

Noel-Levitz White Paper

Reaching Beyond Borders: Key Issues in Recruiting and Retaining International Students

There are perhaps few arenas where the escalating reality of the global community is more significant than in the realm of higher education, where future generations prepare to live and work in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. For U.S. colleges and universities, this reality underscores the growing importance of building an international student presence on campuses, especially as the number of domestic high school graduates begins to decline after 2008.

Amy Kice, director of international undergraduate admissions at Southern Methodist University (SMU), states it plainly: "International recruitment is becoming more important because the world is becoming more global, and colleges are compelled to mirror what is happening. Students are coming to us with a much more global perspective, traveling abroad at a younger age, and universities are looking to internationalize their campuses."



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Competing on an international stage

As American institutions increase their focus on building a more geographically diverse student body, the recruitment landscape reveals both positive and negative trends for the U.S. Following the declines of the immediate post-9/11 years, international students have once again been enrolling at U.S. postsecondary institutions in near-record numbers. From 2005-06 to 2006-07, international enrollment increased by almost 20,000, with the 582,984 foreign-born students enrolled in 2006-07 accounting for 3.9 percent of total enrollment.¹ According to the 2007 edition of "Open Doors," an annual report by the Institute of International Education, the number of new international students at U.S. institutions increased by 10 percent in 2006-07, building on an 8.3 percent increase in 2005-06.² The report attributes this growth to increasing international recruitment efforts, a growing number of students seeking education abroad, and continuing efforts by the U.S. government to ease the visa process for international students.

At the same time, competition for international students is growing markedly, with the result that U.S. market share has declined, even as the number of students seeking degrees abroad has increased from just under 1.7 million in 1999 to more than 2.7 million in 2005. While U.S. enrollment of international graduate students increased in 2006-07, the number of foreign undergraduates declined 1.5 percent and the number of students from Europe fell 2.3 percent. And even as U.S. enrollments from key countries such as India, China, and Vietnam increased during the last two years, the perception that it is easier for students to enter and remain in other English-speaking countries continues to hinder recruitment by U.S. institutions, which operate without the government coordination and support that is present in many countries.

"Canada, Australia and the U.K.—which recruit with country support—are very strong competitors for international students," says Phyllis Supple, former associate director of admissions and coordinator of international admissions at Duke University. "Institutions from these countries are traveling together and marketing their unique qualities. There are also American Colleges Overseas in at least 13 countries today, and they seem to be thriving. The Bologna Accord, which will be fully implemented in 2010 by some 40 countries, will offer tremendous flexibility and mobility to European students, allowing them to cross borders easily to go to any European college."

In the face of these challenges, many U.S. institutions are redoubling their efforts to recruit international students. "Colleges and universities understand the value of internationalization in a shrinking world and know the importance of educating and preparing global citizens," Supple states. "International students bring differing perspectives into the classroom and into the residence hall. And as the number of graduates from U.S. high schools gets smaller, the international student market will be attractive as a way of filling spots and bringing in tuition dollars."

Dino Pruccoli, director of international admissions at DePaul University, which boasts approximately 1,200 international students from 100 countries, echoes these priorities for his own campus: "We recruit international students in order to educate U.S. citizens who can't study abroad, to add diversity to our campus—religious, ethnic and cultural—and because many are full-pay students who help our bottom line."



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What matters to international students?

Institutions hoping to grow their enrollment of foreign-born students do well to begin with a clear understanding of the priorities and concerns that these students bring to their college searches. While college students from around the world share many values with American-born students, they also differ in some important respects that influence their evaluations of college options.

For three years, Noel-Levitz has surveyed international students in the United States, asking them to rate their satisfaction with key areas of student life and learning, as well as the importance they attach to each of these issues. The resulting report describes responses from undergraduate international students at four-year public and private institutions, revealing what they value. Based on data from 12,398 international students who took the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory™ (SSI) at 496 public and private campuses in the U.S., the report offers several findings that are instructive for colleges seeking to recruit and retain international students:

1 Academic quality is of paramount importance.

First and foremost, international students value the quality of their education. They want faculty who are knowledgeable in their fields, strong content and instruction within their areas of study, and academic advisors who can properly guide them toward graduation. They also desire an adequate variety of courses and the ability to register for the classes they need with little conflict.

2 Campus life issues are not highly valued by international students.

Athletics, activities, organizations—these and other areas of campus life and culture consistently ranked among the lowest priorities for international students. This doesn't mean these areas should be ignored, especially once students arrive on campus, but they clearly are of secondary importance compared to academic issues.

3 International students care greatly about campus safety and security.

While campus life issues are not as important, international students placed very high importance on campus safety and security, especially at public institutions.

4 Financial aid is not as much of a concern to international students as it is to domestic students.

Given the prevalence of private, personal funding for international students, they are less concerned about the availability of financial aid and financial aid counseling than domestic students are.

5 In many respects, international students value the same things domestic students do.

Academic quality issues dominated the importance scales for both international and domestic students at public and private institutions. At four-year public colleges and universities, international and domestic students also ranked Campus Safety and Registration Effectiveness at the same level. The rankings diverged somewhat at private four-year campuses, but, generally speaking, international and domestic students placed similar importance on many items outside of the financial aid area.

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A well-reasoned approach to international recruitment

With more and more young people looking beyond their borders to broaden their educational and experiential horizons, opportunities abound for U.S. institutions seeking to develop a greater international presence on their campuses. But the pursuit of international students—at a time when they have many attractive options for study abroad—is a venture that requires perseverance, a willingness to learn the terrain, a focused recruitment approach, and a keenly honed communication plan in order to yield results.

Experienced international recruiters agree that no institution should embark on this venture until it has defined its goals and is ready to make a three- to five-year commitment of time, resources, and personnel. “The key to successful international recruitment is the development of a long-term strategy,” says veteran international recruiter Supple. “A campus needs to be able to articulate why it wants international students and how its academic programs match up with the goals of international students coming from various regions and countries. Only then can it decide how, where, and when to recruit.” Once an institution commits itself to recruiting in a given area, she adds, it’s essential that recruiters develop an understanding of that country and region, including its educational programs and grading systems.

SMU’s Kice recommends that a college entering the competition for international students “find one area, one target, one market and repeat that target for three years, rather than trying to recruit the world. Go to Asia, for example, and pick two or three countries, work in that area, and then make a decision about whether to continue.” With a well-established international recruitment program, SMU’s two international recruiters travel throughout the world, says Kice, deepening their knowledge of diverse areas. “You have to gain a complete understanding of different cultures around the world, be a good listener, and know that you can’t be all things to all people. If you know different parts of the world, you read applications differently.”

As one example of the differences between recruiting domestic and international students, she cites the greater role of parents in most non-U.S. settings. “If you have a visit from a domestic kid, they ask a lot of questions and their parents are in the background,” she says. “With international students, parents do a lot of the questioning and e-mailing. You have to understand that, but explain why students need to make choices for themselves.”

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A more nuanced funnel

International recruitment also presents a number of variations on the traditional funnel model used to recruit domestic students, according to those who work in the field. "It's more challenging to buy names," says DePaul's Pruccoli, "so the prospect pool is smaller. Because of the distance, they don't visit your campus, so you need more communication from current students and more contact with parents. But they apply to just as many schools as American students do."

The international funnel must be far more nuanced, emphasizes Supple. "Some colleges throw all international students together. You need to track numbers based on regions or countries, financial aid or non-financial aid and the like, in order to develop a knowledge base for different countries. Smaller schools, in particular, need to develop a history so they can refer to it to justify and make decisions about recruitment."

International students, like their American counterparts, are increasingly bypassing the inquiry stage and applying to institutions without prior communication with the admissions office, making it essential for admissions officers to develop a sophisticated communications stream once the application is received. Thanks to the Internet, e-mail, and online applications, it's far easier to stay in touch with international students than in decades past. "We have almost stopped using paper in some areas," says Pruccoli. "We send an electronic viewbook and e-postcards, but that doesn't work in all countries. You have to be mindful that not everyone is as up to speed with technology as we are." He also stresses the importance of timeliness and efficiency in the handling of paperwork and notification of admission for international students, who need time to acquire visas and other documents in order to enter the U.S.

Although the domestic and international funnels are similar in some respects, says Kice, "the biggest difference is that you have to have the staff, time, and commitment to spend more time on each student. They have so many more questions and concerns, and you have to take time to develop family relationships to assure parents that this place will be okay for their son or daughter." For SMU, which recruits heavily in nearby Latin America, a basic component of the recruitment strategy is returning frequently to key markets where the university has supportive alumni or parents. "In a lot of smaller markets, it's word of mouth and hands-on receptions in homes that bring validity to your campus."

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Selling the U.S. experience

It's not difficult to imagine why U.S. colleges and universities are a tough sell in some international markets. Along with the impediment of more stringent student visa requirements to study in the U.S., American colleges are the most expensive in the world. Yet international recruiters carry a powerful set of messages to counteract those drawbacks. Without demeaning other countries, says Pruccoli, "I tell students, 'Look out your window. How many U.S. corporations do you see, compared to corporations from other countries? The people who run these places were educated in the United States.' They know that students who study in the United States bring back U.S. diplomacy and values and become leaders in their countries. That makes a big impact."

While U.S. colleges are the most expensive, they also spend more on students than colleges in any other country, Kice emphasizes. "We tell them we're one of the few educational systems in the world that spends so much to make sure you're successful. We provide orientation, advising, tutoring, a writing center, a health center, on-campus housing, activities, and we're the only country in the world with intercollegiate sports, which many students like." At SMU, she is currently working with faculty leaders in each division of the university to determine ways to provide greater support for international students. Without this commitment to provide on-campus support, say international recruiters, colleges should not be attempting to bring foreign students to their campuses.

Other selling points vary by region or type of college. Catholic colleges, for example, often target Latin American students, while liberal arts colleges seek to reinforce the message that successful businesses seek graduates with broad perspectives and interpersonal communication skills. "There are all kinds of ways schools can sell themselves—emphasizing small classes, a nurturing environment, and location," affirms Supple. "Many international students think they want to study on a campus located in a major urban area, so campuses located in non-urban areas need to address this issue as they market the institution. At Duke, we focused on its location in the Research Triangle in North Carolina rather than on Durham."

At DePaul, says Pruccoli, international recruiters emphasize the safety of the institution's urban campus; Chicago's access to internships, jobs and cultural activities; a highly diverse student body where international students will feel at home; and, of course, the university's academic strengths and rankings. "But once students enroll," he adds, "it's really about word of mouth. If students are happy, they tell others at home."

Ultimately, says Kice, these overlapping messages add up to "the U.S. experience, and the credibility of having a degree from a U.S. college, especially for those looking for a global degree in fields such as business or economics." Beyond that, each institution must build its own "brand," based on its programs, services and environment.

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Tools for navigating global waters

Southern Methodist University recently launched a campuswide capital campaign that includes a goal to make the institution a more international place. That means a commitment to send its students abroad, says Kice, but also to bring international students to campus, to recruit international faculty and staff, and to bring research scholars to campus from all over the world. As she leverages resources to build awareness of SMU in foreign countries, she employs recruitment strategies such as fly-ins for high school counselors from key markets outside the U.S. “Even though students may not be able to visit campus,” she points out, “counselors can see the campus and disseminate information to dozens of students through their counseling.”

Supple reiterates the need to be strategic and targeted in building a presence in overseas markets. “There are many ways to recruit, ” she stresses, “using armchair travel; traveling with tours, small groups or individuals; nurturing relationships with advisors; using third-party agents. Alumni and professors traveling abroad can be a great help.”

Prucoli recommends hosting overseas advisors on campus and interacting with organizations such as the Overseas Association for College Admission Counseling (OACAC), whose 600 members include secondary counselors and other professionals from around the world engaged in helping students transition from secondary to higher education. Other important organizations include EducationUSA, a network of advising centers created by the U.S. Department of State to provide information about U.S. higher education to prospective international students, and NAFSA: The Association of International Educators (originally known as the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers), whose members promote international education.

Be proactive about networking through these avenues or one-on-one with colleagues at schools that do international recruitment and admissions, Kice agrees. “We’re still a small community. Don’t be afraid to ask for assistance from other institutions or experts working in the field.”

References

- ¹ Eugene McCormack, “Number of Foreign Students Bounces Back to Near-Record High,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 16, 2007, <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v54/i12/12a00102.htm>; “International Student and Total U.S. Enrollment,” *Open Doors 2007* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2007), <http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/?p=113122>
- ² “Newly Enrolled International Students,” *Open Doors 2007*, <http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/page/113138/>





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Questions about this white paper?

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Noel-Levitz is a nationally recognized consulting firm that specializes in strategic planning for enrollment and student success in higher education. Each year, higher education executives from throughout the U.S. meet regularly with Noel-Levitz to accomplish their goals for student recruitment, marketing, student retention, and strategic enrollment management.

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