricular development.

Forming Mechanisms for Cross-Campus Collaboration

International student offices say they can't provide a positive experience for international undergraduates without working closely with cross-campus offices. This applies to all institutions but especially to large schools like Kent State University, which has 1,600 international undergraduates.

The committee works to pre-empt or resolve student issues. For instance, some committee members have met with the regional transit authority, says Di Maria, to try to get bus routes established to a neighboring county that contains apartments housing Kent State's growing international student population. (The current five-minute drive by car takes students two hours due to bus transfers.) Another example: committee representatives have taken back to their colleges discussions about plagiarism, says Di Maria, “which hasn't solved all the issues but has probably stemmed some of the problems that might otherwise have come up.” Committee input into Kent State's student health insurance produced more flexible options for international students.

By design, Di Maria doesn't lead the group. Co-chairs include an undergraduate studies staff member and a college of the arts associate dean. Di Maria wants the group to be “anchored in the institution, something that's not pushed by a personality or a position but that's a community initiative.”

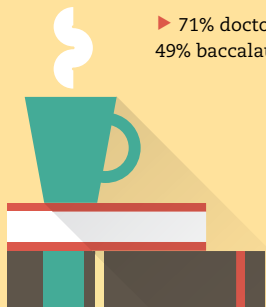
This approach seems to be working, as members from across campus have taken ownership. “What's really nice,” he notes, is “committee members say, ‘I want to fix this thing, I want to be part of the solution.’”

NAFSA's Retention Study Shows Gaps in Perceptions

Academic Concerns

Nearly three in four respondents from doctoral institutions thought academics were a key factor in attrition rates. But, fewer than half of baccalaureate institutional respondents felt it was a key factor.

▶ 71% doctoral vs. 49% baccalaureate



Academic Assistance

A majority of institutional respondents felt that writing or tutoring services were important retention tools. However, just over one in five students concurred.

▶ 51% institutional respondents vs. 21% international students



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Language Barriers

Fewer than a quarter of baccalaureate institutional respondents felt English language skills were a significant cause of attrition, while at doctoral institutions, nearly half felt this factor was key.

▶ 49% doctoral vs. 22% baccalaureate

A DISCONNECT between the reasons cited by international undergraduates and by U.S. institutions for why these students leave campus before completing their degree is the biggest finding of a national NAFSA survey released in May 2014. The purpose of the report, conducted with support from ELS Educational Services, was to research the reasons undergraduate international students in the U.S. may leave their institution of first enrollment before completing their degree, and to identify a set of good practices for retaining these students.

The report found that educational professionals cited school reputation (67 percent), finances (64 percent), and academics (62 percent) as the top reasons students bail. Students, however, reported among their top deal-breakers financial factors alone—access to jobs or internships (37 percent), affordability (36 percent), and availability of scholarships (34 percent).

These findings suggest that international undergraduate respondents were underestimating the academic preparedness required to succeed in the U.S. classroom, while institutions were underestimating the importance of how much affordability and career are for students, says Choudaha.

"The findings don't imply that institutions should or could just start offering large scholarships to international students," he says. But for someone coming from abroad, four years is a big investment for their families and that generates high expectations. "For instance, an inability to find jobs on or off campus is a big source of dissatisfaction because they expected to subsidize their cost of living and to gain work experience." Most schools have career services, he says, "but they're not adapting enough to the needs and complexities of international students" by, say, training them how to interview for a U.S. job. Institutions, he says,

are investing much more on recruitment than on retention and services.

Providing opportunities for international students to socialize and navigate campus life can have a very positive effect on students, says Choudaha. "But as the student moves forward, the issues that come up go well beyond integration and campus life." Institutions ranked orientation very highly as an effective practice, he says. But students ranked it much lower than opportunities to find a campus job. Students' take, says Choudaha, is, "It was a good practice when I first came, thank you very much, but now the number one thing is, how can I stay on campus and make myself financially viable?"

According to Sheila Schulte, senior director of international enrollment at NAFSA, "The three main implications from the study that can help institutions set transparent expectations with international students are: understanding the diverse needs of the international student body, coordinating internationalization efforts across campus, and investing in programs and services that improve student experiences."

As universities strive to retain students, says Choudaha, it might be useful to learn from research done outside of higher education on customer retention. Why, he asks, do the airline and other industries have customer loyalty programs? "Because acquiring one is more expensive than retaining the one you already have."

The study, *Bridging the Gap: Recruitment and Retention to Improve Student Experience*, was conducted in 2013–2014. It is based on responses from 480 international education professionals at 100 U.S. higher education institutions and from 517 international students at 83 institutions, as well as on focus groups and group interviews. The report also summarizes good practices and reasons for attrition cited by institutions and students surveyed. For the full report, see www.nafsa.org/retentionresearch.

Meeting Financial Needs and Expectations

Student respondents to a recent NAFSA survey (see box, p. 35) cite financial issues as the main factor in their dissatisfaction with an institution. Flexibility around financial support comes from a school's top leaders. Rice University's Vision for the Second Century, created by the president a decade ago, includes an increase in undergraduate students, including those from abroad. Taskforces that look at emergency funding and other ways to help foreign students, says Adria Baker, vice provost for international education, are part of that overall vision. "If we have a glitch, I inform the president's office," she says. "He cares."

In terms of broad aid to international students, every school has to have that philosophical debate, says Jill Munro, The College of Wooster's director of international student and scholar services, about how much aid goes to international students versus domestic students.

Campus jobs help retention not only because of the extra money they bring. Students who work in a campus office have a built-in support system and an increased connection and loyalty to the institution.

Her school's average grant package for an incoming international student is \$22,000 per year, which goes toward tuition that will reach \$54,000 in fall 2014. "Without offering something, we would not be able to recruit as many students," says Munro.

The College of Wooster also has a hardship fund that allows students with a family medical or other financial emergency to apply for a one-time scholarship. And because student unhappiness over financial aid can often be traced to unmet expectations, the college did a simple fix a few years ago, says Munro, to clarify costs to students upfront. Seeing that international students didn't realize that their financial aid increase didn't match the tuition increase, her office prompted admissions to state this in its paperwork and at student interviews.

In contrast, large state universities often can't provide the same largess as private institutions. Despite Georgia State University's recent efforts to attract more international undergraduates, garnering financial assistance for foreign students is difficult, says Heather Housley, director

of international student and scholar services. The state has set the school's tuition rate similar to that of higher ranking Georgia Tech and University of Georgia, "which makes international recruiting challenging," she says. A small number of out-of-state tuition waivers exist, but most go to programs like athletics. What's left that might entice international undergraduates is less tangible, she observes. What's more, she adds, in Georgia "we continue to face challenges to make it easier for international students to come here, compared to other states."

Beefing Up Internships and Campus Job Opportunities

Campus jobs help retention not only because of the extra money they bring. Students who work in a campus office have a built-in support system and an increased connection and loyalty to the institution, finds Marymount's Aline Orfali. She worked very closely with the on-campus employment office to create more jobs for international undergrads by limiting the number of work hours granted to graduate assistants. "Retention rates for students who have campus jobs are very, very high," says Orfali. The College of Wooster's Jill Munro works to secure for international students with financial need the same three-week lead on applying for campus jobs accorded to domestic work-study students.

International students also crave off-campus work experience to enhance their marketability and contribute to college costs. The College of Wooster encourages them to take more internships, says Munro. But restrictions mean "we're starting to get caught between government regulations and what we know is best for the student." Her college is starting to allow internships as part of the student's major, one thing the government requires, she says. Wooster will never be a co-op school, which has an advantage in that the regulations "fit them perfectly," she says.

Dealing With Plagiarism

Often institutions, including Marymount University, lose international undergraduates because of academic conduct, according to Orfali. She believes it's a two-way street. "International students need to understand our standards here and the faculty also need to understand that different cultures look at [intellectual property] differently." Her office is trying to encourage more staff to apply to be chaperones on spring break study abroad trips to increase their global perspectives, "because when working with students, sometimes it's cheating and sometimes it's an honest mistake." Last semester three students were academically dismissed, but two are returning with her office's help.

NAFSA Webinar

International Student Retention Research: Results and Best Practices

October 14, 2014

Orfali finds conversations about academic conduct are difficult to have. “As a student advocate you want to help your student without making excuses for them when they do the wrong thing.” When students ask her office to accompany them to an academic conduct hearing, they go, attending as an on-site advisor to the student or as an advocate who waits outside before entering to make a statement on the student’s behalf. “Though we don’t look at it this way, this may be part of our retention efforts,” she notes.

Adapting Tools Already in Place

Some institutions choose to piggyback on existing mechanisms and technology that serve undergraduates by tailoring them to international students. Georgia State University is a leader in retaining minority students, having graduated more African Americans last year than any other institution, says Housley. Meeting the needs of her university’s highly diverse student body helps with international retention, she says, citing advisement center software that produces metrics that help students make wise decisions about their majors and how to graduate on time.

Kent State recently added to its online dynamic student checklist new features for international students so they can readily tell if, say, they’re full-time enrolled for immigration purposes or their financial guarantee has expired. And through an early alert system, faculty notify the international office halfway through a semester if an international student is struggling.

Tweaking Classes and Services to Ease the Way

One sign of an institution’s desire to improve the student experience is its willingness to make adjustments to classes and services that aren’t working well for the international population. Rice University made its freshman writing course more instructional and less punitive, says Adria Baker, increasing its effectiveness in bringing students up to speed. The school also encouraged all faculty to clarify syllabi by being more specific about course expectations—a crucial change for international students.

At the University of Dayton, faculty won’t dumb down required humanities courses that international students find difficult, says Ya You. The school will, however, revise format, making some courses more international-student friendly by, for instance, using more ways to assess students so those with limited speaking and writing skills have a way of showing what they’ve learned. The school also provides international peer coaches for certain high DFW (drop, fail, withdraw) courses, she says.

Results of NAFSA’s year-long study on undergraduate international student retention will be presented by the lead researcher, Rahul Choudaha, chief knowledge officer and senior director of strategic development for World Education Services’ Research and Advisory Services team. The presentation will include an overview of the data accumulated, the practical implications of that data, and recommendations for implementing retention best practices on campus. Representatives from two institutions will discuss their organizations’ retention policies. Register at www.nafsa.org/webinar_retentionregister. The webinar is sponsored by ELS Educational Services.



The same university eliminated walk-in support for international students when they found that students prefer set appointment times with individual staff members they already know and trust. And at the request of women students from the Middle East, You created female-only sessions for students attending the school’s global cultures conversations. Only half of the women who show up are Middle Eastern. The rest, she says, are from China, India, and the United States, proof of a change broadly welcomed.

Advice for Other Institutions

Apart from the services that schools find enhance student satisfaction, international educators stress several useful principles: work with international student leaders and nationality clubs, which are better able than university staff to elicit honesty from students about challenges they face (David Di Maria); make sure international office staff are put on strategic campus bodies such as the academic standards and retention committees (Aline Orfali); help students make personal campus connections, which contribute more to retention rates than throwing money at “big food festivals and things like that” (Heather Housley); develop personal relationships with students, which makes it easier to design productive retention strategies (Jill Munro).

Building the infrastructure to meet the needs of new international undergrads “is a process that never ends,” observes Baker. **IE**

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