International Students in America: Current Issues for Higher Education and Academic Libraries

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In academic year 2007-2008 more than 623,800 students from foreign countries attended an institution of higher education in the United States. This number is 7% higher than the previous academic year (Institute of International Education, 2008b). Educators and administrators are paying attention to these statistics because the United States finds itself in an increasingly competitive market for international students. This paper will explore five key reasons why international students are a valuable asset for higher education. It will then provide an overview of the current issues facing U.S. institutions in regard to international students. Lastly, it will discuss ways in which these issues can affect academic libraries and make recommendations for how academic libraries can address these concerns.

As globalization has diversified the landscape of international students, scholars have made the important argument that generalizing “international students” is unfair and instead we should consider them “as individuals, each with their unique cultural and educational background, personality traits and temperament, and each facing unique challenges in their pursuit of knowledge” (Ye, 2009, p. 8). For the sake of this paper, which is an introduction to common international student issues, “international students” will be treated as a common group of people.

Why do higher education institutions have an interest in international students?

International students appeal to higher education institutions in many ways. This paper identifies five reasons why institutions have an interest in this particular group of students. First, on a fundamental level, “pluralism and diversity are important values in America’s communities and educational settings” (El-Khawas, 2003, p. 45). As institutions of learning, colleges and universities across the United States often provide safe places where students can grow and learn about the world around them. Contact with and sensitivity to diversity in its many forms widens students’ perspectives and prepares them to be culturally-aware leaders.

Secondly, as Altbach and Knight (2007) point out, “the emergence of the ‘knowledge society,’ the rise of the service sector, and the dependence of many societies on knowledge products and highly educated personnel for economic growth” are common themes driving internationalism in education (p. 290). Institutions recognize that they need to prepare their students with the knowledge and skills to succeed in a competitive global economy. Hosting students from foreign countries provides the opportunity for American students to develop this “global consciousness” (Altbach, 2004, p. 19) in both academic and social settings.

Third, and related to this imperative of global awareness, are global security and well-being. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States government enacted stricter visa regulations, which are often cited as a major reason for an unprecedented decline in international student enrollment in academic year 2003-2004 (Naidoo, 2007). To counter xenophobic feelings after September 11, 2001, some educators, administrators, and researchers reiterated the necessity for international engagement through education. NAFFSA: Association of International Educators, in particular, has voiced the opinion that hosting foreign students is more important today than ever before:
“...generations of American foreign-policy leaders have pointed to educational exchanges as one of our most successful foreign policy tools, the most proven and effective way for the United States to build a foundation for dialogue and partnership with the rest of the world” (NAFSA, 2009, p. 1).

Higher education institutions charged with shaping future leaders of the world possess the ability to respond to this message.

A fourth reason why international students are attractive to U.S. institutions is because they often fill gaps left by American students in key areas of research, notably engineering and the sciences. Talented and dedicated foreign students help make possible the very important research activities of a university (Altbach, 2004; Shinn, Welch, and Bagnall, 1999). These functions in turn lend a competitive edge to universities that support them by increasing the institutions’ attractiveness to students, researchers, funding agencies, and accrediting organizations. Indeed, research has shown a “close link between indicators of internationalization and indicators of research performance [outlined in a 2003 national report The Top American Research Universities]” (Horn, Hendel, and Fry, 2007, p. 351).

Finally, economic gains resulting from international students enrolling in college in the United States present a real attraction. In academic year 2007-2008, international students, 62% of whom pay solely with personal and family funds, contributed more than $15.5 billion to the U.S. economy in the form of tuition, education expenses, and living expenses (Institute of International Education, 2008a). The contribution of these students is particularly important considering the competition institutions currently face in light of diminishing state support (Schuh, 2000).

What current concerns do higher education institutions face regarding international students?

American colleges and universities no longer enjoy unrivaled access to the pool of students wishing to study in an English-speaking country. Both Great Britain and Australia have initiated broad government-sponsored programs to enhance their educational offerings to foreign students. (Altbach 2004; Shinn et al., 1999). While the United States still remains attractive because of its high-quality research facilities, academic freedom, and degree prestige, it lacks “a comprehensive national recruitment strategy that would coordinate the efforts of all relevant federal agencies” (NAFSA, 2006, p. 8). According to NAFSA, such organization would alleviate common obstacles by easing the process of applying for visas and better facilitating travel and work by foreign students. Until a national strategy is implemented, institutions will continue to formulate a wide variety of recruitment and support plans without coordination (and with mixed success).

Countries from which the United States receives high numbers of students (particularly China and India) are improving their own education systems in an attempt to retain their own national scholars, since, as Naidoo (2007) points out, the “importance of education as a contributor of knowledge is leading many governments to realize the importance of the need to educate more of their citizens, to improve their economic competitiveness” (p. 217). As the middle class in these regions grows, access to
education in the home country will increase; likewise, as access to education improves, so will economic status and the middle class. Naidoo proposes that this development combined with tuition hikes by American universities have the potential to adversely affect international student enrollment.

The current global financial crisis presents another economic hurdle higher education institutions face. International students are already altering their plans to study in the United States. Neelakantan (2009) quotes an Indian student as saying “My initial plan was to do my master’s degree [in the U.S.] and look for a job too, but now I realize that there are no jobs and no funding, so I took admission in a college in Delhi.” Families may no longer be able to afford to send their children to America to study. The issue of travel budgets for American recruiters poses additional uncertainties.

Positive economic outlooks, however, suggest that despite a growing middle class abroad, demand for educational opportunities will still outweigh availability in Asia (McMurtrie, 2009). Also, while many institutions are eliminating or severely reducing travel funds, some institutions, like the University of Oregon, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Vanderbilt University, remain committed to international student recruitment. These schools plus twenty-one others recently accepted an invitation from the office of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to recruit “passionate, hungry students” from Baghdad as part of a larger effort to involve the U.S. in rebuilding the Iraqi education system (Mills, 2009).

Economic matters aside, American colleges and universities also face issues relating to support services for international students. From the application stage to the on-campus period, institutions need to consider choices that can affect enrollment, retention, and reputation. For example, Murray State University (Kentucky) significantly increased its foreign student enrollment after enacting proactive measures, like improving its online application process and response time (McMurtrie, 2008).

Complicated visa regulations are oft-cited reasons why foreign students forgo enrollment in the United States. NAFSA (2006), however, suggests that the U.S. government has corrected many restrictive visa policies that create an unwelcoming environment. Research now suggests that it is not the visa policies per se, but lack of administrative support for helping students navigate the policies, that deters international enrollment. For example, institutional staff are responsible for maintaining student data in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) database administered by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

“The workload of the international student service professionals significantly increased in order to comply with the new federal policy and regulations, [but] many [institutions] did not receive additional human resources. The result is less face-to-face time for current international students on campus and less time for recruiting potential students” (Starobin, 2006, p. 66).

With human resources already stretched thin in many institutions, these regulatory duties further limit the amount of assistance staff are able to provide to foreign students (Lee, 2008). Frustrated students may send negative reports back home with the effect of discouraging friends and relatives from enrolling.
Once on campus, international students require support services to help ease their transition to a new culture and foster intellectual and social growth. Orientations to basic school functions, such as how to register for classes, are critical for students (Kher, Juneau, and Molstad, 2003). Social activities, such as international movie nights, help students feel welcome and promote interaction with host students (Lacina, 2002). Important information about school services, academics, and American culture should also be made readily available, perhaps in the form of a handbook (Carmical, 2002). To ensure intellectual growth, faculty should be made aware of particular learning needs of international students and potential sources of conflict in the classroom (Lee and Rice, 2007). These efforts on behalf of institutions are necessary to increase international student success, therefore colleges and universities should be prepared to sufficiently commit support services in any internationalization efforts.

How can academic libraries address these issues?

As institutions face academic, economic, and social issues regarding international students, so too do such concerns affect academic libraries. This section discusses ways in which international student issues can play out in academic libraries and makes recommendations for how academic libraries might address such issues.

Critical research functions at colleges and universities depend on academic libraries to provide the best possible resources for faculty and students. Szélényi (2006) points out that international students, particularly at the graduate level, are indeed drawn to U.S. institutions because of their “great librar[ies]” (p. 77). Considering the competitive nature of enrolling international students these days, libraries can assist with recruitment efforts. One way to aid recruitment would be to provide print or electronic promotional materials about library collections that may be of particular interest to international student populations, such as business and science resources. For potential international graduate students in particular, libraries might also make easily accessible information about faculty publications.

Recent research suggests a correlation between library collection development and support of international students. Horn et al. (2007) developed a ranking mechanism for dimensions of internationalization at selected research universities and one of the indicators included the number of books in the international collection of the university library. Data for this indicator was gleaned by searching WorldCat for books with country names in the subject headings (p. 343). Additionally, Constantino (1994) provides evidence of both the “benefits of pleasure reading for foreign students” and changes in reading proficiency when foreign students were introduced to romance books (abstract). Libraries can also make available foreign language materials, such as newspapers and novels, to appeal to this group of students. Collection development budgets may be shrinking due to the present economic recession, but academic libraries with high numbers of foreign students should carefully consider whether to cut resources of interest and benefit to international students.

In terms of teaching and learning, just as faculty should be made aware of particular learning needs of international students, library staff should also address such needs during instruction and reference interactions. Language and other communication barriers are a significant challenge for some international students, and Amsberry (2008)
suggests ways for librarians to alleviate library anxiety, such as speaking clearly, avoiding idioms and cultural references, and minimizing library jargon. Regarding academic integrity, according to Evans (2006)

“Plagiarism is often a difficult concept for international students; plagiarizing a source can be seen as an honor to the original author. International students attending universities and colleges in the United States need to understand the concept of plagiarism and the consequences of committing plagiarism” (p. 10).

Thus, as Ha (2006) and Labelle (2007) concur, academic librarians need to discuss the tenets of intellectual property and be aware of cultural differences that might lead students to inadvertently plagiarize or improperly cite references. Yi (2007) and Song (2004) explore specific information-seeking patterns of various international student populations, including women and business students. For academic librarians looking to evaluate their services or increase their awareness of and support for international students, the studies and scholarship mentioned above will provide many excellent ideas.

This paper additionally recommends that academic libraries participate in the social acclimation of international students. Library staff might attend international student group functions as a way to connect with foreign students, learn about their interests, and respond by providing relevant information. Library administrators could collaborate with international student affairs departments to host an event in the library that highlights international books. Library administrators should also make sure orientation materials given to international students provide information about library services. Additionally, library-specific handbooks should be created to help students understand the American library system and terminology. Such activities will demonstrate the library’s important role in engaging international students, making them feel more welcome in the community, and contributing to a more positive U.S. experience.

Conclusion

International students are a desirable addition to American institutions of higher education. Not only do they enrich the educational experience, they also contribute to the nation’s economy. One of the most pressing issues for U.S. colleges and universities is how to increase enrollment and retention of international students in an ever more competitive global economy. Strategic recruitment efforts and well-coordinated support services hold promise for reaching this goal. Academic libraries are well-situated to participate in efforts to recruit and retain international students, and more importantly, provide relevant library services to help make these students’ educational and social experiences more meaningful and rich. In areas such as collection development and library instruction, academic librarians can exhibit unique strengths that highlight the vital role academic libraries play in higher education and the greater community.
"Works Cited"


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Additional Reading


