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Universities as Global Villages: Supporting International Students on Campus

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Since the United States is the number one destination in the world for international students (Institute of International Education 2019), the expectations are high for the country's colleges and universities to provide a welcoming environment. For the past 4 years, the social and political climate in the country has made this task even more complicated. Higher education institutions (HEIs) find themselves trying to attract talented students from abroad amid conflicting messages about whether they will be welcome. U.S. colleges and universities have had to support and engage the large number of currently enrolled students during these unprecedented times that divide the country on the basis of race and political ideology in the midst of a global pandemic. COVID-19 has also created new challenges for international students and intensified the existing inequities in their experiences. In this *Trends & Insights* piece, we provide a brief summary of those challenges, some best practices for engaging and supporting international students, and our projections and reflections on the effects of existing and emerging trends on international students' experiences in the United States, particularly in light of the recent U.S. elections. We share our perspectives on this topic both as emerging scholars of international higher education and current international students.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: SUPPORTING AN EXTREMELY DIVERSE POPULATION

International students at U.S. universities might share an immigration status as temporary visitors, but their experiences and needs are widely different based on an intersection of factors, including country of origin, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, language(s) spoken, socioeconomic status, and previous experience with U.S. culture. For many years, colleges and universities in the United States have set benchmarks for tailoring student services to the specific needs of countless subpopulations that comprise their diverse campuses. However, when it comes to international students, many universities rely on a single office to serve all of them as if they were

a monolithic group with the same challenges and same needs. While people who work at these offices tend to be genuinely concerned with the overall wellness and development of international students, these departments alone cannot adequately serve the needs of such a diverse population. Instead, to address these challenges strategies must involve the broader campus community (Hudzik 2020).

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Worldwide, universities and their students have encountered additional challenges as a result of the current pandemic. This summer, we conducted a study on the impact of COVID-19 on international

students in the United States and found the following prevalent stressors among international students (Tozini and Castiello-Gutiérrez 2020): financial well-being, discrimination, psychological stress and isolation, institutional and social support, and regulatory impacts.

Financial Well-being

The number and types of sources of funding can influence the ways international students engage on campus. In addition to not having access to certain financial aid options at most institutions, many international students in the United States struggle financially due to employment restrictions that only allow them to work limited hours, mainly on their own campus. As a result of the pandemic, many students lost the possibility of working in facilities that are not offering in-person services, such as the library, bookstore, and cafeterias. The number of off-campus employment opportunities has also decreased, which reduces the chances of obtaining practical training in their field of study.

Discrimination

In several public appearances, President Trump has referred to the COVID-19 virus as the “Wuhan virus,” “the kung flu,” or “the China virus.” After these references were made, several instances of discrimination against international students who were perceived as Chinese have been reported (Cheng 2020). In our research, one participant described the anxiety of being targeted because of nationality: “I am more afraid of hostile policies targeting Chinese international students issued by [the] Trump administration and the following discrimination than the COVID-19 [pandemic] itself.”

Psychological Stress and Isolation

International students have been disproportionately affected by the coronavirus pandemic due to the lack of family support within the area, leaving them at high risk of isolation (ACHA 2020, 5). Even before the pandemic, international students reported feeling lonely and isolated; almost 1 in 4 international students in our study (24 percent) feel they have not been accepted socially (Tozini and

Castiello-Gutiérrez 2020). With many campuses closed, access to counseling services has also become restricted, therefore pushing international students to look for third-party counselors.

Institutional and Social Support

In comparing support networks before and during the pandemic, participants in our study indicated that while they received the same level of support from their family, support from faculty and international office staff has decreased. This change may be explained by a perceived lack of empathy from faculty and difficulties with synchronous classes and accessing services for students in different time zones. On a positive note, support from fellow domestic and international students has increased.

Regulatory Impacts

The policies and discourse of the Trump administration have been extremely unfriendly toward international students. In 2020 alone, several policies affecting international students were proposed or approved: a ban on visas for Chinese students with military ties; a suspension of H-1B and some J visas; an attempt to deport or refuse visas to international students taking online classes; a ban on the entry of new international students whose universities are teaching entirely online; and proposed changes to cap degree timelines. Under these conditions, it is no surprise that many international students think that the U.S. government sees them as “criminals, terrorists, spies, or thieves of jobs and intellectual property” (Castiello-Gutiérrez and Li 2020, ii).

While the outlook of change in the U.S. federal government under a different presidency might look encouraging, as international students, we have mixed feelings. Even as colleges and universities might be making some effort to ensure that students feel welcome, the overall environment remains scary and even hostile. Almost half of the people who voted in this election were willing to maintain the country’s course and tolerate the current administration’s anti-immigrant stance. A lot of harm has already been done, and it will take time and intentionality to undo.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS TO SUPPORT INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

So, what can HEIs do to better serve the needs of international students?

- 1. Transform campuses into global villages:** U.S. colleges and universities need to move beyond being melting pots of different races, ethnicities, nationalities, and creeds, to become “global villages”—intercultural places where different communities have meaningful interactions and internationalization and diversity education is embraced and woven into every aspect of the institution. To do so, HEIs must revisit the idea of internationalization as an intentional process (de Wit et al. 2015) in which they need to invest in as many resources for supporting international students’ success as they do in attracting them to campus.
- 2. Move away from deficit perspectives:** Universities must avoid a deficit perspective in which international students are treated as Others, as individuals who need assistance assimilating to U.S. culture. HEIs also must shift attention from ways to help international students cope with issues of racism and other forms of discrimination to address larger systemic problems (Yao, George Mwangi, and Malaney Brown 2019).
- 3. Know and support the institution’s international students:** Understanding the different experiences that international students are facing given the current environment and students’ unique characteristics is a crucial endeavor. Universities must engage all students, including international students, in conversations about diversity and students’ positioning in the U.S. context. Better lines of communication need to be established between international student services and diversity and inclusion offices, and common practices should be shared between these offices and other departments. During exceptional circumstances, such as the current pandemic, institutions need to be particularly aware of international students’ potential needs, such as financial aid, housing alternatives, and academic flexibility.
- 4. Collaboration:** While international students’ experiences vary widely within an institution, some similarities persist across HEIs. University administrators and international education practitioners should not try to overcome all these issues alone. Working together with their peer institutions as well as with professional organizations that provide research and resources, advocacy guidance, and coordinated responses can be a more inclusive and efficient way of addressing international students’ needs.
- 5. Stronger advocacy against discriminatory policies:** The rapid and strong response from U.S. HEIs and professional organizations against the U.S. government’s proposal to impede international students staying in the country for distance learning classes demonstrated the power of collective agency. As opposed to engaging in individual responses, colleges and universities rallied together to take legal action in defense of their students. This level of collaborative advocacy should be the norm as the world continues to become more polarized and moves closer toward nationalism and neo-nativism.

In scenarios where international mobility becomes more restricted due to restrictive immigration policies, growing nationalistic stances, and global health and financial crises, supporting international students in a humanistic way becomes imperative. Listening to what international students have to say, understanding what it is they bring to campus other than revenue and prestige, and being empathetic to how they experience issues of inequality is just the beginning. All these actions must be followed by an intentional, sustained, and campuswide strategy and culture. International educators can better meet the needs of the diverse population of international students they serve when this work is part of a more comprehensive internationalization strategy at their institution. In doing so, we hope that the diversity of international students on U.S. college campuses can be celebrated and embraced so that we can feel more welcome here.

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