

12 STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING A CAPACITY FOR INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENT CAREER SUCCESS

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NAGAP Perspectives, Spring 2017

The graduate enrollments at many American graduate schools are stagnating. Between 2010 and 2015, the total domestic enrollment in graduate programs declined by 1.1%. This decline was led by fields of study such as Arts and Humanities (-2.8%), Business (-0.8%), Education (-3.5%), Engineering (-0.2%), and Social and Behavioral Sciences (-1.3%). These five fields of study formed more than half of the total graduate enrollment (**see Table 1**).

In contrast, the total international enrollment in graduate programs increased by 6.2% in the same period. The top three fields of study for international students—Engineering, Mathematics and Computer Sciences, and Business—enrolled 55% of all

international students. Beyond the high concentration of international students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, one out of every six students in Arts and Humanities was an international student.

American graduate schools command a strong aspiration among international students and received over 785,000 applications in fall 2015, including over 522,436 applications for master’s and certificate programs (Okahana & Allum, 2015). Much of the growth in international graduate enrollment was driven by master’s-level programs, which expanded by 54% between 2010/11 and 2015/16 to reach a total of 233,463 students (Institute of International Education, 2016).

However, there is a wide disparity in institutions’ experience attracting and enrolling international students. Consider the comparison by institution type and Carnegie Classification (**see Table 2**). Two out of every three international graduate students were enrolled in public institutions—an indication of international students’ consideration of cost and affordability of studying abroad. Fifty-seven percent of all international students were enrolled in 108 Research Universities (very high research activities) by Carnegie Classification. This is a likely influence of institutional rankings and perception of prestige by many international students. International students consider rankings as a proxy of higher recognition by employers and hence a direct association with career advancement opportunities.

Broadly, most international graduate students’ decisions to study abroad are influenced by an interplay of financial investment and potential career opportunities. This is evident from the importance of funding opportunities like scholarships and assistantships in students’ search criteria. Likewise, it is well established that the prospects of finding jobs and internships are critical in students’ decision-making process.

In times of fiscal challenges faced by many universities, it is not feasible to offer more funding to international students. Likewise, rankings are a long-term process and are beyond the control of GEM professionals. In addition to funding and ranking constraints, many graduate schools are in geographic areas that are often overlooked by international students.

While some programs and institutions have not been very successful and others are new to recruiting international

Table 1

Trends with Total Graduate Enrollment by Field of Study

Broad Field	Total Enrollment (2015)	International Students as a % of Total	Domestic Students	International Students
			Average Annual % Change, 2010 to 2015	
Total	1,782,364	19%	-1.1%	6.2%
Education	289,184	4%	-3.5%	1.0%
Business	241,537	18%	-0.8%	3.0%
Health Sciences	224,118	5%	6.2%	3.0%
Engineering	157,457	54%	-0.2%	8.3%
Social and Behavioral Sciences	137,871	14%	-1.3%	1.7%
Mathematics and Computer Sciences	105,033	55%	3.7%	17.5%
Arts and Humanities	100,816	16%	-2.8%	2.5%
Other Fields	100,205	16%	-3.2%	7.1%
Biological and Agricultural Sciences	87,426	23%	1.3%	0.2%
Public Administration and Services	79,786	4%	2.7%	2.9%
Physical and Earth Sciences	51,732	33%	0.7%	1.1%

Source: Compiled from Okahana, Feaster & Allum (2016), Council of Graduate Schools

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graduate students, many others, especially with leading STEM and business programs, face the challenge of working with a disproportionately high number of international students.

In both of these scenarios, growing or sustaining international student enrollment requires enhancing international student experience and supporting their success. Many students expect to receive more support identifying career opportunities. They assume that their high investment in education and the institutional reputation should entitle them to an experiential opportunity. However, many students lack the mindset and skillset to navigate a culturally different, more competitive job and internship market.

The decentralized structure of graduate schools and career services can make it even more complex to bring synergy and efficiency in the programming and resources to support international students. It is common that the

International Students and Scholars Office (ISSO) on many campuses will primarily focus on immigration compliance and not on career success. In sum, the decentralized structures, limited resources, and diversity of students in terms of preparation, culture, and motivations makes it an imperative for graduate schools to think strategically and proactively in supporting international graduate student success.

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12 strategies for international graduate student career success

As a concept, capacity building is a process of leveraging individual and institutional abilities and resources to achieve common goals (UNESCO, 2011). It requires a continuous focus on collaboration, learning, and adaptation to move toward sustainable results. Given the decentralized structure of many graduate schools and increasing competition for limited resources, graduate schools must build a capacity to support the success of international students in a sustainable manner.

NAGAP, The Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, has been advocating to connect recruitment and admissions functions with the remainder of the student experience. NAGAP defines Graduate Enrollment Management (GEM) as “a systematic approach to managing the graduate student lifecycle from initial awareness to alumna/alumnus by integrating the core functions associated with the enrollment and support of a graduate student” (Connor, LaFave & Balayan, 2015). This framework must be inclusive in its approach and practices in building a capacity to shape positive international graduate student experience.

Here are 12 strategies to start building a capacity for international graduate student success:

Activate Institutional Synergy

1. Focus on international student experience: Recruiting and enrolling international students is becoming more competitive. GEM professionals should leverage positive international student experiences and success stories to build brand recognition among prospective students.

2. Align faculty and staff efforts: For many faculty and staff members, working with a culturally diverse student community

Table 2

Trends with Total Graduate Enrollment by Institution Type and Carnegie Classification

	Total Enrollment (2015)	International Students	International Students % of Total	% of International Students
Total	1,782,364	335,840	19%	100%
Institution Type				
Public	1,103,416	217,301	20%	65%
Private, not-for-profit	570,021	116,212	20%	35%
Private, for-profit	108,927	2,327	2%	1%
Carnegie Classification				
Research Universities (RU/VH)	684,386	190,319	28%	57%
Research Universities (RU/H)	334,491	71,599	21%	21%
Doctoral/Research Universities	254,224	23,024	9%	7%
Master's Colleges and Universities	460,747	45,093	10%	13%
Other	48,516	5,805	12%	2%

Source: Compiled from Okahana, Feaster & Allum (2016), Council of Graduate Schools

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poses challenges that are beyond language skills. Bring the campus community together to align efforts for effectively working with diverse segments of international students.

3. **Share good practices across campus:** One way of overcoming the dissipated energy of a decentralized graduate school structure is to collaborate across schools on core programming related to international student experience and career development.
4. **Partner to make relevant resources available:** GEM professionals have limited time, expertise and resources to allocate toward career advancement. However, they can catalyze the process by partnering with internal and external stakeholders to make resources available in a flexible and economic manner.

Build Students' Mindset and Skillset

5. **Expand career pathways:** Visa and immigration constraints are a reality. Raise students' awareness, as early as possible, of alternative career pathways in terms of locations, industries, and occupations and help them understand the bigger picture about career and life planning.
6. **Enable students with employer search strategies:** Many international students struggle with finding employers who will be willing to sponsor future visas. This requires equipping students with information to help locate and educate potential employers about offering experiential opportunities to international students.
7. **Educate students about cultural differences:** Many international students underestimate the importance of cultural

differences in navigating career opportunities in the U.S. They are often unprepared with soft skills like professional networking.

8. **Build students' soft skills:** Knowing about cultural differences is only part of the story, building a skillset to navigate the differences is another aspect. Many institutions do not have the internal capacity to support skill development.

Create Effective Programming

9. **Recognize the diversity of international students:** Often international students are placed in one monolithic block. It is critical to understand the different international student segments in terms of their motivations, resources, preparedness, and cultural mindsets.
10. **Leverage pre-departure and on-campus orientation:** While institutions have some form of orientation for international students, it often focuses on immigration and visa compliance. A basic introduction to cultural differences from the perspective of career planning and job search in the U.S. will help students start with the right foundation.
11. **Explore reusable and flexible online resources:** Providing online resources and programs can offer a higher level of personalization to a diverse student population. It can also accommodate the schedule conflicts of international students in different programs.
12. **Engage current international students and alumni:** Despite being a well-known strategy, it is often underutilized. Formalizing and co-creating a mentoring program not only fosters an active student community, but also offers support to students in a cost-effective manner.

12 Strategies for Building a Capacity for International Graduate Student Success



Choudaha, Rahul & Hu, Di (2017). A Model for Building a Capacity for International Student Success.

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As international student enrollment becomes more integral to the sustainability and growth of American graduate schools, more investments, efforts, and strategies must be allocated to support international student success throughout their education lifecycle. It is critical that GEM professionals take the lead in strengthening collaboration across decentralized silos of graduate schools and supporting the career needs and expectations of international students, as it directly correlates with recruitment and admissions outcomes. ■

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