Article

Connecting International Student Retention and Global Competency

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ABSTRACT

Since international student enrollment continues to rise at US universities, this paper addresses how international student retention can be increased. We argue that programs, services, and events that bring together international and domestic students may not only help retain students, but may also develop their global competency. In an increasingly diverse world, developing students' global competency is key if we hope to help them to succeed at home or abroad.

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Introduction

Universities and colleges in the United States widely recognize that benefits of admitting international students include diversity, intercultural learning and increased revenue (Andrade, 2011). It is also worth noting that the number of international students at American universities is increasing. The Institute of International Education's 2013 report, for example, stated that the number of international students enrolling in American colleges and universities grew 7.2% between 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 to a record enrollment of 819,644 students. According to a National Science Foundation Report, enrollment is projected to continue to rise indefinitely which may suggest significant fiscal returns (Burrelli, 2010). Specifically, "in the 2012-2013 academic year . . . international students and their dependents contributed $24 billion to the U.S. economy, creating and supporting 313,000 jobs" (NAFSA, 2013). Given the contributions of international students to higher education, it is worth considering how to support their success and retention by fostering a model of integration into the campus and community that looks beyond simply ensuring academic success.

While many institutions use the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) as one predictor of degree

program success (Andrade, 2009), the reality is that students may still arrive unprepared for the differences in dialect and speed of discourse, much less the extensive reading and writing in an academia where English is the medium of instruction (Cheng, Myles and Curtis, 2004). Cultural differences can also impact student adjustment, leading to homesickness, isolation or detachment from the target culture, some or all of which may impact achievement (Lacina, 2002). And while universities and colleges have developed strategies and support programs for international students, including immigration and settling in, they may not specifically address the immersion into implicit social, cultural and academic expectations that may differ significantly from students' previous experiences in their home countries (Andrade and Evans, 2009). The usual but perhaps short-sighted response to the perceived rather than the actual needs of international students is to provide Intensive English Programs. However, they are typically non-credit and rarely offer a wide variety of support services (Andrade, 2011).

This paper argues for a more holistic model to integration and retention of international students. Rather than placing the burden of integration on the backs of the international community, we advocate for a combination of support services, programs and events that connect international and domestic communities. We believe that targeted activity such as this may also positively impact retention and it may have the added benefit of increasing the global competency of both parties. Global competency can be defined as, "the knowledge and skills that help [students] cross disciplinary domains to comprehend global events and respond to them effectively" (Reimers, 2009).

Programs and Services that Develop Retention and Global Competency

As theorized by Leask (2009), internationalization "at home," is a process that requires the equal participation of both domestic and international students. Internationalization at home matters since the integration of international and domestic students can promote global competency (Reimers, 2009). Leask claims that "effective cross-cultural interaction" is often presented as "a one-sided process" resting on the international student's ability to adjust to "the host culture" (p.218). In this model, international students bear all the responsibility when, in reality, both international and domestic students "need support and encouragement" in order to ensure a successful cross-cultural interaction. In Leask's view, informal co-

curricular activities, which she defines as "the various extracurricular activities that take place on campus" (p.207), are a vital part of global competency development.

Washington State University (WSU) Office of International Programs' (IP) International Center (IC) promotes global competency by targeting domestic and international communities. It also works to increase retention by providing both holistic programming and traditional support services for international students. Traditional support services include:

1. *Becoming a Cougar: American Life and Culture Series*

   This weekly series helps students better navigate the university environment and provides additional support by educating students on various topics including travels and transportation, athletics, academic integrity and social norms in America.

2. *English Programs: Conversation Tables and English with Board Games*

   Domestic and international students meet together every day of the week at noon to chat, play games and practice their English in a relaxed, informal setting.

These programs aim to provide opportunities for students to interact with faculty, staff and community members, improve their interpersonal and language skills, and become more familiar with American culture and values, all key aspects in increasing student retention. Co-curricular activities are particularly important in helping students "connect with each other, explore interests, and develop different talents and skills" and they increase international student retention (Andrade and Evans, 2009, p.55). Similarly, other studies conducted at the University of Florida by Nesic, Choi, and Anderson (2009) and the University of Montana by Fluck (2009) show that programming aimed at supporting international students and scholars eases students' cultural transition and improves retention rates. Andrade and Evans (2009) have identified vision, relationships, family, the institution, spirituality, and structure as keys to ensuring students' retention (p.46). While some of these factors mentioned by Andrade and Evans (2009) are deeply personal, most of the other factors might be affected by the policies and programs that an institution of higher learning decides to implement.

In addition to programming that attempts to ease students' cultural transition, the WSU IP-IC also offers holistic programming to encourage students to become active on campus and in the community such as:

1. *Friends and Family:* This program connects local community members with international students to share culture.

2. *Campus Friends:* In this program, domestic and international students are paired as conversation partners to exchange language and/or culture.

3. *Engage the World:* This program sends international students and students returning from education abroad into local classrooms and senior centers to provide cultural seminars and other types of educational presentations.

4. *Coffee Hour:* The Friday afternoon Coffee Hour from 3-4 attracts a large and diverse group of students, faculty, staff and community members for casual conversations or more formal presentations on selected cultural topics.

It is worth discussing the *Campus Friends program* in more detail since it exemplifies a best practice when it comes to developing students' global competency. The program, which pairs international and American students, aims to increase their global competency. American students that join the program come from an intercultural communication course where *Campus Friends* is a required part of the curriculum and attached to course concepts and outcomes. In addition, the program allows students to earn service or volunteer hours as an incentive to participate. The time the campus friends spend together may help develop global competency not only because of the connection to the intercultural communication course, but also because of the availability and ease of access to rich, meaningful and interactive events and programming such as cooking demonstrations, soccer tournaments, coffee hours and other special events. More importantly, by encouraging domestic students to approach intercultural communication as a two-way process, the program aims to create a more even playing field in which domestic students share the responsibility for creating a successful cross-cultural environment "at home" with international students.

The WSU IP-IC has just completed assessment on the outcomes of the *Campus Friends program.* The assessment tool, NAFSA's My Cultural Awareness Profile (MyCAP) measures domestic students' changes in global competency (2011). Preliminary results do

indicate an increase in global competency over the course of one semester or sixteen week session. In addition, we have assessed the *Friends and Family program* and have gathered valuable information about program quality and ways to improve family-student interactions. The next step for that program is to develop a more encompassing assessment plan that includes a measure of long-term student retention.

The WSU IP-IC is following in Leask's lead by creating an environment that promotes opportunities for international and domestic communities to interact and learn from each other. This is accomplished by collaborating with stakeholders on and off-campus, advocating for international student support services, and facilitating the extension of student learning from a local to global perspective. By focusing on institutional, social, and structural factors in particular, the services, events and programming offered by the IP-International Center aim to support, retain and integrate international and domestic populations. In addition, they provide the WSU community with international experiences through the integration of domestic and international communities.

Conclusion

Universities can help support students' success in and out of the classroom which, in turn, may increase international student retention as well as build inclusive global competency. As Leask (2009) contends, institutional interest in the topic of global competency is a result of the "increased interconnections between nations and peoples of the world" produced by globalization (p.205). Drawing on Kalantzis and Cope's (2000) research, Leask presents the interaction between home and international students as "a valuable resource" for ensuring that both populations "develop the skills and knowledge required to work in a global setting . . ." (p.206). Leask's research suggests, however, that "simply bringing home and international students together in class and on campus does not necessarily result in . . . the development of valuable intercultural communication skills and international perspectives" (Leask, 2009, p.207). Instead she argues that a strategic use of "both the formal and the informal curriculum within a dynamic and supportive institutional culture of internationalisation" is the best option to develop global competency on campus (p.207). That is, increased numbers of international students integrating into our universities and with American students contributes to the internationalization of our campuses "at home" by fostering global competency when appropriately supported. The rising tide of international

students choosing to attend American universities, then, challenges us to look at how retention and global competency are intertwined and to embrace support services including social, cultural and educational programming that support not only international student success and their ultimate retention, but also the successful interaction between domestic and international students.

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