

Working with International Students in the U.S. and Beyond: A Summary of Survey Research by NCDA International Student Services Committee

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ABSTRACT

The career development process is one of the most important aspects of the international student experience. Providing comprehensive and culturally competent services requires institutional efforts that utilize best practices developmentally throughout the college experience and beyond. This article is based on the work of the International Student Services Committee of the National Career Development Association, especially the surveys conducted with international students, career development professional and employers. The authors focus on three major themes from the surveys: knowledge about work authorization options, impact of cultural differences on job search, and specialized career services for international students. Discussing these major themes, the authors report on best practices and future implications for supporting international student career development in the U.S. and beyond.

Keywords: International students, career development, career services, higher education

There are nearly 975,000 international students in the U.S. who study at the postsecondary level (Institute of International Education, 2015). Given the increasing presence of international students as well as their financial, academic, and cultural diversity contributions, higher education institutions recognize the importance of international recruitment efforts. However, there is limited institutional emphasis on the international student experience beyond recruitment. College students and their families are increasingly questioning the return on investment of a college education, which is often measured by successful attainment of a satisfying job upon graduation. This is also true for international students. However, they often face additional systemic obstacles along their career development paths.

Most studies in the literature about the experiences of international students focus on their different learning styles, academic engagement, English proficiency, adjustment issues, psychological well-being, and discrimination (e.g., Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Le & Gardner, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Mori, 2000; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). These experiences are relevant to the career development of international students, as they have potential impact on students' college experience, as well as their intellectual and mental capacity to prepare for life after college. On the other hand, there are only a few studies that directly explore international student career development. They show that students are most concerned with work experience, the decision to stay in the U.S. versus going back to home country, job search skills, interviewing skills, and immigration regulations (Spencer-Rodgers & Cortijo, 1998; Shen & Herr, 2004; Arthur, 2007; Crockett & Hayes, 2011). These studies inform us about the important practical challenges of pursuing and maintaining opportunities.

Given the fact that only 34.6 % of H-1B visas (which allows non-resident foreigners to work in the U.S. for 3 years with another 3-year extension possibility) are granted to F-1 status international students (Ruiz, 2013), job search is a major area of concern. Moreover, not all international students prefer to find jobs in the U.S., and it is another unique challenge to engage in job search and transition back to one's home country or another country after several years of education in the U.S. Thus, there is need for a more comprehensive understanding of the international student career development process, as well as best practices to support this student population.

In order to address these gaps, the National Career Development Association (NCDA)'s International Student Services Committee (ISSC) conducted surveys with random samples of students (n= 1422), career development professionals (n=373), and employers (n= 84) between 2012 and 2015, which will be described in the next sections followed by a discussion on implications, best practice recommendations, and future

directions for research. The details of the survey methods and extensive reports on findings can be found in the full reports (NCDA-ISSC, 2015).

FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY PROJECTS

The survey projects revealed significant findings across the three surveys that may help to explain the barriers that impact international students, career services professionals, and employers. These common themes from the survey results encouraged the authors to contrast between actual barriers and perceived barriers.

First, there is a definite gap in knowledge among international students, career services professionals and employers when it comes to work authorization options in the U.S. More than one third of international students and more than two thirds of career services professionals who participated in the surveys, reported a lack of knowledge on work authorization topics such as Optional Practical Training (OPT) and Curricular Practical Training (CPT). Similarly, more than half of employer respondents reported that their lack of knowledge on work authorization was the major obstacle for hiring international students, and they perceived it as too complicated a process. Moreover, despite the seeming lack of knowledge, less than one in five employers reported wanting more information from the NCDA-ISSC about the process and benefits of hiring international students. Work authorization significantly impacts the career development of international students. Both international students and career services professionals need a more accurate and complete understanding of the process in order to facilitate an effective exploration of career possibilities and set realistic career goals. Employers' lack of knowledge and misperceptions about the work authorization process, on the other hand, may cause many qualified candidates to be dismissed in the initial screening process of job applications.

A second common theme reported by all three groups encompasses the cultural differences that seem to have both positive and negative implications for job and internship search experiences of international students. Among the most significant concerns reported by career services professionals were cultural adjustment (39.3%) and language proficiency (35.4%). They also reported challenges in helping students manage expectations from their families and others in their home countries, as well as a need for culturally sensitive career assessment tools appropriate for use with international students.

Unlike career services professionals, however, employers and students were not as concerned about cultural issues impacting the job and internship application process. In fact, some employers indicated cultural differences did not have as profound of an impact on the hiring decisions as

work authorization status. When asked about the differences between international and non-international students, employers mentioned international students' professionalism and career orientation as positive aspects of cultural differences. Furthermore, employers emphasized how hiring international students enhanced diversity in the workplace and showcased a commitment to inclusivity.

The areas that employers perceived as challenging cultural differences were international students' interviewing styles and communication skills. Employers were open to providing constructive feedback on cultural issues such as English language proficiency, nonverbal behaviors such as eye contact, supporting one's arguments with strengths-based examples and storytelling, and other interviewing skills that may stem from different cultural and educational practices. Employers' expectations for international students in the job search include their ability to interview skillfully to demonstrate their strengths and discuss their immigration status confidently. Similarly, career services professionals believe international students need to improve their use of the English language. On the other hand, fewer students identified language proficiency and cultural issues as barriers in the job search.

The difference in perceptions of cultural differences and their impact on job applications may stem from the different perceptions on what makes a candidate qualified in a job application versus the interviewing process. For example, many international students identified relevant skills and background as the primary requirement for succeeding in the job search. They also reported that personality and extracurricular activities were deemed more valuable in the U.S. compared to their home countries. Such differences may have an impact on international students' career preparation and articulation of qualifications in job application materials and interviews. Thus, it is important to help international students recognize what employers look for and value in qualified candidates. Furthermore, international students should integrate and market their strengths, in particular their cross-cultural experiences, into job applications and interviews. For example, more than half of the employers identified cross-cultural competency, adaptability, and language skills as differentiators for international candidates. With improved use of language and a more comprehensive articulation of personal and professional experiences, international students can help employers recognize their unique potential.

A final noteworthy theme is the growth in expertise, partnerships and career programs that demonstrate strengths and best practices on the part of career services professionals and their organizations. The survey with career services professionals showed that more than half of career services centers offered customized programs for international students, and 93.5% collaborated with international student advising offices. Furthermore,

a quarter of career services centers had a staff member dedicated to working with international students. The hopes and needs to have such specialized professionals are dramatically increasing across the U.S. These findings support the significant needs of not only international students but also career development professionals who seek more knowledge and resources to support them effectively. At this point, however, a striking finding from the surveys point to a need for more strategic work by career centers: the majority of international students reported either having no or limited knowledge of career services prior to coming to the U.S., and more than half of the respondents never utilized career services on their university campuses. This finding highlights the importance of career services departments proactively reaching out to international students earlier in their academic careers in the U.S.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings suggest that higher education institutions and career centers should provide more information and resources to international students, career services professionals, and employers. First, students need earlier and greater understanding on the ways in which they can use career services. More awareness is needed on how to best prepare themselves for internship and job applications by making informed decisions about their academic programs (e.g., knowing which career fields allow longer durations of work authorization in the U.S.), realizing the benefits of extracurricular activities (e.g., cultural adjustment, developing language and communication skills, building connections), enhancing their network in both the U.S. and outside the U.S. to have multiple career alternatives and opportunities, and learning about work authorization options and paperwork deadlines, all of which will ease their communication with employers in job application and interview processes.

Second, career services professionals need additional professional development on work authorization options and application procedures to better facilitate the career planning process of international students. They should reflect on potential misperceptions and biases on this topic, and collaborate with others (e.g., international student advising offices, institutional or local immigration attorneys) to educate themselves and their students. Effective delivery of career information, which meets the diverse needs of international students, is an important area of multicultural career counseling minimum competencies (NCDA, 2009). Thus, educating themselves about the unique challenges of international students, advocating for their students' rights to choose and apply for employment based on their interests, values and skills, and referring them to appropriate support resources when needed are significant aspects of culturally competent

practices. Similarly, it is also important for career services professionals to better identify both strengths and areas of growth while working with international students, and integrate them into a more holistic assessment of each individual student in order to personalize his/her career goals in accordance with cultural expectations, systemic constraints, and multiple opportunities in the U.S. or beyond. For example, career counselors should not overfocus on job search in the U.S. and recognize that not all international students seek to stay in the U.S. Career services professionals should help international students explore their genuine interests and values by also becoming aware of the potential peer, family or other environmental influences on their career decisions. When students decide to pursue career opportunities beyond the U.S, career services professionals should be able to help them prepare for a new cultural transition. The continuous pursuit of professional development is recommended to improve their multicultural career counseling competency to help international students navigate cultural transitions and uncertainty around global career opportunities.

Third, more employers should be encouraged to learn about work authorization options in order to demystify the perceived complications of the application process. Thus, they can consider the valuable skills and experiences that international students can bring to their organization. The NCDA-ISSC suggests greater communication and collaboration between international students, employers, and career services professionals. To exemplify such efforts, in addition to the survey projects, the committee gathered best practice examples from innovative career centers. *The Immigration Bridge Program*, launched by the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University, is a proactive partnership between the Kelley School, the IU Office of International Services, and a top immigration law firm. The program helps international students navigate the H-1B visa process, while offering economical legal services to employers who hire international students and need guidance through the H-1B visa process. The initiative does not guarantee a visa sponsorship, visa, or employment, but does help improve the situation for students being recruited both on and off campus. The program was the winner of the 2014 NCDA Service to International Students Award. Other examples include the creation of LinkedIn networking groups for international students and alumni, organizing international student conferences, and encouraging career services centers with knowledgeable employer relations teams that strive to diversify the employer pool with companies open to international candidates.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As indicated by the findings of the surveys, there is an urgent need for practitioners, researchers, and employers to engage in next steps. First,

career services and higher education professionals can increase their understanding about the systemic issues faced by international students in the job search process. Systemic issues may include restrictive immigration policies regarding employment, job opportunity limitation for international students based on geographical location in the US, and discrimination or lack of awareness from employers. Further, career services and higher education professionals should have a greater understanding about the career development needs of international students on their campus before implementing “one size fits all” programming. This information can be obtained through surveys or focus groups with international students. With a better understanding of systemic barriers and international student needs on their campus, career services and higher education professionals can advocate for international students to their institution or with employers.

Additionally, evidence from our survey suggests there is a mismatch of information about international students’ career development among career services practitioners, employers, and the students themselves. Heightened collaboration between the three parties should be fostered in order to demystify and streamline the complex process of international students’ career development, job search process and work authorization options.

Importantly, admissions and recruitment professionals who work with international students should provide sufficient and complete information to international students about the challenges inherent in the career development and job search process. Perhaps institutions can maintain more detailed records of their international student career outcomes in order to allow prospective international students to make an informed decision about the ability for the institution to support them in their career development. This type of transparency may be unheard of in current recruitment or admissions practices due to the potential it could deter international students with intentions to immigrate. Yet this transparency and commitment to accountability by institutions will ensure ethical practices among admissions and recruitment professionals, which will likely also contribute to less confusion and anxiety among international students in their job search process.

To conclude, the authors believe that the NCDA-ISSC is a best practice example that integrates several implications such as the importance of collaboration between career development practitioners, student services units, and institutions. In this regard, the NCDA-ISSC has not only conducted original research and maintained a resource guide, the committee has also spearheaded a new NCDA award for innovative career development services for international students. A diverse group of more than 20 committee members, which also includes past international students, currently work on writing and resource development projects. The ongoing

work of the committee members strives to close the gap between research and practice by integrating their career services experiences across the U.S. and around the world.

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