

AIRC SERIES: VOLUME **1**

NAVIGATING THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT: Insights And Strategies

Edited by

CLAY HARMON AND KRISHNA BISTA

AIRC

The Association of
International Enrollment
Management

STARSCHOLARS
NETWORK

OPEN ACCESS

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Praise for the book

Navigating the Future of International Enrollment

A compelling framework that transforms international enrollment from a complex challenge into a strategic opportunity for global academic excellence.

Thomas Tinnefeld, PhD

Professor of Applied Languages, Saarland University of Applied Sciences, Germany

A valuable resource for higher education administrators and scholars.

John D Branch, PhD, EdD

Professor of Business Administration, University of Michigan, USA

An essential resource offering innovative strategies and crucial insights for education leaders navigating international enrollment in today's rapidly evolving global landscape.

Chunipha Poedloknimit, PhD

Lecturer, Department of Public Administration, Western University, Thailand

A rich collection of perspectives that deepens our understanding of how to create supportive and globally connected learning environments for international students.

Lu Lu, PhD

Beijing Language and Culture University, China

NAVIGATING THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL ENROLLMENT...

In a rapidly changing world, *Navigating the Future of International Enrollment* offers both clarity and vision for building more inclusive, resilient, and globally engaged campuses. Drawing on diverse voices and practical experience, it inspires educators and policymakers to reimagine internationalization for the future.

Thatcher A. Spero, PhD

Professor of Education, Musashino University, Japan

With clarity and vision, the authors provide timely strategies that will guide institutions in navigating the evolving global enrollment landscape and highlight the central role of student success and well-being.

Praveen Kumar Rudra, PhD

Assistant Professor, University of Nebraska at Omaha, NE, USA

A thought-provoking volume that empowers education leaders to embrace diversity and innovation in global enrollment strategies.

Sirirat Na Ranong, PhD,

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, Thailand

Navigating the Future of International Enrollment Management

Insights and Strategies

This scholarly volume examines the shifting dynamics of international student enrollment within an increasingly complex global higher education. Drawing on contributions from experienced practitioners and researchers, it addresses critical themes including international branch campuses, transnational education models, data-informed decision-making, student success, and institutional transformation. Through evidence-based analysis and case studies from diverse contexts, the book offers actionable strategies for fostering ethical, inclusive, and sustainable enrollment management practices. It serves as an essential reference for higher education leaders, enrollment professionals, and policymakers committed to advancing global engagement in a time of rapid change.

Editors

Clay Harmon and Krishna Bista

AIRC Series on Enrollment Management

Series Editor: Clay Harmon, EdD

The *AIRC Series on Enrollment Management* provides a timely and authoritative resource for understanding the challenges and opportunities of international student recruitment and enrollment in higher education. Edited by Clay Harmon, Executive Director of the Association of International Enrollment Management (AIRC), the series brings together diverse voices—scholars, practitioners, and policy leaders—to address pressing questions of ethics, access, and sustainability in global student mobility.

Each volume explores a core dimension of enrollment management, including student recruitment, retention, market diversification, policy impacts, and institutional capacity building. Through evidence-based research, comparative case studies, and actionable strategies, the series equips higher education leaders to adapt to shifting demographics, evolving policies, and global competition.

Books in this series include:

Navigating the Future of International Enrollment Management

Insights and strategies

Edited by Clay Harmon and Krishna Bista

Navigating the Future of International Enrollment Management

Insights and Strategies

Clay Harmon, Krishna Bista

STAR SCHOLARS PRESS

This book is published as an Open Access publication and is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial–NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

First Published 2025

by
Star Scholars Press

Category

Enrollment Management/Student Mobility/International Education/Higher Education

Copyright © 2025 The Author(s)

ISBN: 979-8-89524-030-4 (paperback)
ISBN: 979-8-89524-031-1 (hard cover)
ISBN: 979-8-89524-062-5 (digital/PDF)

Director of Book Publications: Dr. Roy Y. Chan, Lee University, US
Director of Communications: Dr. Bo Zhang, University of Hartford, US
Director of Digital Production: Dr. Sahar Aghasafari, University of South Carolina, US
Director of Global Essay Project: Dr. Franca Nwankwo, Morgan State University, US
Managing Director: Dr. Chinwe Ihoma, Morgan State University, US
Associate Director: Dr. Patricia Timmons, Harvard University, US
Production Director: Rajendra Bista, STAR Scholars Network, US
President: Dr. Uttam Gaulee, STAR Scholars Network, US

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025945248
Subject: Education/International Education – United States

Library of Congress
US Programs, Law, and Literature Division
Cataloging in Publication Program
101 Independence Avenue, S.E.
Washington, DC 20540-4283

Printed in the United States of America

Cover Design: Intead.com

press.starscholars.org

How to cite this book:

Harmon, C., & Bista, K. (Eds.). (2025). *Navigating the future of international enrollment management: Insights and strategies*. Star Scholars Press.

Acknowledgements

We extend our deepest gratitude to all colleagues at the STAR Scholars Network and AIRC: The Association of International Enrollment Management for their unwavering support, expertise, and guidance in the creation and success of this publication. Special thanks to the entire production team for their invaluable contributions and commitment to this project. We also recognize the crucial efforts of many individuals working behind the scenes, whose dedication played a key role in completing this project.

We also recognize the following individuals for their roles in bringing this book to publication: Director of Book Publications: Dr. Roy Y. Chan, Lee University; Director of Communications: Dr. Bo Zhang, University of Hartford; Director of Digital Production: Dr. Sahar Aghasafari, University of South Carolina; Managing Director: Chinwe Ihoma, Morgan State University; Associate Director: Patricia Timmons, Harvard University; Production Director and Reference Checker: Rajendra Bista, STAR Scholars Network; and Marketing Director: Tina Pandey, STAR Scholars Network, US. Also many thanks to Unsplash photographers Charles Forerunner, Luky Triohandoko, Markus Krisetya, Kyle Glenn, Andrei Castanha, Charles Deloye, Duy Pham, Valery Rabchenyuk, and Robert Bye for their images used in this book.

Their dedication and expertise have been pivotal in realizing this project, and their efforts are gratefully acknowledged.

Editors



Setting the Standard for the IEM Field

AIRC: The Association of International Enrollment Management is a non-profit membership association of accredited secondary and post-secondary institutions, student educational recruitment agencies, and service providers that seek to promote standards-based international student recruitment and enrollment practices. AIRC is designated by the U.S. government as a standards development organization.

AIRC's Programs and Services Include:

- Standards of ethical best practice for the IEM field
- One of the world's most stringent quality assurance programs for international student recruitment agencies
- The International Student Recruitment and Enrollment Planning (ISREP) professional certificate
- Free online courses for agency and school counselors
- The AIRC annual conference and other events that uniquely bring together institutions, agencies, and service providers

AIRC Membership Offers:

- Access to partnerships to grow your enrollment
- Increased credibility among colleagues
- Regional and national advocacy efforts
- Professional development and learning opportunities
- Discounts on AIRC's events, webinars, and trainings
- Shaping the future of the IEM field



Learn more at www.airc-education.org.

New Titles

1. *ChatGPT and Global Higher Education: Using Artificial Intelligence in Teaching and Learning*, By Xi Lin, Roy. Y Chan, Shyam Sharma, Krishna Bista
2. *Bridging Cultures, Empowering Futures: Global Citizenship and International Education*, By Krishna Bista, Uttam Gaulee, Dawn Michele Whitehead , Bo Zhang
3. *Current Trends in Global Education: Bridging K-12 and Higher Education for an Interconnected World*. By Marina Falasca, Karina J. Baum
4. *Entry Points to US Education: Accessing the Next Wave of Growth*, By Leilt Habte, David Di Maria, Krishna Bista, Jing Luan
5. *Current Perspectives on Intercultural and Global Competence*, By Darla K. Deardorff, Mizuho Tatebayashi
6. *The International Handbook of French Education: Language Learning, Teaching and Advocacy*, By Jerry L. Parker, Amany Saleh

<https://press.starscholars.org/>

Contents

Introduction: Navigating the Future of International Enrollment Management	XIII
1. Rethinking International Enrollment Management: Looking Inward to Support a Global Perspective	1
2. International Branch Campuses and U.S. Universities: Global Enrollment Opportunities in a Changing World	11
3. Transforming Business Education: A Management Information System as a Major in STEM to Attract International Talent	19
4. A World Unbound: The Fusion of Trends Redefining International Education	29
5. Using Data Wisely for International Enrollment Management	39
6. From Home to Host: Challenges and Resilience in Cross-Cultural Transition	49
7. Managing International Academic Collaboration in a Turbulent World: Swedish Perspectives	67
8. Intentional Enrollment Management: A Scalable Approach to Student Success and Institutional Transformation	75
9. A Niche in Transnational Higher Education: The Microcampus Model of the University of Arizona	87

10. From Recruitment to Graduation: A Comprehensive Approach
to International Enrollment Management

97

Introduction: Navigating the Future of International Enrollment Management

Clay Harmon

AIRC: The Association of International Enrollment Management

Krishna Bista

STAR Scholars Network: Society of Transnational Academic Researchers

Context and Definition

International Enrollment Management (IEM) has emerged as a distinct and vital branch of Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM), applying its principles specifically to the recruitment, enrollment, and success of international students. SEM, broadly defined, integrates marketing, admissions, financial aid, and retention strategies into a coordinated framework designed to align enrollment outcomes with institutional mission and long-term sustainability (Howard, 2025; Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2013). Building on this foundation, IEM extends these practices to a global stage. It encompasses the full spectrum of international student services—from overseas recruitment partnerships and credential evaluation to intensive English programs, admissions, sponsored program administration, immigration compliance, and retention support (NAFSA, 2023).

Professional communities such as NAFSA's International Enrollment Management Knowledge Community (KC) and standards developed by AIRC: The Association of International Enrollment Management have further formalized the field. AIRC's Institutional Enrollment Management Standards emphasize ethical practice, transparency, and accountability in working with international students and recruitment partners (AIRC, 2020). Together, these frameworks underscore that IEM is not simply about increasing international student numbers. Instead, it is about building sustainable pathways that attract and support a diverse student body, ensuring that international enrollment practices are ethical, student-centered, and aligned with institutional goals and global higher education priorities.

In the global context, IEM is more than an operational function; it is a strategic driver of higher education's role in diplomacy, economic development, and cultural exchange. Today's international enrollment leaders operate at the intersection of shifting demographics, geopolitical volatility, and evolving immigration policy. They must not only recruit and retain students but also anticipate and adapt to changes in global mobility patterns, regulatory environments, and intensifying international competition for talent.

While domestic enrollment management literature often emphasizes yield optimization and retention strategies, the international dimension introduces unique complexities: cross-border policy shifts, global market diversification, international student services, and the cultivation of institutional brand identity across cultural and national contexts (Wilkins, 2021). International enrollment work therefore demands an agile, data-driven, and culturally competent approach that accounts for both long-term positioning and immediate operational challenges.

Trends, Challenges, and Policy Context

Global Growth and Emerging Constraints

Recent statistics underscore both the opportunity and volatility in the international student market. The *Open Doors 2024 Report* (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2024) documented an all-time high of 1,126,690 international students in the United States in the 2023–2024 academic year—a 7% increase from the previous year—contributing more than \$50 billion to the U.S. economy. India overtook China as the largest sending country, with 331,602 students (+23%), while China sent 277,398 students (–4%). More than half (56%)

of international students pursued STEM fields, reinforcing the direct connection between international education and U.S. workforce development priorities.

Despite these gains, short-term projections signal significant challenges. According to NAFSA and JB International’s scenario modeling, reported by Mowreader (2025) in *Inside Higher Ed*, international student enrollment could decline by as much as 15% in the 2025–2026 academic year—equivalent to 150,000 fewer students—due largely to visa processing delays, heightened vetting protocols, and a temporary suspension of visa interviews during the peak summer issuance season. The projected losses could amount to \$7 billion in total economic impact and 60,000 fewer jobs in higher education and related sectors.

SEVIS Data Insights and Seasonal Trends

Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security published data from the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) indicating a steep decline in the number of international students in the United States between March 2024 and March 2025. DHS later removed the dataset due to irregularities and subsequently issued corrected figures showing steady year-over-year growth in international student enrollment. SEVIS “by the numbers” remains a critical resource, providing monthly updates that offer near-real-time insights into enrollment patterns. This timeliness makes the dataset particularly valuable for assessing how political conditions and immigration policy changes influence student mobility and institutional recruitment strategies (Andrews, 2025).

Patterns within SEVIS data reveal predictable seasonal fluctuations: substantial spikes in August and September as new students arrive for the fall term, followed by winter declines linked to program completions and transitions to Optional Practical Training (OPT). The timing of visa issuance is therefore pivotal. Disruptions during peak processing months—such as the suspension of visa interviews in June and July 2025 in high-volume sending countries including China, India, Japan, and Nigeria—significantly impacted fall enrollment. Such delays forced some students to defer or abandon study plans, producing downstream effects on institutional enrollment targets, financial stability, campus diversity, and program sustainability.

Shifting Geographies of Global Student Mobility and Market Diversification

While the United States and other Anglophone destinations continue to dominate international enrollment flows, global student mobility is becoming increasingly multipolar. New and emerging hubs—including Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and China—are reshaping global student mobility. Japan, for example, has set a target of hosting 400,000 international students by 2033, expanding English-taught programs and easing visa pathways (The PIE News, 2025). South Korea, propelled by its technological leadership and cultural influence, currently hosts more than 200,000 international students and aims to reach 300,000 by 2027 (OECD, 2025). Singapore’s globally ranked universities, positioned at the intersection of Asia and the Global South, attract students through competitive post-study work opportunities and strong regional linkages (The PIE News, 2025). China, traditionally viewed as a sending country, is increasingly positioning itself as a host destination, leveraging scholarship programs, rising university rankings, and its 2024 Degree Act, which expands international degree recognition and partnerships (OECD, 2025).

These shifts underscore that international enrollment management is no longer concentrated in a few traditional markets. Instead, demographic change, policy reforms, and economic strategies across Asia, Europe, and other regions are creating diversified pathways for academic mobility. For institutions and policymakers, this signals the importance of adopting a comparative perspective: student flows must be understood not only in relation to the U.S. or other “big four” destinations but within a broader, interconnected global higher education system (OECD, 2025; The PIE News, 2025).

Regional enrollment trends are diversifying. While India’s rapid growth and China’s gradual decline dominate headlines, several emerging markets show strong potential. Bangladesh, Ghana, Nepal, Pakistan, and Spain each reached all-time highs in 2023–2024 (IIE, 2024). Sub-Saharan Africa recorded a 13% growth rate, the highest among all world regions for the second consecutive year. These shifts present opportunities for market diversification but also demand tailored recruitment strategies, as cultural, economic, and visa-related factors vary widely by region.

As Phillips and Jones (2024) argue, diversification is a key risk management strategy in the face of demographic volatility and policy uncertainty. Institutions

that spread recruitment efforts across multiple global markets are better positioned to weather downturns in any single country or region.

Demographic and Economic Imperatives

Domestically, the President’s Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (2025) reports that immigrant-origin and international students together comprise roughly one-third of all U.S. higher education students. This includes 1.9 million first-generation immigrants, 3.9 million second-generation immigrants, and over 1.1 million international students. These populations are not only a critical source of enrollment stability but also essential to advancing institutional objectives related to intercultural equity and belonging. Their contributions extend beyond tuition revenue, enriching campus culture and strengthening the U.S. talent pipeline.

Given projected domestic enrollment declines—the so-called “enrollment cliff” expected from 2025 onward—international students represent a vital growth area for many institutions. However, the financial impact of losing even a fraction of this population is significant, especially for regional public universities and tuition-dependent private institutions.

Policy Environment and Implications for Global Mobility

The national policy ecosystem remains one of the most significant external forces shaping IEM strategies. The 2025 visa processing changes represent a stark reminder of the influence that federal immigration policy exerts on institutional capacity to recruit globally. Under the Trump administration’s current approach, increased scrutiny, travel restrictions, and limited consular staffing have already disrupted traditional recruitment channels. For example, NAFSA (2025) reports that June 2025 F-1 visa issuances declined by as much as 90% compared to the previous year in certain countries affected by new travel restrictions.

These policy barriers have ripple effects beyond U.S. borders. Competitor nations such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom have intensified recruitment efforts, often highlighting their comparatively streamlined visa processes and post-graduation work opportunities. In this competitive environment, U.S. institutions must leverage their academic reputation, alumni networks, and scholarship programs to remain attractive.

Global mobility is also shaped by broader geopolitical and economic trends. For instance, rising demand for STEM programs—pursued by 56% of international students in the U.S.—positions American universities favorably in fields aligned with workforce needs. However, disruptions to these pipelines, whether through restrictive work visa policies or increased domestic competition in sending countries, can quickly shift enrollment patterns.

Institutional Strategies and Adaptation

In this challenging context, IEM requires a dual focus: immediate tactical responses to policy shocks and long-term strategic positioning. Phillips and Jones (2024) identify brand positioning, targeted outreach to high-yield populations, cultivating new audience segments, and leveraging digital marketing tools as central to mitigating enrollment declines. Zaccariotto Batista's (2025) research underscores that enrollment growth cannot be separated from the quality of administrative and communication services, which significantly shape student satisfaction and retention. Institutions that integrate robust student support frameworks into recruitment pipelines are more likely to convert admitted students into enrolled and retained students.

Wilkins (2021) highlights that cross-border delivery models—such as international branch campuses, micro-campuses, and transnational partnerships—can diversify recruitment risk and extend institutional reach. However, these models require sustained investment, nuanced cultural adaptation, and local stakeholder engagement to succeed.

Building Capacity for the Future: Graduate Programs and Professional Associations

Sustaining and strengthening IEM requires a pipeline of well-prepared professionals equipped with the skills to navigate these complexities. Across the U.S., a growing number of universities now offer graduate programs specifically focused on international education management, enrollment strategy, and global higher education leadership. Notable examples include:

- **Morgan State University** – *PhD in International and Comparative Education*, with a focus on student mobility and global educational development.
- **Vanderbilt University (Peabody College)** – *Master's in International*

Education Policy and Management (IEPM), emphasizing policy analysis and organizational management in diverse sociocultural contexts.

- **Harvard Graduate School of Education** – *Online Master’s in Education: International Education Policy and Management Pathway*, designed for working professionals seeking to lead in international education contexts.
- **University of Pennsylvania (Graduate School of Education)** – *M.S.Ed. in Global Higher Education Management*, an executive-style online program preparing leaders for complex university management challenges.
- **University at Albany** – *Master of Arts in International Education Management and Leadership*, focused on institutional, governmental, and non-profit leadership in the international education sector.

These programs—offered in both in-person and online modalities—equip future IEM leaders with competencies in cross-cultural communication, policy development, data analytics, and strategic planning. Graduates enter the field prepared to design inclusive recruitment strategies, strengthen institutional capacity, and advocate for supportive immigration and education policies.

In parallel, professional associations such as NAFSA: Association of International Educators, the AIRC: The Association of International Enrollment Management, and the Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA) provide ongoing training, networking, and policy advocacy. By fostering collaboration across institutions and countries, these organizations amplify the capacity of individual practitioners to influence global mobility trends positively.

Purpose and Scope of This Volume

Navigating the Future of International Enrollment Management: Insights and Strategies is the inaugural volume of a planned annual book series, a collaborative project between AIRC and STAR Scholars Network, to address these intertwined opportunities and challenges. By bringing together leading scholars, experienced practitioners, and policy experts, this volume offers evidence-based frameworks, case studies, and forward-looking analyses to guide enrollment leaders in a volatile global market.

The chapters in this volume span market intelligence, strategic communications, policy advocacy, data analytics, and student services integration. Collectively, they provide readers with both the macro-level trends—shaped by global mobility patterns, demographic shifts, and immigration policy—and the micro-level practices that translate strategy into measurable outcomes.

The stakes are high: in an era marked by demographic realignments, shifting mobility patterns, visa backlogs, and geopolitical tensions, international enrollment management has emerged as both a strategic imperative and an ethical responsibility for higher education systems worldwide. Across diverse national contexts, institutions are navigating the interplay of domestic policy priorities, global labor market demands, and cross-border education frameworks. This volume draws on comparative and international perspectives to equip leaders with evidence-based insights, adaptable strategies, and policy-relevant tools to manage enrollment within an increasingly interdependent global higher education landscape—ensuring that institutions remain academically vibrant, socially inclusive, and globally connected for students from all regions.

References

AIRC (2020). AIRC international enrollment management (IEM) standards for U.S. institutions. The Association of International Enrollment Management. <https://www.airc-education.org/copy-of-agency-standards>

Andrews, G. (2025, July 8). *SEVIS data and international student trends*. Association of American Universities. <https://www.aau.edu/newsroom/leading-research-universities-report/sevis-data-and-international-student-trends>

Howard, C. B. (2025, January 6). *Distinguishing strategic enrollment management and annual recruitment plans*. AACRAO. <https://www.aacrao.org/resources/newsletters-blogs/aacrao-connect/article/distinguishing-strategic-enrollment-management-and-annual-recruitment-plans>

Hossler, D., & Kalsbeek, D. H. (2013). Enrollment management and managing enrollment: Setting the context for dialogue. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*, 1(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sem3.20001>

Institute of International Education. (2024). *Open Doors 2024 report on international educational exchange*. <https://opendoorsdata.org/>

Mowreader, A. (2025, August 5). International student enrollment could drop 15% this fall. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/global/international-students-us/2025/08/05/international-student-enrollment-could-drop-15>

NAFSA: Association of International Educators. (2023). *International enrollment management knowledge community*. <https://www.nafsa.org>

NAFSA: Association of International Educators. (2025). *International student enrollment could drop 15% this fall*. <https://www.nafsa.org/>

OECD. (2025). *What are the key trends in international student mobility? Education indicators in focus #88*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en>

Phillips, C. H., & Jones, S. J. (2024). Strategic and tactical marketing strategies for regional public universities to address the enrollment cliff. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 96(4), 653–677. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2024.2378640>

President's Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration. (2025). *National data on immigrant-origin and international students*. <https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/national/national-data/>

The PIE News. (2025, January 7). *Top study destinations outside the “big four” in 2024*. <https://thepienews.com/top-study-destinations-outside-the-big-four>

Wilkins, S. (2021). Two decades of international branch campus development, 2000–2020: A review. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 35(1), 311–326. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-08-2020-0409>

Zaccariotto Batista, E. F. (2025). *International students' perceptions of enrollment support services at Andrews University: An analysis of 2021–2024 data* [Doctoral dissertation, Andrews University]. Andrews University Digital Commons. <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/dissertations/1841>

Bios:

Clay Harmon, EdD, is Executive Director of AIRC: The Association of International Enrollment Management, which promotes quality standards and best practices in international student recruitment and enrollment. Dr. Harmon has held leadership roles across study abroad and international enrollment

management and brings over twenty years of professional experience in higher education. His research interests include U.S.–China educational exchange and English language proficiency requirements for international applicants. Dr. Harmon earned his BA in Asian Studies from the University of Puget Sound, an EdM in Higher Education from Harvard University, and an EdD in Leadership for Educational Equity in Higher Education from the University of Colorado Denver.

Krishna Bista, EdD, Senior Executive Vice President of the STAR Scholars Network. He is also Professor of Higher Education at Morgan State University, Maryland. An internationally recognized scholar of global student mobility, he is the founding editor of the *Journal of International Students* and founding series editor of Routledge's *Global Student Mobility Book Series*. Dr. Bista has authored more than 100 papers and edited over 35 books on higher education, internationalization, and doctoral student experiences. His recent publications include *Advancing Global Competencies in Education: Theory and Practice* (2025, Routledge) and *Global Pathways: Insights on Studying, Working, Thriving Abroad* (2025, AAC&U and STAR Scholars).



Chapter One

Rethinking International Enrollment Management: Looking Inward to Support a Global Perspective

Raghvendra Singh
Michael Lanford
University of North Georgia, USA

ABSTRACT

The future of international enrollment management faces numerous challenges, including geopolitical tensions, restrictive immigration policies, and political movements that are hostile to diversity and inclusion in higher education. This article nevertheless argues that professionals still have significant agency within their institutions to develop and implement impactful student service initiatives for incoming and current international students. In particular, the article argues that professionals need to focus on 1) greater collaboration across departments, 2) the cultivation of deep relationships to better understand students' evolving challenges, and 3) real-time support systems in today's unstable geopolitical environment.

Keywords: collaboration, enrollment management, international students, loosely coupled systems, student success, support systems

INTRODUCTION

The future of international enrollment management faces numerous challenges due to increased geopolitical tensions; the global rise of fascist and nativist political movements; restrictive policies on immigration; and influential leaders' hostility to diversity, inclusion, and intercultural engagement in higher education (Darian-Smith, 2025; Joseph-McCatty et al., 2025). For example, recent U.S. federal policy has been exceptionally antagonistic to programs that foster international engagement and outreach, as evidenced by devastating cuts to the U.S. AID and the Fulbright programs, as well as the closure of U.S. embassies and consulates (Lally & Blanco, 2025). Concurrently, important tenets of higher education, such as academic freedom, shared governance, and institutional autonomy, which propelled U.S. institutions to the forefront of global research and innovation, are being systemically destroyed by unelected political stakeholders and complicit university boards (Altbach et al., 2025; Darian-Smith, 2025). Even previously uncontroversial support for international students and scholars has been radically undermined due to the revocation of international student visas and the cancellation of SEVIS status for hosting institutions (Gilbert, 2025).

These multilayered challenges may understandably generate a sense of hopelessness among international professionals, as they seem too overwhelming to effectively counteract. This article, however, argues that international enrollment professionals, now more than ever, must look inward and identify the small, internal changes they can make within their institutions to create a more welcoming and supportive environment for their international students. In particular, this article draws upon the contemporary context of U.S. higher education to argue that international enrollment professionals around the world can focus their energies on three institutional issues to develop and implement impactful services for international students: 1) greater collaboration across departments, 2) the cultivation of deep relationships to better understand students' evolving challenges, and 3) real-time support systems in today's unstable geopolitical environment.

GREATER COLLABORATION ACROSS DEPARTMENTS

U.S. colleges and universities are famous for being loosely coupled institutions in which the daily tasks and cultural expectations of a department situated in

one part of campus might be completely unknown, and even rather foreign, to individuals working in another department on the same campus (Weick, 1976). This loosely coupled configuration of U.S. higher education often baffles external stakeholders who are accustomed to a top-down corporate environment; however, it confers several advantages. Individual colleges, departments, and programs enjoy considerable autonomy to develop their own mission statements, prioritize their own goals, cultivate their own cultures, and carry out ambitious initiatives without debilitating administrative oversight (Tierney & Lanford, 2018). This ethos of autonomy, in turn, has a positive effect on innovation, as individual disciplinary experts are free, at least in theory, to pursue long-term projects that can benefit society rather than short-term financial gain (Lanford & Tierney, 2022). Moreover, if a major problem arises in one department, it generally has a limited impact on the vitality of other departments in the institution.

However, one major downside to U.S. higher education's loosely coupled nature is that programs often work in silos, unaware of how the capacity and talents of affiliated programs could lend their expertise to important institutional initiatives (Lloyd, 2016). As a result, potentially impactful services might be inadequately replicated and watered down across institutions. Any campus committed to supporting international students must recognize that student success is a shared responsibility not only across all campus offices but also across disciplinary degree programs (Toner, 2022). Unfortunately, international students are often treated as a single, generalized group and are frequently directed to the international office for all their needs. International students should not be expected to rely solely on the international office as they navigate the academic, cultural, and social transitions of studying in a new environment.

For example, recent international student surveys consistently reveal that career opportunities and career development remain the primary reasons why international students choose to study in the United States (Esaki-Smith and Interstride, 2025; IDP Connect, 2025). These findings point to a critical need for international admissions and student service offices to collaborate closely with career services to ensure that international students have access to robust experiential learning opportunities as part of their educational journey. While international student service offices typically possess deep expertise in immigration matters, career coaches across campuses should receive cross-training on key topics, such as curricular practical training (CPT) and optional practical training (OPT), which provide critical experiential learning pathways for international students (Bernhardt, 2021). Similarly, international student services and campus career services should collaborate by combining

their areas of expertise to support international students more effectively. Jointly organized campus events can help students navigate U.S. workplace culture and the job search process, including resume development and interview preparation tailored to the expectations of U.S. employers (Bernhardt, 2021). Equally important is intercultural competency training, whether offered by professors or specialized counselors, so that career service specialists understand the cultural and social backgrounds of international students and can tailor advice that acknowledges preconceptions while effectively helping students achieve their career goals (Kisch, 2015).

Another vital area of campus collaboration involves educating new international students about how to navigate the complex and constantly evolving U.S. healthcare system. This crucial educational mission includes information about how to access available and cost-effective medical services, from prescription medications to urgent care, and learning the appropriate procedures and expectations for seeking care in a variety of medical settings. In partnership with campus health services and external community stakeholders, international offices should also develop comprehensive, health-focused information sessions on a variety of topics pertinent to health and safety that may require sensitivity for many international students. For example, at the University of California Berkeley, clinical counselors and international student advisors work closely, serving as cultural informants to the larger campus community in addressing the mental health needs of its international students (Hulstrand, 2018). In summary, career development and healthcare are just two of the many topics in which U.S. higher education institutions, as well as universities around the world, could leverage diverse areas of expertise across loosely coupled systems, thereby providing comprehensive support for international students rather than leaving them on their own to make sense of opaque and often confusing social phenomena in an unfamiliar environment.

CULTIVATING DEEP RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

Owing to understandable institutional incentives to prioritize convenience and efficiency, mass electronic communication remains a common outreach method for international students. Nevertheless, U.S. higher education institutions must do more to engage international students through meaningful, in-person interactions. Our argument is grounded in the notion that 2025 has been a particularly tumultuous year for international students in the U.S. While universities may have limited influence over federal and state policy decisions, the broader political context underscores the critical need for institutions to strengthen their relationships with international students, especially at a

time when many are questioning their decision to study in the U.S (Young, 2025). Meaningful personal connections can reinforce a sense of belonging and trust, assuring students that their institution is both supportive and accessible (Lanford, 2019). Such deep relationships not only help institutions better understand the unique challenges and anxieties international students face, but also demonstrate a genuine commitment to students' well-being and success.

As an illustrative example, the first author of this article recounts his experiences serving as a Program Manager for international students at Northern Arizona University. Campus-wide events, such as Thanksgiving meals and cultural festivities, fostered a sense of community and provided international students with opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue with faculty and staff. Through such opportunities, students were able to share their transitional challenges and personal experiences in a supportive environment, much to the benefit of the institution.

From an institutional perspective, it is important to recognize that international student retention is not merely a statistic; it reflects a deeper sense of belonging rooted in how the university community embraces its international population. Inclusion in higher education should go beyond showcasing cultural programs and festivities. It must also involve a genuine commitment to understanding and supporting the academic, social, and logistical challenges international students face. Staff and faculty need to be aware of the academic adjustments these students undergo while adapting to a new educational system. They should also recognize that international students often lack access to common resources, such as personal transportation or knowledge of essential processes such as filing tax returns. While broadly impactful services, such as immigration support and quality academic instruction, are critical for all international students, the individualized and culturally responsive considerations, such as accommodating dietary needs through kosher, halal, or culturally familiar meal options, foster a truly inclusive and welcoming campus environment. For example, the concept of food diversity, which encompasses both multicultural and dietary accommodations, illustrates how something as seemingly simple as campus dining can play a powerful role in affirming international students' presence and value within the broader campus community (Buell et al., 2021). Such understandings only occur, however, when institutions make a concerted effort to understand students' multiplex backgrounds and needs.

REAL-TIME SUPPORT SYSTEMS

The lack of consistent policies regarding international student visa processing

has thrown U.S. higher education into considerable turmoil. Therefore, when considering the variety of erratic and unpredictable attacks that higher education has experienced over the past few months, it is apparent that all institutions, rather than assuming that a return to normalcy is around the corner, should prepare for uncertainty as best they can. As international students in the U.S. face heightened scrutiny regarding their immigration status and express growing fears about traveling abroad while enrolled, several U.S. higher education institutions have wisely implemented real-time support systems. These systems include free or subsidized summer housing for students who choose not to leave the country. Institutions as diverse as Arizona State University and Macalester College have provided housing and meal plans to international students, who, out of concern over immigration repercussions, opted to remain in the U.S. during academic breaks (Martinez, 2025). Northern Arizona University has fostered safe spaces for international students through informal staff–student engagements (ICAWay, 2025).

A major issue in the development of effective real-time support systems, however, concerns the collection of relevant and valid information about student needs and concerns. To gather information that can supplement real-time support systems, some institutions have organized catered lunches, which create a relaxed setting for students to voice concerns, particularly around sensitive topics such as visa issues. These efforts not only promote open dialogue between students and staff, but also reinforce a sense of safety, inclusion, and support within the broader campus community.

During these challenging times, as U.S. higher education institutions search for their North Star to guide them through the complexities of international student recruitment, reflection on - and the recalibration of - current systems may be the key to progress. In recent years, many institutions have understandably prioritized acceleration in international enrollment. These are different times. Rather than continually seeking the next China or India as a source of prospective international students, it is essential to invest in the success and well-being of those who are already on our campuses. By enhancing their experience and fostering a genuine connection with the institution, we lay the groundwork for sustained engagement and future opportunities in international recruitment.

CONCLUSION

As stated at the beginning of this article, international enrollment management professionals, as exemplified by contemporary political issues in the U.S., are facing significant challenges in both the recruitment and retention of

international students. During times of such uncertainty, it is easy to lose sight of our core purpose. Professionals working in enrollment management have an institutional charge to recruit international students who can support increased global collaboration and engagement, expand the capacity for research and innovation, bolster institutional branding, and prepare all graduates for global citizenship. Nonetheless, they also have an ethical duty to ensure that international students are supported through external edicts and policies that could threaten their health and safety. We believe that enrollment management professionals not only still have significant agency within their institutions to develop and implement impactful student service initiatives for incoming and current international students, but they can also support greater collaboration across their institutions, support deep relationships with students, and ensure that real-time support is provided when unexpected geopolitical events occur. In doing so, enrollment management professionals can meet their institutional responsibilities while responding ethically and humanely to the international students in their care.

REFERENCES

- Altbach, P. G., de Wit, H., & Glass, C. R. (2025, April 23). U.S. universities urged to focus on international student experience. *University World News*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250423101645540>
- Bernhardt, B. (2021, August 1). Op-ed: Building partnerships to support international student career development. *National Association of Colleges and Employers*. <https://www.nacweb.org/diversity-equity-and-inclusion/best-practices/op-ed-building-partnerships-to-support-international-student-career-development/>
- Buell, K. J., Briscoe, K., & Yao, C. W. (2021). It just doesn't taste the same: International students' perceptions of on-campus food and dining. *Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 47(2), 10-23
- Darian-Smith, E. (2025). Knowledge production at a crossroads: Rising anti-democracy and diminishing academic freedom. *Studies in Higher Education*, 50(3), 600-614. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2347562>
- Esaki-Smith, A., & Interstride. (2025). *International student sentiment survey 2025*. <https://interstride.com/research/International-student-sentiment-survey-2025/>

Gilbert, N. (2025). “You’re just not welcome”: Researchers grapple with U.S. plan to revoke Chinese student visas. *Nature*, *642*(8067), 277-278. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-025-01746-0>

Hulstrand, J. (2018, May–June). Supporting international students on U.S. campuses. *International Educator*, *27*(3), 44–47. https://www.nafsa.org/sites/default/files/ektron/files/underscore/ie_mayjun18_isa.pdf

ICAway. (2025, April 13). *Hope & optimism with Dylan Rust: International student retention & creating a sense of belonging* <https://www.icaway.com/hope-optimism-with-dylan-rust-international-student-retention-creating-a-sense-of-belonging/>

IDP Connect. (2025). *Emerging futures 7: Voice of the international student*. Emerging Futures, Voice of the International Student.

Joseph-McCatty, A., Frierson, K., Pennell, A., & Franks, J. (2025). Navigating anti-DEI legislation: Reflexivity and resistance in social work education. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2025.2512495>

Kisch, M. (2015, May–June). Helping international students navigate career options. *International Educator*, *24*(3), 66–69. <https://www.nafsa.org/professional-resources/publications/helping-international-students-navigate-career-options>

Lally, M., & Blanco, G. (2025, May 31). The Fulbright freeze is immoral and self-destructive. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/fulbright-freeze-immoral-and-self-destructive>

Lanford, M. (2019). Making sense of “outsiderness”: How life history informs the college experiences of “nontraditional” students. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *25*(5), 500-512. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418817839>

Lanford, M., & Tierney, W. G. (2022). *Creating a culture of mindful innovation in higher education*. SUNY Press.

Lloyd, C. (2016). Leading across boundaries and silos in a single bound. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *40*(7), 607-614. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2015.1125816>

Martinez, X. (2025, May 31). International students fear leaving the U.S. as Trump's visa threats mount. *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/us-news/education/international-student-travel-visas-trump-a3d2f0a5>

Tierney, W. G., & Lanford, M. (2018). Research in higher education: Cultural perspectives. In J. C. Shin & P. N. Teixeira (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of international higher education systems and institutions* (pp. 1-6). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_165-1

Toner, M. (2022, November 16). Partnering on campus to support the student journey. *NAFSA: Association of International Educators*. <https://www.nafsa.org/ie-magazine/2022/11/16/partnering-campus-support-student-journey>

Weick, K. E. (1976). Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2391875>

Young, J. R. (2025). International students are rethinking coming to the U.S. That's a problem for colleges. *The Hechinger Report*. <https://hechingerreport.org/international-students-are-rethinking-coming-to-the-u-s-thats-a-problem-for-colleges/>

Bios

RAGHVENDRA SINGH is the Associate Director of International Recruitment and Outreach at Indiana University Bloomington. He is also a doctoral candidate in higher education leadership at the University of North Georgia.

MICHAEL LANFORD, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Higher Education at the University of North Georgia. His research investigates educational equity, globalization, institutional innovation, and organizational culture.



Edited by Jing Luan, Leilt Habte, David Di Maria, Krishna Bista

"Entry Points to US Education highlights examining modern international education's complexities. This work is indispensable for those looking to elevate their strategic approach to international student engagement and education. All contributors expertly combine theoretical insights with practical examples, making this book an incredibly valuable resource for implementing effective recruitment and engagement strategies." **Dr. Allan E. Goodman**, Chief Executive Officer, Institute of International Education, USA

Order your copies at <https://press.starscholars.org/press/catalog/book/44>



Chapter Two

International Branch Campuses and U.S. Universities: Global Enrollment Opportunities in a Changing World

Joshua K. Park
George Mason University Korea

Danielle Swanepoel
SolBridge International School of Business

Shannon N. Davis
George Mason University

Abstract

Higher education in the United States has been anxiously preparing for the enrollment-based demographic cliff, in which case there will be a substantial decline in the number of U.S. high school students who would be targeted to enroll at colleges and universities. Other countries have similar or even more severe concerns (e.g., South Korea and Japan), whereas some countries (e.g., Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) have the opposite demographic experience, with many high school students seeking higher education opportunities. International student recruitment is a practice that many universities have adopted as a way to mitigate their own country's decline in traditional college student enrollments. One mechanism that the U.S. has led in is the deployment of international branch campuses, extensions of U.S.

universities around the world. In this chapter, we argue that there will be increasing opportunities for international branch campuses to offer a US higher education experience to students due to changing geopolitical policies on immigration to the US. Using the example of one international branch campus, we document how U.S. universities can respond to these global changes and provide unique avenues into U.S. higher education for non-U.S. students.

Keywords: international branch campus; student mobility; educational access; enrollment strategies; transnational education; international students

Introduction

Countries facing a substantially low birthrate and an increase in the aging population are facing several crises, one of which is a decline in student enrollment in higher education institutions. This phenomenon is often referred to as the Enrollment Class (Schutte, 2023). Notably, as of 2024, countries in East Asia appear to be most impacted by this crisis, with South Korea reporting the lowest fertility rate in the world at 0.72 (Kreimer, 2024), followed by Japan, where over 29% of the population is over the age of 65 (Kinoshita & Kishimoto, 2024), and Taiwan's fertility rate has dropped to 0.87 (Lin, 2024). In South Korea, university enrollment will decrease from 440,000 (in 2023) to 260,000 by 2040 (Jung, 2025). To address this, South Korea has implemented several initiatives to address this enrollment-based demographic cliff, some of which include mergers and closures of smaller, regional universities; restructuring programs from academic to more vocational focuses; and diversifying student profile enrollment, as "aggressive recruitment policies for international students are among the most common strategies for many institutions. The number of international students in Korea has increased significantly, rising from 40,585 in 2009 to 160,165 in 2019" (Jung, 2024). The Korean government has supported this aggressive recruitment of international students through projects such as the 'Study Korea 300K Project', which aims to attract 300,000 international students by 2027.

Although the US is not experiencing a demographic crisis to the same extent or at the same pace as many Asian countries, it is also facing the Enrollment Cliff. According to Schutte (2023), as a direct consequence of the Great Recession (2007–2009), there was a marked decline in births in the U.S. and "modern U.S. birth rates have continued to decline, even as the economy rebounded in the 2010s". An economist at Carleton College, Nathan Grawe, predicts that the college-going population will decline by 15% by 2029 (Schutte, 2023), and the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia predicts that approximately

80 colleges will shut their doors over the next five years (Unglesbee, 2024). Existing strategies to address this impending enrollment cliff focus on student retention strategies, expand on student success initiatives, and tap into the population of first-generation students who may not have been a market that has previously served these higher education institutions. Although South Korea has more recently implemented strategies and initiatives to tap into the international student market, the U.S. has proven to be an attractive study destination for international students for decades and has been implementing international-student recruitment efforts for far longer than countries in Asia; this could be a powerful tool with which to address the enrollment-cliff challenge in the U.S.

An Asian case of successful internationalization efforts

Internationalization efforts have also had a positive impact on some Korean universities over the last decade, which has also improved regional growth. As an example of such growth, one (University A) of the 18 universities in Daejeon (a city in South Korea with a population of 1.5 million) has aggressively prioritized internationalization over the last 15 years, and the outcome is the recognition from Times Higher Education as being ranked first in the 'International Outlook' in Korea. University A has approached internationalization differently from its Seoul competitors, establishing a fully international business school as an autonomous unit with a strong emphasis on international faculty, international students, and all programs taught in English. It has also achieved international accreditation (such as AACSB) early on. Over a 15-year period, the school has managed to achieve 70% of the international student body, which is considered considerable for a school situated outside Seoul.

Markedly, what has been gleaned from the years of success at University A are three key factors: the successful implementation of international or globally focused programs (taught in English), the student experience (appropriate support that caters to diversity, cultural immersion programs, and cocurricular activities that build global competencies and skills, and successful job placements after graduation), and finally, reputation building (this can take the form of succeeding in global rankings and accreditations, which are globally recognized). While aggressive international student recruitment is necessary, the reality is that most universities in Korea are dipping into the same recruitment pool (often using similar tactics); therefore, the university needs to do more to differentiate itself from others in the same region, which University A has managed to do.

With globally focused programs taught entirely in English, University A has established over 300 international partnerships, including many exchange programs that enable international students to study at the University for either a semester or a full year. Other meaningful and impactful collaborations include dual-degree programs (several with US partners), which often allow two degrees to be awarded upon graduation and potential job placements in the country of graduation, and collaborative online learning opportunities between institutions, which taps into fostering the much-needed global competencies and expertise. These international collaborations are easier to secure when an institution has succeeded in the rankings and holds global accreditations, as global rankings and global accreditations signal the quality of programs and add an extra layer of legitimacy.

Deployment of International Branch Campuses

Even though US institutions already enjoy solid reputations and legitimacy, it must be noted that US institutions have depended mainly on domestic rankings to boost their reputation (such as the U.S. News). Bastedo and Bowman (2009) noted that if a liberal arts college were to move into the top tier of U.S. News rankings, applications would increase by 9.6%, whereas acceptance rates would drop by approximately 5.7%. While this was certainly sufficient prior to the enrollment cliff, the focus of rankings may need to shift to global rankings if international student recruitment becomes a larger focus in recruitment for US-based universities. Many U.S. universities and colleges have implemented a multilayered approach to internationalization efforts, some of which include visa/work incentives, international partnership collaboration, the use of international consultants and agents to recruit international students, and the modification of programs and the student experience to increase international student retention. These initiatives have served many U.S. institutions well. According to the Open Doors 2023 Report on International Educational Exchange, the U.S. hosted 1,057,188 international students in 2023 - a significant 12% increase from the previous year (Open Doors 2023 Report).

While US qualifications hold high value, many international students may not choose the US for reasons such as high out-of-state tuition costs, high costs of living, visa-restrictions, or family obligations that restrict them from leaving their home countries. These concerns can be mitigated with international branch campuses. According to the Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT) at the State University of New York, there are a total of 77 branch campuses globally (Guo, 2018). These international branch campuses offer lower tuition and living costs (in many cases, the host country's governments subsidize these

initiatives) and serve as a convenient and attractive alternative to those students who wish to pursue a US qualification without having to reside full time in the US during their studies (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012).

Geopolitical assistance

Initially, the deployment of international branch campuses may have been a successful tactic for recruiting international students, as it catered to their specific needs, such as lower tuition costs and lower living costs. However, more recently, international branch campuses have played a far more substantial role. Geopolitical issues have negatively impacted international student recruitment to the U.S., most notably, the Ukraine/Russia Conflict, the Israel/Palestine Conflict, and the current U.S. administration, which has implemented severe tariffs globally (these trade wars may impact international student recruitment to the U.S., especially from countries such as China). International students in conflict areas still prefer to pursue US qualifications but are in difficult situations—often facing visa restrictions, financial challenges, or political restrictions. An alternative is for these students to enroll in these international branch campuses, often in countries with far fewer restrictions, lower costs of living, and perhaps even political neutrality.

More recently, the current US administration has taken a stronger stance on the recruitment of some international students, most notably by implementing full travel bans in several countries and heightened restrictions in others. This of course would impact student enrollment from these regions; for example, 12,430 Iranian students were reported to be studying in the U.S. in Fall 2024, and the U.S. could expect a large decline in student visa applications from these regions (and others) moving forward (Knox, 2025). For example, Chinese students constitute the largest international student body at the University of Connecticut—1,401 of 2,153 international students (Zahn, 2025). It would be difficult for universities to replenish these numbers from other regions or countries. Additionally, there have been orders to specific universities to ban the intake of international students, which has led to legal challenges. Unfortunately, these types of decisions and disruptions, even if short-term, create a great sense of uncertainty in prospective students, causing them to look elsewhere for their higher education.

Because of this uncertainty and insecurity caused by the current U.S. administration, there may be spillover to U.S. branch campuses. However, many branch campuses require that students be funneled to the main campus at some point in their studies, and this requirement may serve as a deterrence

for those seeking smooth four-year study. This will require that these branch campuses pivot in their approach and address these mobility concerns. Moving forward, these branch campuses could consider decoupling degree progression to the US (even if only temporarily), and they could also consider establishing “regional mobility hubs” where a multicampus mobility network that promises a global network without having to encounter the US-enrollment bottleneck. Furthermore, a positive strategy for these branch campuses could be to follow the example of University A by expanding its dual degree programs and transnational partnerships with meaningful and impactful university partners across the globe. Finally, to curb student skepticism toward US access, a change in the narrative when marketing may be needed -establishing the message that a safe study environment for pursuing a US degree could be achieved at international branch campuses (see Chung & Davis, 2024, for one such example).

References

- Bastedo, M.N., & Bowman, N.A. (2009). The real and perceived influence of the U.S News rankings. *Research in Higher Education*, 50 (2). pp. 145 – 166.
- Chung, K., & Davis, S. N. (2024). Community engagement as an entry point to US higher education: A case of one international branch campus. In Luan, J. L. Habte, D. Di Maria, & K. Bista (Eds.), *Entry points to US education*. Star Scholars Press. <https://doi.org/10.32674/4r0sfm5>
- Guo, Q. (2018). Top U.S. Colleges with Branches Overseas. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quanzhiguo/2018/08/21/top-u-s-colleges-with-branches-overseas/>
- Jung, J. (2024). When massified higher education meets shrinking birth rates: The case of South Korea. *Higher Education*, 88(5), 2357–2373. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01220-2>
- Jung, D. H. (2025). *Declining enrollments force Korean universities to fight for survival*. *TheKorea Times*. <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/society/20250129/declining-enrollments-force-korean-universities-to-fight-for-survival>
- Kinoshita, S., & Kishimoto, T. (2024). Aging population in Japan: Immediate shake-up in healthcare needed. *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine*, 117(12), 829–830. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qjmed/hcae097>

Knox, L. (2025, June 6). Trump proclamations escalate international student attacks.

Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/global/international-students-us/2025/06/06/trump-proclamations-escalate-international-student>

Kreimer, S. (2024, September 5). South Korea's plan to avoid population collapse. *Think Global Health*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/south-koreas-plan-avoid-population-collapse>

Lin, H. Y. (2024). From aging to superaged society in Taiwan: Plans and practices. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377417098_From_ageing_to_super-aged_society_in_Taiwan_Plans_and_practices

Open Doors 2023 Report. (2023). *United States hosts over 1 million international students, fastest enrollment growth rate in more than 40 years*. Institute of International Education.

Schutte, A. (2023). *Navigating the enrollment cliff in higher education*. Trellis Company.

Unglesbee, B. (2024, January 29). College closure could increase sharply in the face of the demographic cliff. *Higher Ed Dive*. <https://www.highereddive.com/news/college-closures-demographic-cliff-forecast-philly-fed/734650/>

Wilkins, S., & Huisman, J. (2012). The international branch campus as a transnational strategy in higher education. *Higher Education*, 64(5), 627–645. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9516-5>

Zahn, B. (2025, June 15). CT colleges uncertain about international student enrollment as federal student visa policies evolve. *New Haven Register*. <https://www.nhregister.com/news/article/ct-colleges-uncertain-federal-student-visa-20348994.php>

Bios

Joshua K. Park (jpark@gmu.edu) is Professor and Campus Dean at George Mason University Korea. Prior to joining George Mason, he served as the Dean of SolBridge International School of Business, which became renowned for its diverse student body and international programs, drawing nearly 1,300 students from over 80 countries. A graduate of Harvard Law School, his research interests fall into two broad streams: education and business. His experience in education,

business, negotiation, and debate is reflected in his numerous academic and popular articles, books, and TV programs.

Danielle Swanepoel (dswanepoel@solbridge.ac.kr) is an Associate Professor of Ethics at SolBridge International School of Business and has, most recently, served as the Executive Dean of Academics. Her research interests include Technology Ethics, AI Ethics, and Business Ethics and CSR.

Shannon N. Davis (sdavis@gmu.edu) is Professor of Sociology at George Mason University. She has served the university in numerous administrative roles, most recently as Associate Dean for Faculty and Academic Affairs at the campus in Incheon, South Korea. She is the author of over 80 peer-reviewed publications, four books, and numerous other publications. Her scholarship focuses on mechanisms of reproducing inequality in social institutions, including families and higher education.



Chapter Three

Transforming Business Education: A Management Information System as a Major in STEM to Attract International Talent

Ismatara Reena

University of Louisiana at Lafayette, USA

Nirmal C. Gope

University of Louisiana at Lafayette, USA

ABSTRACT

This case study examines the extraordinary growth of Lamar University's Master of Science in Management Information Systems (MS in MIS) program, which experienced an increase in international student enrollment from 9 in Spring 2021 to 410 by Fall 2024. Using semistructured interviews and content analysis, the study identifies key factors for this success. A specialized, industry-relevant curriculum emphasizing SAP and hands-on learning appeals to students from various backgrounds. Financial incentives, including automatic scholarships and in-state tuition, increase affordability. Marketing efforts rooted in word-of-mouth and a strong digital presence have fuelled organic growth. The program's inclusive academic environment, supported by internationally experienced faculty with accommodating teaching styles, fosters belonging and student engagement. Together, these factors make this program a highly attractive

option for international students. The findings highlight how STEM design, a strong curriculum, financial aid, alumni support, and inclusivity help professionals with global enrollment recruit and retain international students effectively.

Keywords: Enrollment growth, Financial incentives, Inclusive academic environment, International students, Management information system (MIS), STEM education

INTRODUCTION

The term internationalization in higher education has been used since the early 1980s, and its definition has been updated as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension in the purpose, functions (teaching, research, and service) or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2004, p.26). International students contribute significantly to higher education institutions and their surrounding communities through diverse perspectives, economic contributions, and global engagement. According to the NAFSA, the Association of International Educators, there were over 1.1 million international students enrolled in American universities and colleges in the academic year 2023--2024. These students contributed record-breaking \$43.8 billion to the U.S. economy and supported approximately 378,000 jobs, with one job created or supported for every three international students (NAFSA, 2024). Beyond their economic value, international students enhance U.S. higher education by promoting global competence, driving innovation, and contributing significantly to STEM-related research (IIE, 2023; Redden, 2020). They are especially important at the graduate level, particularly in fields such as engineering, computer science, and health sciences (Bound et al., 2021; Ruiz & Budiman, 2023). Their participation boosts global rankings, enriches the research environment, and equips domestic students with global skills.

As international students are significant contributors in their institutions and communities, faculty, staff, and administrators play a pivotal role in creating flourishing environments for them within their higher education settings. Recognizing diversity and creating and adapting strategies to support academic, social, and cultural integration are essential for international students' success. A review revealed that faculty strategies and best practices that contribute to international students' academic success and retention include inclusive pedagogies, effective teaching methodologies, and culturally responsive practices (Atobatele et al., 2024). Furthermore, inclusive learning environments promote student engagement and satisfaction by embracing diverse perspectives

and encouraging active participation. In addition, the study highlighted the importance of training and professional development, focusing on intercultural competencies, understanding the unique challenges faced by international students, and inclusive teaching for stakeholders.

One international professor as well as an administrator of the Department of Management Information System developed an online MS program in MIS in spring 2019 under the College of Business. In Fall 2019, they offered both in-person and online degrees. According to the website of the program, it is a 30-hour, one-year, STEM-designated course that provides students with the necessary skills to solve business problems. Course curricula were designed on the basis of the intersection of business and technology to attract students from diverse backgrounds. Most courses are hands-on and prepare students for successful careers in enterprise systems and business analytics. The MS in the MIS program is laden with commercial, in-demand software, such as SAP, Oracle-SQL, Tableau, and Primavera P6, and graduates work with all highly renowned IT companies, such as IBM, Intel, HP, Apple, and Facebook. The program has 13 faculty members and instructors from multiple countries (Lamar University, 2025a). International student enrollment surged from 9 in spring 2021 to 410 by spring 2024—a 44-fold increase in just four years, with nearly 70% of students in the MIS program being international.

Table 1
Master's Student Enrollment in All Programs (32) and MIS from 2019--2025

Graduate Students		2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Total	Fall	206	182	421	878	1279	1179	
	Spring	245	226	231	621	1054	1323	978
	Summer	131	131	144	491	592	382	
MIS	Fall	11	11	29	95	376	395	
	Spring		11	15	54	186	410	314
	Summer		11	13	37	78	52	

Note: Lamar University (2025b)

The purpose of this case study is to identify the key factors driving this success and to provide insights and recommendations for international enrollment managers and higher education professionals worldwide.

METHODOLOGY

This in-depth case study explores the factors contributing to the growth and success of Lamar University's MS in Management Information Systems (MIS) program to attract international students. The data were collected through semistructured interviews. We employed a hybrid sampling method that included

convenient sampling, snowball sampling, and purposive sampling. We conducted interviews with key stakeholders, including the founding Program Director, who is a professor and administrator with two decades of experience at Lamar University, who also pursued their PhD in the United States as an international student; an assistant Professor who similarly immigrated to the U.S. as an international student; two current international students; two former international students of the program; and a support staff member who has served as the department's student support services specialist since the program's inception. Furthermore, we performed a critical content analysis of the program's curriculum, department's webpage, and university's Office of International Education and Services webpage.

Table 2
Demographic Data of the Participants

No	Participant's Name	Gender	Country of Origin	Affiliation with the Program
1	Dr. Mina Abbasi	Female	India	Program Director
2	Nandan Jadav	Male	India	Faculty
3	Ashley Paul	Female	USA	Staff
4	Nabin Thapa	Male	Nepal	Current Student
5	Nisha Sindal	Female	Nepal	Current Student
6	Jenifer Akter	Female	Bangladesh	Former Student
7	Samuel Ben	Male	Nigeria	Former Student

IRB approval was obtained from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette before interviews were initiated. The participants were informed about the study's purpose, emphasizing voluntary participation and their right to withdraw without repercussions. Informed consent and demographic information were obtained online via Qualtrics. All participants were at least 18 years old. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted 30–45 minutes. After each interview, transcripts were sent to participants for review, allowing additions, modifications, or deletions. Upon receiving transcripts from the participants, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The data were analyzed via thematic analysis, revealing several key factors that make the program unique, pragmatic, and effective in attracting and supporting international students. The success of Lamar University's MS in the MIS program is attributed to a strategic blend of industry-relevant curriculum design, experiential learning opportunities, financial incentives, targeted outreach, and a supportive academic environment. The following section provides a detailed discussion of these findings.

Uniquely Specialized and Industry-Relevant Curriculum

“Our MIS program curriculum combines business and technology, uniting students from engineering and business disciplines. This integration is central to our curriculum design. Our specialized master’s program differs from typical MIS programs by emphasizing SAP, a robust enterprise resource planning software. SAP integrates various business functions, including marketing, management, accounting, finance, and economics. This specialization gives our students a competitive advantage in the job market.” - Dr. Mina Abbasi, Founding Program Director

The MS in the MIS program distinguishes itself by effectively integrating business and technology, rendering it an optimal choice for students from various academic disciplines, including engineering and business. A significant advantage of the program is its strong emphasis on SAP, equipping students with specialized skills in enterprise resource planning that are highly valued in the job market. The curriculum is notably practical, with 80% of it dedicated to hands-on learning through projects, assignments, and software-based instruction, utilizing industry-standard tools such as Oracle-SQL, Tableau, Primavera P6, and Salesforce. Students have the opportunity to select from a range of electives in areas such as programming, database design, business analytics, and cybersecurity, thereby allowing for tailored academic pathways. The program also offers dual degrees, such as MS in MIS/MBA, and multiple certificates, including cybersecurity and data analytics, enabling students to efficiently acquire multiple credentials through stacked courses. Its STEM designation is particularly appealing to international students, as it provides an additional two-year optional practical training (OPT) period, making it total 36 months. Furthermore, the program’s accelerated 8-week terms allow students to complete their master’s degrees in as little as one year.

Financial incentives and support

“Lamar University offers in-state tuition waivers and scholarships to MIS students, even if not from Texas, making tuition affordable. The College of Business provides scholarships and assistantships for students”. - Jenifer Akter, former student.

“Lamar University’s career center organizes fairs, provides support in resume writing, and prepares students for jobs. Although I did not secure a job from these fairs, they helped me with networking and interviewing. ”- Samuel Ben, Former Student.

The program provides substantial financial incentives and support, rendering it an appealing and cost-effective option, particularly for international students. All admitted students automatically receive a \$500 scholarship per semester and are granted in-state tuition, thereby significantly reducing the overall cost. Additionally, students become eligible for Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) after completing 18 credit hours and Graduate Research Assistant (GRA) positions after the first semester, which offer valuable work experience along with monthly stipends.

Effective marketing and recruitment strategies.

"I learned about the MIS program at Lamar University through a friend studying there. His roommate in the MIS program shared details about it. He said the program suited students with business backgrounds such as mine and was STEM-designated, which interested me." - Nisha Sindal, Current Student.

"A friend from my undergraduate college studying at Lamar in Computer Science told me about the MIS program and encouraged me to look into it." - Nabin Thapa, Current Student.

The program's success in attracting students can be attributed to its effective marketing and recruitment strategies, which rely primarily on robust word-of-mouth referrals from current and former international students. This organic growth is further enhanced by a strong online presence through platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn. These platforms not only promote the program but also serve as essential venues for sharing job opportunities and fostering a supportive community in which alumni actively assist new graduates with job placements. Additionally, strategic partnerships with organizations such as the Workmaze have successfully diversified recruitment efforts, attracting students from new regions, including various African countries such as Ghana, Cameroon, and Nigeria.

Supportive and Inclusive Academic Environments

"I try to speak more slowly. Some students have trouble understanding when I speak English too fast." - Dr. Nandan Jadav, Faculty.

"I appreciate the supportive environment here. The faculty are responsive to international students' needs, and the university has a welcoming atmosphere. This makes it easier to adjust and thrive." - Nisha Sindal, Current Student.

The program fosters a supportive and inclusive academic environment through several key initiatives. A significant element is the presence of faculty with international backgrounds who, having been international students themselves, bring a "diversified mindset" and offer globally relevant examples, thereby fostering a strong sense of belonging among students. These faculty members employ adaptable teaching styles, take time to understand students' diverse backgrounds, and actively encourage communication and classroom participation. Furthermore, faculty members prioritize team diversification by intentionally forming project groups with students from various backgrounds to promote cross-cultural interaction and learning. Finally, the program provides robust career support by actively connecting current students with alumni for job placement assistance, thereby building a valuable and supportive professional network.

Recommendation for Practitioners

The findings provide insights for international professionals worldwide, along with study limitations and suggestions for future research. To effectively recruit and support international students, higher education institutions should prioritize obtaining STEM designations to offer extended optional practical training (OPT) benefits. It is essential to invest in hands-on, industry-relevant curricula that incorporate in-demand software, ensuring that graduates are "career-ready on day one." Offering flexible and stackable program options, including diverse electives, dual degrees, and certificates, caters to varied interests and enhances marketability. Institutions must also leverage financial incentives such as scholarships and tuition waivers to increase program accessibility. Fostering robust alumni networks and encouraging word-of-mouth marketing are crucial, as are diversifying recruitment channels through strategic partnerships. Finally, creating an inclusive and supportive campus environment by recruiting faculty and staff and adapting teaching methodologies to accommodate international student needs will ensure their success and satisfaction.

Limitations

This case study is grounded in qualitative data primarily obtained through semistructured interviews with a select group of stakeholders, including the Program Director, one faculty member, two current international students, two former international students, and one support staff member at Lamar University. Although the study is enriched by a critical content analysis of program materials, the findings may not be generalizable to all institutions

or Management Information Systems (MIS) programs because of the specific context of Lamar University. The reliance on self-reported data from interviews also introduces potential bias. Additionally, external factors, such as visa approval processes and global economic conditions, which can significantly influence international student enrollment, are acknowledged as sources of uncertainty but are not extensively examined within the scope of this particular study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should prioritize conducting quantitative analysis to examine the correlation between specific program features such as SAP focus, scholarship amounts, OPT extension, and international student enrollment across various institutions. Comparative studies of both successful and less successful international recruitment programs in management information systems (MIS) or similar STEM fields could elucidate broader best practices and challenges. Longitudinal studies tracking the career trajectories of international MIS graduates could provide insights into the long-term impact of a program's hands-on curriculum and industry-relevant software training. Additionally, an in-depth exploration of students' perspectives through comprehensive surveys or focus groups would yield diverse insights into their decision-making processes, challenges, and support needs. Research should also explore the impact of global events and policies on international student mobility and program choices, the evolving role of artificial intelligence in learning and supporting international students, and how universities can effectively integrate these tools.

REFERENCES

- Atobatele, F. A., Kpodo, P. C., & Eke, I. O. (2024). Faculty engagement in international student success: A review of best practices and strategies. *International Journal of Applied Research in Social Sciences*, 6(3), 440-459.
- Bound, J., Braga, B., Khanna, G., & Turner, S. (2021). The globalization of postsecondary education: The role of international students in the US higher education system. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 35(1), 163-184.
- Institute of International Education (IIE). (2023). Open doors report on international educational exchange. <https://opendoorsdata.org/>
- Knight J. (2004). Internationalization remodeled: Definition, approaches, and rationales. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 8(1), 5-31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315303260832>

Lamar University (2025a). Master's degree in management information systems. <https://www.lamar.edu/academics/degrees/information-systems-analysis/management-information-systems-masters-degree.html>

Lamar University (2025b). Dashboard. <https://www.lamar.edu/about-lu/dashboards/interactive-enrollment-dashboard.html>

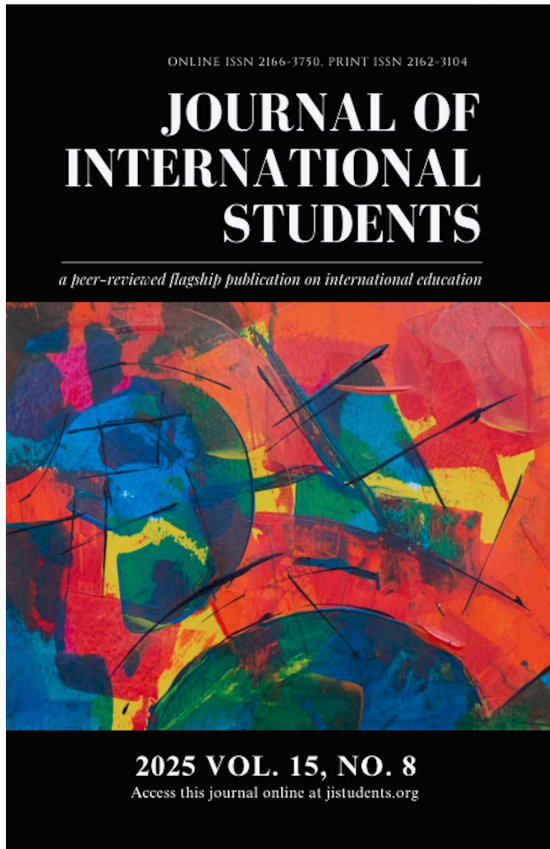
NAFSA. (2024). International student economic value tool. <https://www.nafsa.org>

Ruiz, N. G., & Budiman, A. (2023). International students in the U.S.: Trends, challenges, and contributions. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/>

Bios

Ismatara Reena, EdD, is an Assistant Professor in the School of Kinesiology (Health Promotion and Wellness) at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, USA. Her academic and professional background connects medicine, public health, and educational leadership. Her major research interests include international students, mental health, substance abuse, health disparities, breastfeeding, and e-health literacy. Email: ismatara.reena@louisiana.edu

Nirmal Chandra Gope is an EdD candidate in the Higher Education Administration at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. He has 10 years of experience in student services, including international student support, research programs, and peer mentoring. His research focuses on equity in higher education, DEI, campus belonging, and AI in education. Email: nirmalierdu@gmail.com



The *Journal of International Students* (Print ISSN 2162-3104; Online ISSN 2166-3750) is a peer-reviewed flagship publication on international education and global student mobility. Based in Maryland, USA, the journal publishes high-quality, multidisciplinary research that examines the experiences, challenges, and contributions of international students worldwide. With authors from over 65 countries, JIS serves as a global forum for educators, researchers, and policymakers, advancing evidence-based insights on internationalization, cross-cultural engagement, and inclusive higher education practices.

Learn more at: jistudents.org



Chapter Four

A World Unbound: The Fusion of Trends Redefining International Education

Cara Skikne
Amy VanSurksum
Studyportals, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

International higher education is undergoing a profound transformation driven by a fusion of trends that challenge traditional paradigms. This chapter explores three developments reshaping the sector: the blurring of boundaries between disciplines and the rise of multidisciplinary programs, the emergence of non-traditional education hubs challenging the dominance of traditional study destinations, and flexible program formats that expand access to diverse learners. Together, these trends reflect a broader shift towards non-traditional approaches that prioritize adaptability, innovation, and inclusivity.

Keywords: international education, multidisciplinary, career outcomes, big four, study destinations

INTRODUCTION

International higher education is changing rapidly as new trends challenge traditional approaches. Traditional models of program design and delivery formats, along with conventional choices of study destinations, are being challenged by more flexible, accessible, and geographically diverse alternatives. The sector is moving toward a more inclusive and multipolar future where quality education is available through multiple pathways rather than concentrated in a few traditional centers.

FUTURE-READY PROGRAM DESIGN

Modern degree programs are moving beyond subject-specific expertise. Today, they are increasingly designed to equip students with the ability to navigate complexity, work across disciplines, and respond to rapid social and technological changes. Universities are reimagining curricula that cut across traditional disciplinary lines to reflect the interconnected nature of today's global challenges.

Studyportals data is unique in that it is largely organically generated and based on student searches platforms which collectively list over 90% of all English-taught Bachelor's and Master's programs worldwide. This has led to a diverse global visitor base of over 51 million users annually as of 2024.

The shift in demand for multidisciplinary programs is nowhere more prevalent than in the Business and Management discipline. As of May 2025, there are 476 multidisciplinary MBA programs listed globally on Mastersportal.com. For example, while all MBAs shown on Studyportals are associated with Business & Management, multidisciplinary MBAs are also classified under other study areas (Figure 1). These are primarily attached to Computer Science & IT, Hospitality, Leisure & Sports, Medicine & Health, Social Sciences and Engineering & Technology.

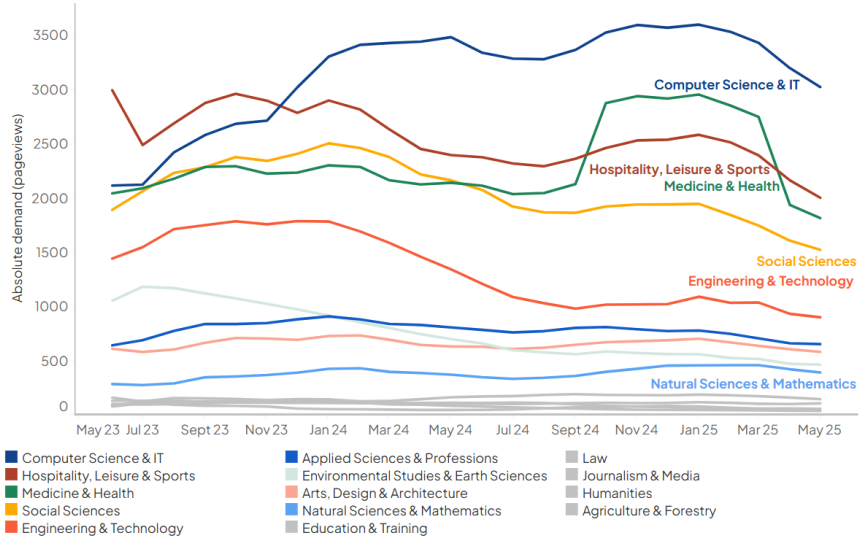
Institutions like Babson College in the United States have embraced this shift. Dr. Wendy Murphy, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Programs and Professor of Management at Babson College, is seeing significant shifts in Business, Engineering, Health, and Human Science disciplines as institutions adapt learning to career outcomes. She cites an increased scrutiny on the return on investment (ROI) on higher education due to rising tuition costs, policy changes, and the changing needs of the workforce post-pandemic as drivers.

Figure 1

Studyportals Trends in Demand for Non-Business Discipline Areas for MBA Degrees

Trend in absolute student demand for non-Business discipline areas for MBAs

(On-campus Master's, six months rolling, June 2023 to May 2025)



Note. Absolute demand measured by pageviews on Masterportal.com from May 2023 through May 2025.

Babson College is a business school that has always maintained a liberal arts balance for its undergraduate students to “educate the whole person and ensure that our students are getting the full range of skills—including critical thinking and problem solving.” (W. Murphy, personal communication, May 5, 2025) Interdisciplinary courses, global content, opportunities for Babson students to earn a certificate in Engineering from nearby Olin College, Olin and Wellesley College students to earn a management certificate at Babson, and COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) projects that rely on co-teaching by faculty across disciplines, are all examples of ways in which Babson is ensuring a well-rounded, future-proof education for their, and other, 21st century students.

International students make up nearly 30% of the undergraduate—and over 60% of the graduate student population at Babson—so increasing course content and matching degree naming conventions to the SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System) STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) designated programs serve a dual purpose.

Employers recognize the value of technical skills, and international students benefit from longer post-study work permission. Optional Practical Training (OPT) for STEM-designated degrees comes with an additional 24-months of work authorization beyond the standard 12-month period. But the interest in STEM degrees is not unique to the international student population. “The interest is both domestic and international, and it’s driven by career outcomes and by the ROI on the degree.” (W. Murphy, personal communication, May 5, 2025) To meet market demand, Babson is adding a Bachelor of Science in Business Analytics, along with ensuring that their graduate program portfolio offers STEM-designated degrees, including Master in Business Analytics, MSBA, and Master of Finance.

Preparing students for the future is a big commitment on the part of institutions and faculty. Murphy (personal communication, May 5, 2025) reiterates that “big problems are cross-disciplinary, and solving big problems takes multidisciplinary thinking.” Faculty are tasked not only with keeping their curriculum relevant for the marketplace, but engaging the ever-changing student.

THE RISE OF ALTERNATIVE STUDY DESTINATIONS

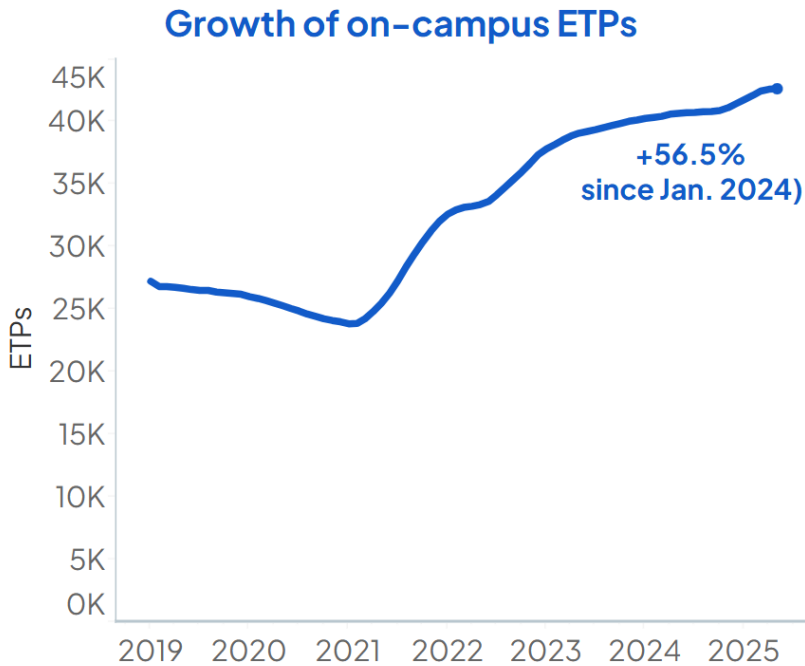
As students seek programs that match their aspirations, they are also exploring new destinations that promise both quality and affordability. The Big Four study destinations—the US, UK, Canada and Australia—have traditionally been the most popular destinations for international students. While these countries continue to host the majority of international students, they are being challenged by a new cohort of emerging education hubs.

The expansion of study destinations reflects a broader democratization of global education. Institutions in newer hubs are investing heavily in infrastructure, international partnerships, and brand visibility to compete on a global stage. They are attracting international students by offering high-quality academic programs, more accessible tuition and living expenses, and a growing number of English-taught degrees.

The rise of more ‘non-traditional’ destinations coincides with their increased provision of English-taught programs. According to Studyportals and British Council IELTS, 22.3% of all English-taught programs in 2024 were offered by countries outside the Big Four anglophone destinations (Figure 2). This amounts to 40,786 English-taught programs outside the Big Four.

Figure 2

Growth of English-taught Programs Outside of Big Four Study Destination Countries



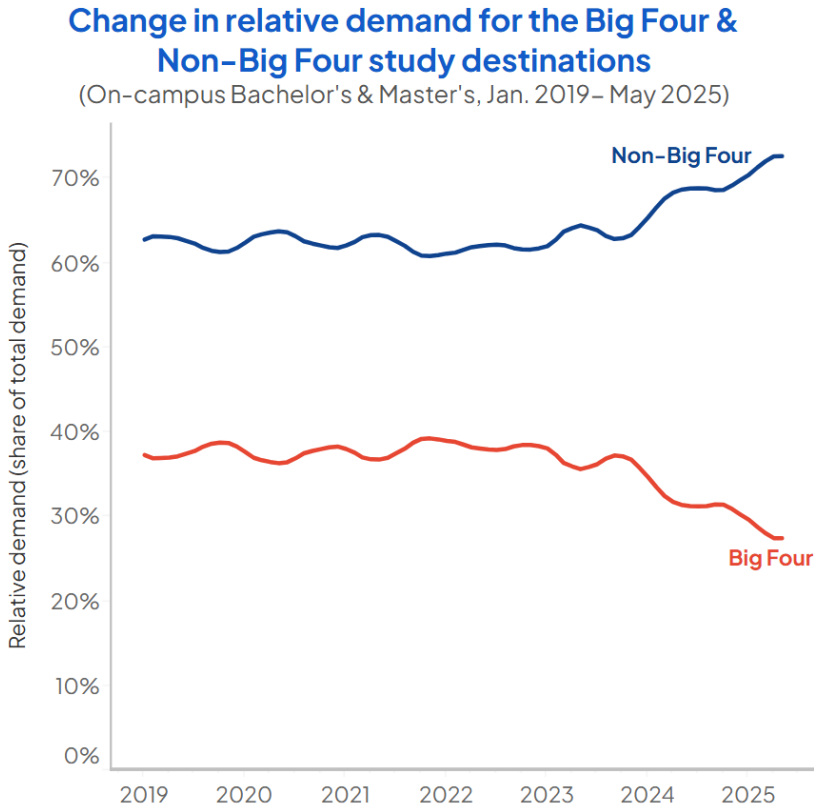
Note. From Studyportals, British Council IELTS, Mapping English-taught Programmes Worldwide, 2024

Alongside the rise in English-taught programs, there is also a sharp increase in student interest for non-traditional destinations (Figure 3). For the first time in decades, the Big Four destinations are losing their collective market share.

Immigration policy shifts and government restrictions impacting international students in the Big Four have led to a drop in student demand. Conversely, student interest in other destinations has grown (Figure 4). This is particularly evident in Asia, where students are increasingly choosing to study closer to home. Student interest for destinations in Asia has climbed over 15% on Studyportals platforms. Countries including Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea are taking advantage of this trend, building their reputations as serious alternatives to traditional Western universities.

Figure 3

Change in Relative Demand Destination Preferences



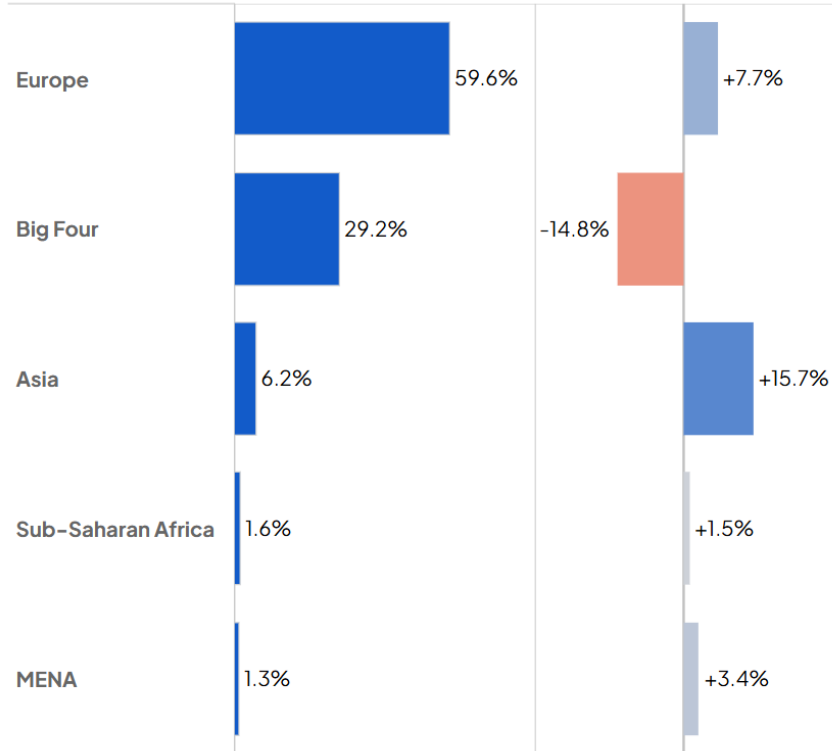
Note. Relative demand is based on search trends on bachelorsportal.com and mastersportal.com.

In support of this trend, Fanta Aw, CEO and Executive Director of NAFSA, stated “I’ve always said we need to move away from the Big Four, and we need to talk about the big 10 and, frankly, the big 20. I’m a big proponent of talking about the big 20 because I actually think it’s important for families and students to have choices about where they want to go, what is the value proposition, and all of that.” (Aw, 2025) As she observed, the sector needs to move beyond the Big Four and embrace the “big 20”—a recognition that quality education providers are emerging from diverse locations. This reflects how institutions are adapting their approach to compete effectively, leveraging technology, affordability, and innovative curricula rather than simply replicating traditional models.

Figure 4
Change in Student Demand by Region

Change in student demand for key regions

On campus, Bachelor's & Master's, Jun. '24 to May '25 vs. Jun. '23 vs. May '24



FLEXIBLE FORMATS OPEN NEW DOORS

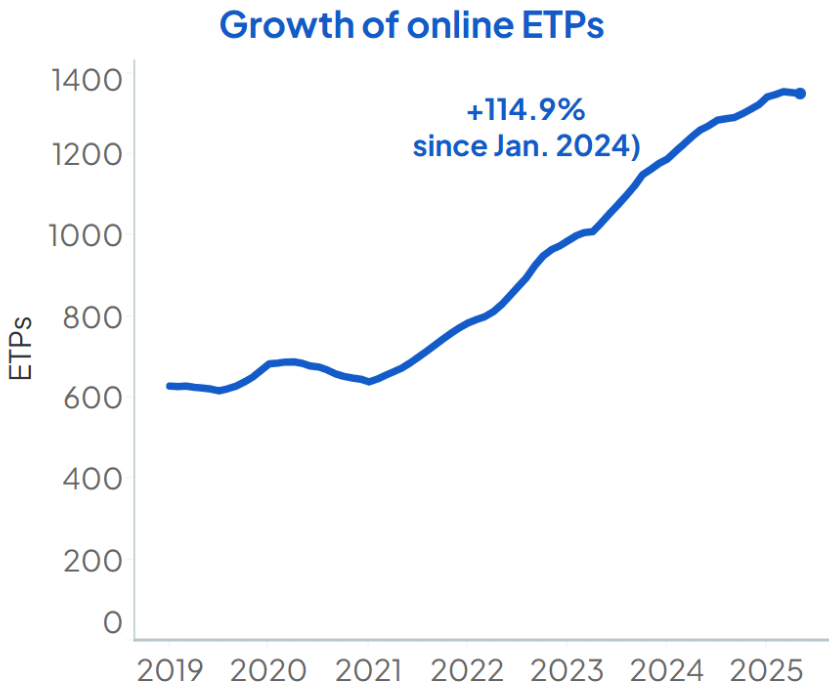
Also transformative is the shift in how programs are delivered. Flexible learning formats—particularly online and hybrid—have expanded access to students previously unable to participate in traditional, on-campus education due to financial, geographic, or personal constraints. As of June 2024, Research by Studypartals and British Council IELTS identified 15,419 English-taught online bachelor's and master's programs worldwide. While the Big Four destinations hold the vast majority (92%) of online English-taught programs, other countries are rapidly increasing their offerings (Figure 5).

Take India as an example: the global share of international students showing interest in online courses there has grown by almost 60% over the past year. This

highlights a fundamental shift in global higher education: digital accessibility is one of the forces leveling the playing field for atypical destinations.

Figure 5

Growth of Online English-Taught Programs Outside of the Big Four Study Destination Countries



One institution leading this charge is O.P. Jindal Global University (JGU). JGU is a prominent private university in India, recognized for its commitment to interdisciplinary learning, international partnerships, and efforts to broaden access to higher education through online programs. They have many students enrolled from Canada, the US, Germany, and Africa.

“We have students—working professionals—who probably cannot come to India due to various reasons,” explains Mudhita Nagpal, Deputy Manager at the Office of Digital Learning and Online Education at JGU. (M. Nagpal, personal communication, April 1, 2025) “Having these online courses gives them access to quality education at a minimal cost, because our programs are comparatively affordable while our education is at par with the leading universities in the world.” She adds, “Our vision is to empower people with education by bridging

the barriers and taking it truly global. So of course, online education helps us immensely.” (M. Nagpal, personal communication, April 1, 2025) To achieve this vision, JGU’s office of Digital Learning and Online Education maintains a vertical called “new program development”: a team of people constantly evaluating the curriculum against industry developments and assesses emerging tools and technologies for online education delivery.

CONCLUSION

The three trends examined in this chapter—interdisciplinary programs, emerging study destinations, and flexible delivery formats—are reshaping international higher education in meaningful ways. These changes aren’t happening in isolation; they are connected responses to student needs that weren’t being met by traditional approaches. The data shows clear momentum: a 123% increase in online programs, significant growth in English-taught offerings outside the Big Four destinations, and rising student interest in non-traditional study locations. Universities in countries like India, Singapore, and Malaysia are using these shifts strategically, offering accessible alternatives to established education hubs.

The result is a more competitive and diverse international education sector. Students have more choices about where and how they study, while countries that were never major education destinations are establishing credible reputations. This trend toward greater accessibility and choice appears likely to continue as institutions respond to changing student expectations and technological possibilities.

REFERENCES

Aw, F., Pierson, S., & van Rest, E. (2025, May 20). *Real-time insights on global enrolment trends: Essential strategies for higher education* [Webinar]. Hosted by Studyportals. <https://studyportals.com/events/real-time-insights-on-global-enrolment-trends-essential-strategies-for-higher-education/>

Studyportals & British Council IELTS. (2024). Mapping English-taught programmes worldwide. <https://studyportals.com/reports/mapping-english-taught-programmes-worldwide/>

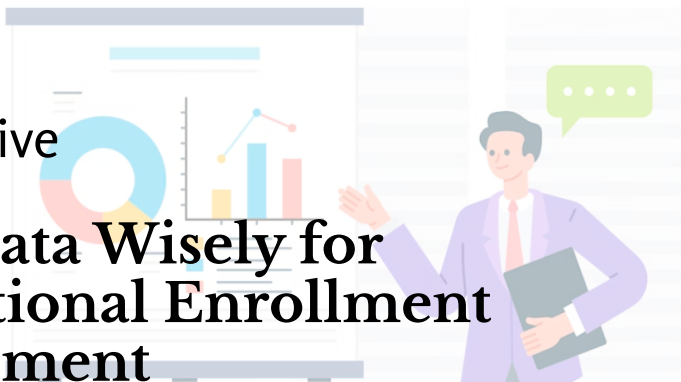
Bios

CARA SKIKNE, MBA, is Head of Communications and Thought Leadership at Studyportals. Her research interests include international higher education trends, student mobility patterns, and the use of data to inform strategy and decision-making.

AMY VANSURKSUM, EdD, is Senior Vice President of Business Development, North America, at Studyportals. Her research interests include international student enrollment trends, global perspectives development, and student access and equity in higher education.

Chapter Five

Using Data Wisely for International Enrollment Management



Ben Waxman
Intead, United States

ABSTRACT

Enrollment leaders face increasing challenges, from budget constraints to geopolitical uncertainties. In this complex environment, university leaders demand innovation and measurable results—prompting enrollment professionals to make strategic, data-informed decisions. This chapter explores how the continuous use of data and key performance indicators can guide and optimize international student recruitment efforts. We highlight where to find relevant data, how to interpret it, and how to avoid common pitfalls. Through real-world examples, we demonstrate how performance tracking enables smarter decisions, greater confidence, and clearer communication with stakeholders. By embracing data-driven approaches, enrollment leaders can secure institutional support and navigate the complexities of global initiatives more effectively and successfully.

Keywords: Data analytics, International student enrollment, Key performance indicators

INTRODUCTION

Enrollment leaders face challenges. We see them all the time. Every university faces constant budget and staffing challenges. When one adds geopolitical factors to the mix, all bets are off.

However, we place our bets all the time. They are never truly off at all. As university leadership demands new ideas, progress, and results, how do enrollment leaders know where to invest for the greatest likelihood of success?

The answer: using data to inform decisions, not just at the outset of an initiative but throughout the effort. Continuous optimization/improvement relies on having key data points (key performance indicators, or KPIs) to benchmark results and progress. That performance tracking allows you to improve throughout the process.

Those who succeed use data to make smarter decisions.

In this chapter, we identify where to find and how to use relevant data throughout the international student enrollment process. We offer real-world examples of successful strategies and common pitfalls.

The goal: Enrollment leaders drive decisions forward with more confidence and are better able to explain the complexities of global initiatives to colleagues unfamiliar with the factors that contribute to international student enrollment success. Using data, enrollment leaders will be in a stronger position to garner support and senior-level approval for cross-border projects.

Country Selection: Where in the world will you find success?

For the past two decades, student mobility has increased worldwide. The current analysis focuses on a total of approximately six million students, with some experts predicting ten million or more by 2030. While that is possible, there are reasons to be more conservative in our expectations. One important factor: the growth we anticipate in the number of students desiring and actively pursuing an international education will include a large percentage of families with lower purchasing power than those who can afford travel and tuition expenses today.

When institutions are considering where to find international or domestic students, they need both academically capable students and those who can afford to pay for their education.

For the past 10 years, the countries that have topped every institution's list (and consistently in the news) are China, India, South Korea, Vietnam, and Nigeria. Other countries, including Taiwan and Japan, Kenya and Ghana, Brazil, and Colombia, are also on student recruiters' minds. Country selection is often based on the volume of students coming from any one of these countries, and that volume has to do with middle-class capacity to afford travel and tuition. However, most countries (many of them beyond those typically on the recruitment list) have at least some families with financial capacity and a desire to send their children abroad for education.

Data Sources

Assessing the many sources of country and region analyses can be slightly overwhelming. In addition to reporting out of IIE, UNESCO, and the British Council, the World Bank and the CIA offer trusted summaries by country of social, political, and economic factors driving their moves forward (or backward). The College Board also provides useful data on international student mobility.

Real-World Application

In evaluating your institution's opportunity in any given country, think beyond the obvious volume of large countries such as China and India. Consider your current faculty and students. Does your institution have specific connections with a particular country? Even if that country has a lower volume of internationally motivated students, your ability to create strong, lasting ties may help you demonstrate a welcoming and valuable academic environment. Countrymates have valuable authenticity when you are building cross-cultural relationships.

Additionally, consider your strongest academic programs and the careers your students pursue. Then, research the employers/careers that are growth opportunities in each country you evaluate. Every country has online job search platforms that typically provide search results showing how many positions are listed for teachers versus cybersecurity engineers. Your institution will have a stronger argument for your academic programs' value (see "Messaging" below) if you draw a connection between potential employment opportunities and your degrees.

Pitfalls/Common Mistakes

Too many times, we have seen well-researched recruitment plans pitched to leadership, with the response being "That's all very nice. Put the recruitment

budget into China and India.” With the global political landscape changing dramatically since 2020, the past five years have led some institutional leaders to rethink that mindset. Within institutions actively investing (or considering investing) in international growth, we see more willingness to explore other parts of the world.

Be prepared to support your country selection with a realistic volume of student analysis, timeline projections for developing a reliable flow of students, and connections and career opportunities that justify why you have highlighted these countries. You need a go-to-market strategy that will be your business plan—a plan others can confidently put their faith and dollars into.

Staffing Structure: What kind of staff do you need?

Staffing an international enrollment office requires careful consideration of skill sets. Many people are drawn to the field because they have the requisite empathy quotient. They love cross-cultural exploration and dialogue. These are valuable skills.

Those same people often do not spend much of their time analyzing results. When asked how many prospective students they think will result from a student fair they attended in Dubai, their answer might be, “I had SO many great conversations!” Your CFO is *not* going to relate.

There are three primary buckets of activity in international student enrollment: recruiting, nurturing, and retaining. Each requires different skills for your office to succeed. Some roles require human connection skills; others require analytical skills. An Intead offers more analysis and a downloadable graphic, breaking down the roles and relevant skills.

Real-World Examples

If you have been in international enrollment management for some time, you have experienced staff turnover frequently. Most institutions face the challenge of producing reliable results. The potential to deliver consistent, reliable results stem from maintaining a knowledgeable, consistent, and reliable team.

The power of the people driving strategy and execution is everything. As they say in Silicon Valley, an A team running a B plan will win over a B team running an A plan. The University of Cincinnati has a long history of consistent leadership in international enrollment and has experienced enrollment growth even through

the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. This university prioritizes investing in its people and the technology that supports effective international recruitment.

Consistent, reliable growth requires consistent teams and investment in those teams.

Pitfalls/Common Mistakes

We often see institutions tasking a small team (or a team of one) with managing all aspects of international recruitment and enrollment. If the full range of skills is not present in-house, pitch institutional leadership on investing in outsource options, which leads directly to our next section.

Vendor Selection: What kinds of tasks can you outsource?

Data Sources

Many third-party vendors are available to support an institution's international enrollment efforts. Recruiting efforts often depend on list purchases and lead generators (online platforms for prospective students to evaluate different majors and study options). These lead sources typically sell leads to many institutions, so you gain access to the same prospective students as your competitors. Be selective and do your research before purchasing these services.

Recruiting agents who operate in specific target countries are another valuable source of support. Organizations such as [HelpVet](#) help vet an institution's agent options and provide contracts and other operational templates to help institutions work effectively with agents. Companies such as [Agent Training Workshops](#) provide agent training workshops and a highly effective system for meeting and evaluating agents from around the world.

Real-World Application

If an institution signs up with a third-party vendor to support international recruiting efforts, it will be important to ensure that student selection criteria are clear. For example, institutions purchase lists of SAT takers with scores much higher than their average student. The result? Zero conversion from that list purchase.

The students they were reaching out to were all seeking a more competitive (higher ranked) institution. The marketing messages were not received as meaningful by the targeted audience.

When considering recruiting agents, find a useful evaluation tool . The international education community is both competitive and collaborative. Through organizations such as and , you will find university colleagues willing to offer their experiences and perspectives on a range of recruitment partners. Be sure to ask questions about leadership, integrity, approach, and real results before any vendor contracts are signed. Build tracking mechanisms to know how well tactics are performing and adjust investments both quarterly and yearly.

Pitfalls/Common Mistakes

Lead sources often inflate or obfuscate their numbers. If a website states that they have X thousand or millions of visitors, ask if those are unique visitors or total visitors (with repeat visitors counted every time they return). Scratch deeply below the surface to understand if your target audiences are truly present and engaged. What kind of conversion rates have institutions like yours seen in the past? How have your industry peers experienced this recruitment option? Find a useful list of questions to ask vendors in .

Message development: How will you talk about your institution in different countries?

Effective marketing messages are born of customer research. The greater your understanding of cultural differences and how they play into Brazilian students or Vietnamese students selecting business programs, for example, the better you can deliver messages that resonate. We all experience information clutter daily from multiple channels and sources. Getting noticed is the first step. And then, once noticed, engaging prospective students in a serious evaluation of their options must follow. Do not confuse these two very different steps in the recruitment process.

Real-World Application

Your current students and alumni from different regions are your guideposts. Talk to them about what made them 1) aware of your institution (often word-of-mouth referrals), 2) evaluate your institution as an option, and 3) choose to attend your institution instead of others. It is also worth asking why they chose to stay. Retention is another success indicator (see “Continuous Improvement” below).

Listen when your international students tell you things. Prompt them to go deeper. (T-shirts and pizza go a long way here to obtain valuable input.) Ask about current trends in their home countries. Gather key words to draw attention to ads

and other marketing assets. Ask about growing industries and influential groups or individuals who might support your in-country efforts.

Beyond creating direct recruiting support, in-country agents provide valuable on-the-ground knowledge to help inform an institution's approach and messaging specific to a country or city.

Harkening back to the roles/skills you need, you will be tempted today to use AI to generate content—as will your competitors. The ads, headlines, and copy AI generates will be generic (common to multiple institutions). However, if you want to stand out (differentiating underpins effective marketing), employ a truly creative, talented writer who incorporates country research and participates in student and alumni interviews.

Pitfalls/Common Mistakes

Many institutions are absolutely convinced that the conversation starts with “Apply Now” messaging. The reasoning: if someone is ready, they should not have to work hard to find that link. True, you do not want your prospects to work hard just to apply. However, if your primary, prominent message upon first encounter is “Apply Now,” are you truly building a quality relationship?

“Apply Now” can be a link on your landing pages, but an in-your-face pop-up appearing within seconds of landing on a page pushes folks away rather than drawing them in.

A second common pitfall involves creating marketing collateral, landing pages, or digital ads with images that do not represent the target audience. Basic marketing: Adjust your marketing messages and images to reflect the target market in which you are operating. Your focus groups and interviews with students and alumni will point the way.

Marketing Channel Selection: How will you reach your most valuable audiences?

Selecting marketing channels is all about finding the watering holes that your target audience frequents and putting your message there. To evaluate how to use social channels in any country, is a terrific and reliable resource. The data you will find there (like the use of mobile devices and laptops and internet reach beyond urban centers) will help you compare your digital campaign opportunities in each target country.

Real-World Application

As you communicate with various student segments (prospective undergraduate, graduate, certificate seekers, other short-term and language programs, corporate learners), consider Meta (Facebook and Instagram), YouTube, Tik Tok, LinkedIn (older/more professional cohorts), and some country-specific apps with limited global reach but value in specific countries, such as Baidu (among others) in China.

Once you are focused on nurturing your leads toward conversion, WhatsApp is an important tool globally. A two-part blog post explains how to set up a WhatsApp business account to help you maintain and track this communication channel effectively (and).

Highly trackable digital campaigns have become valuable tools for analytics. Tracking the success of each channel you use is important, from agent recruiting efforts to the student fairs and academic institutions (high schools and universities) you visit during your recruitment travel.

Pitfalls/Common Mistakes

Often, we find that enrollment teams' limited time prevents them from setting up the tracking that will be valuable for a particular investment. Because of time constraints, the staff takes the trip or launches the campaign and considers the metrics after it is completed (if at all). A better approach: set up functional tracking systems before the project launch. Your team knows to do this, but often other priorities upend the best-laid plans. Force the issue. Find the time. Future you will thank you.

Continuous Improvement: How will you know you are succeeding?

Defining KPIs requires careful consideration. Any endeavor generates many data points. However, you can only truly follow so many before becoming distracted or overwhelmed. Importantly, as you work with leadership to explain your plans and justify the investments you think are wise, those colleagues will only be able to digest so much information.

The KPIs you choose will tell a story. The numbers will demonstrate successes and, critically, what you have learned by failing. At the end of any enrollment-focused initiative, leaders ultimately want to know how many students actually enroll and how much tuition revenue is generated. These are

legitimate KPIs, but they do not tell you much about which tactics produced those results.

As you consider which KPIs are meaningful, choose data that will help you make sense of your work and support your ability to make improvements. Consider how best to convey your work to colleagues and leaders. You will want them to understand the value of what you do, the interesting things you have learned, and why continued (and growing) investment in internationalization has value to specific departments and the entire institution. This is the story you want to tell and done well, the presentation will instill confidence in the plan you have offered.

Real-World Application

In the campaigns we run, we want to know the cost per enrollment to assess campaign effectiveness. Tracking metrics such as the engagement rate, click-through rate (CTR), cost per click (CPC), and campaign spend, we assess campaign performance over time. While linking these metrics directly to enrollment is complex, careful measurement reveals clearer connections to application and acceptance rates. Importantly, a user-friendly and well-maintained dashboard enables the admissions team to easily access and share these insights.

Consider what success will look like? We offer some benchmarks to support your digital campaign work. Collaborating with a UK-based higher education NGO, we tailored its website content and digital ads to resonate with our target audience. Over 8 months and a \$28K USD media spend, we increased Instagram engagement by 1,500 percent, achieved a 2.9 percent CTR with 759 shares from the top-performing post, and gained 8,000 new followers. On Facebook, the top post reached a 4.1 percent CTR, engaging over 150 U.S. high schools. We also developed multiple landing pages and blog posts to guide decision-making, resulting in 26,000 new active users and 260 blog readers clicking on targeted links.

Pitfalls/Common Mistakes

Understanding campaign objectives is crucial. Lead generation campaigns often yield a high volume of responses, whereas nurturing campaigns focus on engaging and qualifying prospects over time. Confusing these objectives can skew KPI measurements. Lead generation campaigns aim to build an audience base, whereas nurturing campaigns identify and develop relationships with high-potential prospects, resulting in applications and enrollments when

performed well. Accurate KPI tracking requires aligning the metrics with the campaign's specific goals.

Your next move

As you consider your options, be sure your planning spreadsheet or old-school pen and paper has a column for the KPIs that you will collect and use to measure your progress. Tracking as you go provides a few key advantages:

1. Helps you optimize as you go (learning what works and what does not)
2. Helps you demonstrate your successes and opportunities for improvement to your leadership
3. Justifies your decisions for future investment

CONCLUSION

At the time of this book's publication, the world of international enrollment continues to grow in complexity. Success in international student yield will favor those who not only recognize the importance of data but also understand where to find it, how to use it, and when to act on it. Data-informed decision-making is essential for driving meaningful, measurable outcomes.

REFERENCES

Migration Data Portal. (2022). *International students globally*. <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/international-students-trends>

Goodman, A. E., & Martel, M. (2024). *Outlooks 2030 brief: The U.S. and international education*. Institute of International Education. https://www.iie.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IIE_Outlook-2030_March-2024-1.pdf

University of Cincinnati. (2025). *International facts and figures*. <https://international.uc.edu/about/stats.html>

Bio:

Ben Waxman is the Chief Executive Officer of Intead, a Boston-area education marketing consultancy with deep expertise in identifying and engaging hard-to-reach student segments. Email: bwaxman@intead.com

A group of people, including men and women, are sitting on the edge of a boat, looking out at a cable car system over a body of water. The scene is bright and hazy, suggesting a sunny day. The cable cars are visible in the distance, and the water is calm. The people are dressed in casual summer attire, and some have their arms around each other, suggesting a sense of community or support.

Chapter Six

From Home to Host: Challenges and Resilience in Cross-Cultural Transition

Seyma Inan
Mercyhurst University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the cross-cultural adaptation of international undergraduate students at a U.S. liberal arts college, highlighting challenges and strategies for successful integration. Grounded in Berry's acculturation theory and the U-Curve/W-Curve hypotheses, the study explores students' experiences through qualitative interviews. Key findings reveal barriers such as language difficulties, bureaucratic hurdles, and cultural stereotypes, alongside growth opportunities such as personal development and community engagement. Students employ coping strategies, including social support, cultural connections, and self-advocacy. These insights offer practical implications for enrollment managers and higher education professionals, informing data-driven recruitment, retention, and support strategies. By fostering inclusive environments, institutions can enhance international student success and strengthen long-term enrollment sustainability.

Keywords: Acculturation, Cross-cultural Adaptation, International Students in the US, Small Liberal Arts College, Language Barriers, Coping Strategies

INTRODUCTION

International students face distinct acculturation challenges. These challenges often come from cultural differences, language barriers, social isolation, and differing educational expectations. The outcomes of these challenges depend on the type of higher education institution they attend, particularly when comparing liberal arts colleges to larger, more heterogeneous institutions. Research indicates that liberal arts colleges often provide a more intimate learning environment characterized by low student-to-faculty ratios and close interpersonal interactions, which are crucial for international students adapting to a new culture (An et al., 2016; Shein, 2015). In these settings, the active engagement of faculty and the promotion of intercultural understanding can help mitigate the acculturative stress faced by these students (Heng, 2018; Han et al., 2017).

The transition experience of international students at liberal arts colleges emphasizes the importance of social connectedness and the impact of the campus climate on their overall adjustment (Koo et al., 2021). Studies have shown that international students in liberal arts colleges can benefit from a community that fosters interaction with native students, enhancing their social integration and reducing feelings of isolation (Koo et al., 2021). The tailored support services often found in liberal arts colleges—such as academic advice and individualized tutoring—further help in addressing specific academic and psychological challenges that international students encounter (An et al., 2016). In contrast, students at larger institutions often report a more fragmented experience due to the sheer size and diversity of the student body. This can lead to higher levels of acculturative stress, as students may struggle to find a cohesive community and adequate resources to support their adjustment (Hansen et al., 2018). For example, research indicates that students in larger universities often face more significant cultural disconnection and encounter barriers when seeking help or forming social relationships, which can exacerbate their stress levels (Su et al., 2021).

Additionally, the coping strategies employed by international students can vary significantly between these two types of institutions. While large universities provide extensive academic resources and diverse extracurricular activities, the sheer scale may overwhelm some international students, leading to challenges in navigating the system effectively (Cohen et al., 2020). Additionally, international students in larger institutions might struggle with integration due to the vast diversity of backgrounds represented, which can shift the nature of interactions

and relationships (Bicak & Taylor, 2020). This disparity highlights the need for institutions to develop tailored strategies that cater to the unique environments and challenges posed by their institutional size and structure (Choudaha, 2016).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The adaptation of international undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college in the U.S. involves navigating various cultural, academic, and social environments. This process is often complex and influenced by both psychological and sociocultural factors, as outlined within the frameworks of Berry's acculturation theory and the U-Curve/W-Curve hypotheses. Berry's acculturation theory posits that individuals may adopt one of four strategies in the context of cultural adaptation: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. The U-Curve/W-Curve models describe the emotional trajectory of individuals as they adjust to a new culture, illustrating initial adjustment difficulties, followed by adaptation and stabilization, and potential readjustment upon returning to one's original culture (Krsmanovic, 2019; Ramos et al., 2014).

The challenges faced by international students can include language barriers, cultural differences, and feelings of alienation, which are critical factors influencing their degree of acculturative stress. Research indicates that a more universal-diverse orientation—reflecting openness to diverse cultural experiences—can significantly alleviate acculturative stress, thereby facilitating smoother adaptation (Yakunina et al., 2013; Yakunina et al., 2013). This aligns with Berry's notion that engagement in an integrative approach fosters successful adaptation. Furthermore, acculturative stress is correlated with various outcomes, including mental health difficulties and overall adjustment to the educational landscape, which can be exacerbated by initial feelings of homesickness, as highlighted in the U-Curve model (Ramos et al., 2014; Myers-Walls et al., 2011).

The implications of cross-cultural adaptation extend beyond individual experiences. Building bridges between domestic and international students through structured and informal activities has proven essential in fostering meaningful interactions and mitigating feelings of isolation (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2018). The combination of formal university programming, such as conversation partners, alongside informal social practices encourages a rich cultural exchange that aligns with Berry's integrative pathway for acculturation. This strategy not only enhances the experience of international students but also contributes to the overall diversity and inclusiveness of the

college environment (Hanson et al., 2012). Thus, utilizing frameworks such as Berry's acculturation theory and the U-Curve/W-Curve hypotheses provides critical insights into the multifaceted challenges these students face and the support mechanisms available to foster their adjustment and integration.

Present Study and Research Gap. Research shows that the academic satisfaction of international students is influenced by their institutional environment. Gopalan et al. (2019) reported that organizational support is critical for cultural adjustment and overall academic satisfaction among international students. This relevance is especially pronounced in liberal arts colleges, which often prioritize student-centered approaches and provide tailored services to support international students' well-being and academic performance (Mahmood & Burke, 2018; Gopalan et al., 2019). The cross-cultural adaptations of international undergraduate students within small liberal arts colleges present a unique context that reflects both the challenges and opportunities these students encounter during their transition to a new educational and cultural environment. The literature on this subject highlight various dimensions of adaptation, including academic, social, and emotional facets. For example, Park's mixed-methods study illustrates the specific academic adaptations that international students must navigate, particularly in fields that require strong language skills, such as writing courses. This study indicates that students' academic experiences can be significantly affected by language barriers, cultural differences, and teaching styles prevalent in U.S. institutions (Park, 2016). Hence, the current study aims to contribute to the literature by providing rich qualitative data that can inform institutional support mechanisms and interventions for international students.

The cross-cultural adaptation of international students in smaller liberal arts colleges presents a distinctive research gap, particularly compared with other institutional types. This educational context, characterized by smaller class sizes, more intimate student–faculty relationships, and a commitment to holistic education, creates both unique challenges and opportunities for international students during their adaptation process (An et al., 2016). Previous work has focused primarily on broader trends in higher education, often failing to adequately disentangle the specific dynamics and acculturation challenges experienced in small liberal arts colleges compared with larger universities or different educational settings (San & Guo, 2022). The current study raises three research questions, as indicated below, to address a significant gap in the discourse on cross-cultural adaptation and illuminate how different institutional types impact the adaptation experiences of international students, particularly within the small liberal arts sector (Alnajjar & Alacapinar, 2024).

Research Questions

1. What challenges do international students face in adapting to a small liberal arts college?
2. How do international students perceive their cross-cultural adaptation experiences?
3. What coping strategies do international students use for cross-cultural adaptation?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the cross-cultural adaptations of international undergraduate students in a small liberal arts college. By using semi structured interviews, the research aims to capture the diverse experiences and perspectives of these students, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of their cultural adjustments, academic experiences, and social integration. This approach emphasizes careful listening and respect for individuals' unique voices and interpretations of life experiences (Ponterotto, 2010). Grounded theory is used as the methodological approach to systematically analyze qualitative data and generate theoretical insights. A "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of acculturation and coping experiences is elicited via such qualitative methods.

Participants

The participants in this study were international undergraduate students enrolled at a small liberal arts college. The participants for this study were selected via purposive sampling. The criteria for selection included being an international undergraduate student currently enrolled at a small liberal arts college in a northeastern American university. Efforts were made to ensure diversity among participants on the basis of nationality, cultural background, gender, and length of time spent at the institution. A purposive sampling strategy is employed to ensure diverse representations of students from various cultural backgrounds, academic disciplines, and years of study. The final sample consisted of 16 students (n=16).

Demographic Questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire was administered to gather basic information such as age, nationality, cultural background, academic program, and length of stay at the college. This helped in contextualizing the experiences shared during the interviews (see **Table 1** for specific information).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Categories	Details
Gender	(10) females, (5) males, (1) nonbinary
Age Range	18-24 years
Countries of Origin	Germany, Turkey, Croatia, Austria, Haiti, Bangladesh, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Romania, India, France, Honduras, Ireland, Nicaragua
Years in the U.S.	>1-5 years
Academic Majors	Psychology, Business, Engineering, Sociology, Art, Computer Science, Data science, Cybersecurity, Poli Sci, Biochem, Public Health, English, Finance/Marketing, Forensics, hospitality, nursing
Academic Years	Freshman (2), Sophomore (7), Junior (4), Senior (1), Graduate (2)

Interview Questions

The participants engaged in semi-structured interviews, allowing for open-ended discussions about their cross-cultural experiences, challenges, and adaptations. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy in capturing their narratives. These interviews provided a platform for participants to narrate their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to cross-cultural adaptation.

Data collection

All the data were collected within the participants' natural settings. The interviews were conducted in a laboratory in the Department of Psychology. Data were collected through semi structured interviews, which are recognized as effective methods for exploring complex phenomena such as cross-cultural adaptations (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide was developed on the basis of literature and theoretical frameworks, including Berry's acculturation theory and the U-Curve/W-Curve hypotheses. The guide includes open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about the following:

1. Challenges faced in adapting to the new cultural and educational environment.
2. Perceptions of cross-cultural adaptation experiences.
3. Coping strategies employed to manage adaptation challenges.

The interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting in person, to ensure participants' comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

Data analysis

The constant comparative method is employed throughout the analysis to compare new data with existing codes and categories, ensuring that the emergent theory is grounded in the data. The audio-recorded interviews are transcribed verbatim and analyzed via grounded theory methodology (Glaser et al., 1968). The analysis process involves several steps:

Open coding: Initial coding of the transcripts to identify key themes and concepts.

Axial Coding: Organizing the initial codes into categories and subcategories to establish relationships between them.

Selective Coding: Integrating and refining categories to develop a cohesive theoretical framework that explains the cross-cultural adaptation experiences of international students.

The collected data, comprising interview transcripts and demographic information, were subjected to thematic analysis. This method involves systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the qualitative data. Through an iterative process, themes relevant to cross-cultural adaptations among international undergraduate students were identified and organized.

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations. As recommended by Hill (2010) and Hill et al. (2005), we used several methods to establish trustworthiness and reduce researcher bias. First, all the research team members discussed their expectations and biases, which might have influenced their interviews and coding at the beginning of the study. Researchers reported expectations and biases that can allow researchers to identify their own perceptions and interpretations of the data in the analysis. Second, we performed a pilot interview protocol with two to three people who could meet the participation criteria but were not included in the formal study. These pilot interviews allowed researchers to examine whether the interview questions functioned properly and logically. After the pilot interview, we revised a few questions to adjust the sequence of asking questions. Finally, member checking was also involved in our study to ensure the

accuracy and trustworthiness of the data (Hill et al., 2005). Upon the completion of transcription, we sent them to the participants to check for accuracy.

Prior to participating in the study, the participants were provided with detailed information about the research objectives, procedures, and their rights. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring their willingness to take part. All the data collected were treated with strict confidentiality in the primary research advisor's laboratory with a passport protected file. The participants' identities were kept anonymous in the reporting of findings, and pseudonyms or codes were used to protect their privacy.

RESULTS

Challenges in Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Language barriers. A recurring theme among participants was the complexity of language adaptation, particularly with respect to informal and practical communication in school. While many students had strong formal English skills, they struggled with slang, idiomatic expressions, and regional accents, which impeded both academic comprehension and social integration. Sarah, from Germany, noted the contrast between textbook proficiency and conversational fluidity: "I thought I spoke proper English... but here, it's like people think a Neanderthal is talking." This disconnect affected her confidence and willingness to engage in peer conversations.

Adam, another participant, echoed this challenge: "There's people who use different slangs or words I'm not familiar with... pop culture wise... it's awkward." Such experiences highlight the isolating effects of linguistic nuance, which extends beyond grammar to the cultural literacy embedded in everyday language. These difficulties, compounded by rapid speech in classrooms, often left students hesitant to ask questions, fearing judgment or misunderstanding.

Navigating bureaucratic systems. The participants described bureaucratic navigation as a persistent source of stress, especially regarding visas, housing, and employment authorization. One of the 16 participants reported, "They need to review our account, so it takes time to go through all these applications. In addition, once it is even completed, you just need to go again and do a ton of paperwork again." This goes to the complexity of unfamiliarity with U.S. administrative systems that make routine tasks—like opening a bank account or filing taxes—confusing and time-consuming. Many recounted instances of missing deadlines or incorrectly filled out forms due to unclear instructions or limited institutional support.

The students expressed frustration with the lack of accessible guidance. Another participant, like Enes, shared how even simple procedures became overwhelming without prior knowledge or support networks, intensifying feelings of disorientation during their initial months on campus. This aspect of adaptation often intersects with language challenges, further complicating efforts to become self-sufficient.

Discrimination and Stereotypes. Several students recounted instances of microaggressions and subtle discrimination rooted in cultural assumptions. Ahmad described a classroom incident: “I asked her a question... and then she was like, ‘Can you hear me? Can you hear me?’—as if I couldn’t understand because English isn’t my first language.” Such encounters reflected an implicit bias, undermining the intellectual capabilities of international students on the basis of their accents or perceived fluency.

Amina, from Eastern Europe, highlighted the issue of national identity erasure: “Most people think Eastern Europe is just Russia. I keep explaining my country’s next to Italy... they still say, ‘Oh, that’s Russia.’” This reduction of cultural identity to simplistic geographic labels frustrated students, making them feel invisible or misrepresented. Stereotypes about economic backwardness or outdated technology also surfaced, contributing to social exclusion and a diminished sense of belonging.

Perceptions of Adaptation

Positive Experiences and Personal Growth. Despite these challenges, many students reflected positively on their adaptation, emphasizing personal development and increased cultural sensitivity. Omar shared that the experience broadened his perspective: “If I ever feel very one-sided, I try to also see the other side of things.” Exposure to diverse viewpoints encouraged students to reevaluate assumptions and embrace intercultural understanding.

Yusuf, who identified as Hispanic, articulated a newfound sense of unity: “Back home, I didn’t truly think about it... but here, I feel more connected to people I wouldn’t have thought about before.” The shared experiences of adaptation created solidarity across cultural groups, fostering empathy and mutual respect.

Community Engagement and Belong. Many students found integration through participation in campus events and student organizations. Aslihan highlighted the value of cultural representation: “We put on cultural events... not just Hispanics, but international students too. It made me feel part of

the community.” These events served as platforms for cultural expression and strengthened students’ sense of agency within the academic environment.

Negative Experiences of Isolation. However, the process was not uniformly positive. Several students described initial feelings of alienation, intensified by the individualistic culture prevalent on campus. Fatima shared, “In class, everyone was completely silent. Back home, people are always helping each other.” The contrast between collectivist social norms and perceived emotional distance in the U.S. academic setting often led to loneliness and confusion.

Language-related emotional barriers also emerged. Yunus expressed difficulty in articulating feelings: “I don’t know how to express my emotions in English, so I just don’t.” Musa added, “Even though I’m a junior, sometimes I feel like I’m here all by myself... against the world.” Their comments underscore the psychological toll of language barriers on emotional well-being and social connectivity.

Mixed Experiences: Balancing Dual Identities Some students reported ambivalence in maintaining connections with their home culture. Maria admitted, “I don’t follow my home culture anymore... it just makes me feel worse, because I can’t celebrate it with people from home.” This emotional detachment signaled the difficulty of sustaining cultural traditions in an unfamiliar environment, especially when those practices are rooted in community participation.

Coping Strategies

Social Support Systems. Students relied heavily on relationships—both back home and on campus—to navigate their transition. Isra described her routine: “I talk to my friends from home... and my parents, at least for one hour three times a week. That warmth helps.” Maintaining these connections offered emotional grounding during stressful periods.

On campus, support from the International Students Office (ISO) was frequently praised. Aisa appreciated the inclusive programming: “ISO was a big thing... meetings and cultural events made me feel integrated.” Ahsen emphasized its practical assistance: “They helped me with employment, gave me a tour... answered all my questions.” The ISO served as both a resource hub and a culturally safe space.

Maintaining cultural connection. Cultural practices such as cooking, celebrating holidays, or engaging with music from home were common ways to maintain identity. Elizabeth, from Ireland, felt connected due to the university’s

Irish roots: “Learning about the Mercy Sisters—it’s something I’ve known my whole life.” Others, such as Isabella and Ismail, described the emotional comfort of calling home during holidays or receiving symbolic gestures from family members.

Some used sports as a bridge. Omar, who played soccer in Haiti, continued tradition at college, reinforcing a sense of continuity and belonging. However, not all the students found it easy—Hacer acknowledged, “It’s hard to stay in touch... everyone’s growing apart.”

Negotiating Cultural Identity. Balancing integration with cultural preservation emerged as a nuanced challenge. Students selectively adopted elements of the host culture, aligning them with personal values while safeguarding core traditions. This balancing act fostered resilience and intercultural competence, shaping a more complex, globalized identity. Their reflections reveal an ongoing negotiation—not between two static cultures but between evolving selves and contexts.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the cross-cultural adaptation experiences of international undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college in the United States. Grounded in Berry’s acculturation theory and the U-/W-Curve models, the research aimed to understand (1) the challenges international students face; (2) their perceptions of adaptation; and (3) the coping strategies they employ. Thematic analysis revealed three major domains: significant acculturative stressors (language, bureaucracy, discrimination), the dual nature of adaptation (both enriching and isolating), and a variety of coping mechanisms centered on social connection, cultural continuity, and identity negotiation.

Language barriers as acculturative stress. Language emerged as both a practical barrier and a symbolic barrier. Berry’s (1997) framework recognizes language fluency as critical to integration, the acculturation strategy associated with the best psychological outcomes. However, many students in this study encountered obstacles due not only to formal proficiency gaps but also to sociolinguistic challenges—slang, humor, and idiomatic expressions—that hindered social participation. The inability to decode informal communication constrained their perceived competence and fostered a sense of alienation, echoing findings from Yakunina et al. (2013), who noted that difficulties in informal communication predict lower psychological adjustment.

Bureaucracy and the hidden curriculum. Navigating institutional systems—visa applications, banking, and employment—exemplified what many participants experienced as a “hidden curriculum” of life in the U.S. This aligns with Hansen et al. (2018), who reported that bureaucratic stress disproportionately affects students unfamiliar with American administrative norms. The U-Curve model (Lysgaard, 1955) maps these frustrations onto the “crisis” phase of cultural adjustment, where idealized expectations crash with institutional complexities. The stress of bureaucratic opacity not only delayed practical goals but also signaled a lack of structural accommodation, pushing students toward separation or marginalization in Berry’s taxonomy.

Discrimination and Stereotypes: The Cost of Cultural Reductionism. Students’ encounters with microaggressions and subtle discrimination illustrate the psychological burden of racialized and regional stereotypes. Being spoken slowly or asked whether they “could hear” conveyed implicit doubts about intelligence and belonging. Such experiences are well-documented sources of minority stress (Sue et al., 2007) and signal symbolic exclusion, where students are present but not perceived as fully legitimate members of the academic community. This results in emotional withdrawal, impairing both social and academic engagement.

Complexity of Perceptions. Consistent with the W-Curve hypothesis, many participants moved beyond the initial confusion to a reflective, integrative attitude. The students described becoming more empathetic, globally aware, and introspective. Talha’s reflection—learning to consider alternative perspectives—mirrors the shift from ethnocentric to ethno-relative thinking (Bennett, 1993). Even in contexts of adversity, students draw meaning from their journeys. Their narratives underscore the dialectic of cross-cultural adaptation: simultaneous expansion of self and occasional contraction of confidence.

However, this growth was uneven. Fatima’s and Yunus’s comments revealed emotional dissonance when local social norms conflict with collectivist expectations. The feeling of being socially invisible or emotionally “lost in translation” emphasizes how cultural distance can be internalized, reinforcing loneliness and self-isolation. These findings reflect Myers-Walls et al. (2011), who noted that emotional expression barriers in a second language compound mental health vulnerabilities in international students.

Coping Strategies: Navigating between Worlds

Social Support and the Buffering Effect. Social support—particularly contact with family and peers—function as a key protective factor. Isa’s daily check-ins with her parents show the buffering effect described by Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) stress-coping model. Connecting with conationals also created an in-group solidarity that buffered external microaggressions. This echoes Ra & Trusty (2015), who reported that international students with strong intragroup ties reported lower levels of homesickness and anxiety.

Cultural continuity and identity negotiation. Cultural rituals, including food, music, and holidays, served not only as nostalgic sympathies but also as anchoring practices that preserved students’ sense of continuity. For some—such as Maria—engagement in home culture faded, indicating a possible shift toward assimilation. For others, dual identity was intentionally maintained. This finding supports Berry’s (1997) concept of integration as bicultural competence, where individuals successfully navigate both home and host cultures without abandoning either.

Institutional Resources and Self-Advocacy. The role of the International Student Office (ISO) in colleges is particularly vital. Students highlighted ISO staff who personally toured them around campus or helped with job applications. These small, targeted acts—aligned with those of Gopalan et al. (2019)—constitute what Mahmood and Burke (2018) describe as “relational capital”: trust-based, personalized institutional support. Their importance cannot be overstated in settings where students often hesitate to seek help owing to cultural norms about independence or self-reliance.

Institutional Implications

International students at liberal arts colleges navigate a complex environment of cultural, academic, and emotional transitions—a complexity between vulnerability and empowerment, alienation and belonging, loss and growth. Their successful adaptation is not solely a testament to personal resilience but also a reflection of institutional structures that either hinder or facilitate inclusion. This study underscores the need for colleges to transition from expecting assimilation to fostering structural responsiveness. Institutions that dismantle barriers, invest in culturally inclusive practices, and amplify student voices are more likely to cultivate globally literate, empathetic academic communities.

Language support must extend beyond academic proficiency to encompass the informal and cultural dimensions of English. Workshops on idioms,

slang, and regional expressions can explain social interactions and help students feel anchored in campus life. To counteract subtle forms of cultural reductionism and to offer practical implications for enrollment managers, institutions should prioritize intercultural competence development through reflective bias assessments, faculty cultural humility workshops, and student-led forums. Within this environment, international students can be recognized as multidimensional individuals, not cultural representatives. Additionally, international offices should offer transparent, multilingual guidance on visas, employment, and housing logistics. Culturally responsive training for staff is essential to ensure that institutional touchpoints become sources of validation rather than alienation.

The liberal arts model—with its emphasis on ethical reasoning and critical inquiry—can further support students in contextualizing their experiences within broader frameworks of personal development and societal engagement (Hill et al., 2012). The path from “home” to “host” is not linear, but it can be enriched through thoughtful, student-centered design.

Research Considerations

While the insights from this study offer valuable implications, their generalizability is limited by the context—a small, northeastern U.S. liberal arts college—and a relatively homogenous sample ($n=16$). Although analytic rigor was maintained through grounded theory and member checking, cultural nuance and researcher positionality may still shape interpretation. Furthermore, the study’s cross-sectional design restricts visibility to the evolving nature of student adaptation over time.

Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to trace how international students’ adaptation processes shift across multiple academic years and identify which institutional interventions yield sustained impacts. Comparative studies across institutional types—urban vs. rural, public vs. private, and large vs. small—could surface environmental variables most predictive of adaptation success. Intervention-based research, especially mixed-method or randomized studies, should evaluate programs such as peer mentoring, culturally immersive events, and hybrid orientations to determine their effectiveness in supporting inclusion, mental well-being, and academic performance. In summary, a broader range of voices is essential to fully understand and enhance the journey of international students navigating complex, often nonlinear, transitions between educational systems and cultural worlds.

REFERENCES

- Alnajjar, M. A., & Alacapınar, F. G. (2024). International student adaptation in liberal arts contexts. *Journal of Global Higher Education Research*, 12(1), 45–63.
- An, B. P., Kim, J., & Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. J. (2016). The influence of academic support services on student satisfaction in liberal arts colleges. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 18(3), 234–256.
- Bennett, M. J. (1993). *Developmental model of intercultural sensitivity*. Intercultural Press.
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, 46(1), 5–34.
- Bicak, I. and Taylor, Z. (2020). Predicting international student enrollment in u.s. institutions by institutional characteristics: using fixed and random effects. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.5590/jerap.2020.10.1.15>
- Cohen, T. A., Ray, S. D., Audette, C., & Weis, R. (2020). College students' access to academic accommodations varies as a function of school type, selectivity, and cost. *Journal of Education and Culture Studies*, 4(3), p130. <https://doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v4n3p130>
- Choudaha, R. (2016). Campus readiness for supporting international student success. *Journal of International Students*, 6(4), 901–904.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. Basic Books.
- Gopalan, N., Quinn, M., & Garrett, J. (2019). International student satisfaction and institutional support: The role of sense of belonging. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 56(4), 364–378.
- Han, X., Han, X., Luo, Q., Jacobs, S., & Jean-Baptiste, M. (2017). Mental health help-seeking among international students. *Journal of American College Health*, 65(3), 109–117.
- Hansen, H., Shneyderman, Y., & Zamboanga, B. L. (2018). Acculturative stress and academic engagement among international students. *Journal of American College Health*, 66(6), 401–408.

Hanson, M. J., Wallace, R., & Nevarez, L. (2012). Building intercultural bridges: The role of informal programming in liberal arts colleges. *Journal of Higher Education Diversity*, 4(1), 67–83.

Heng, T. T. (2018). Different is not deficient: Contradicting stereotypes of Chinese international students in U.S. higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(1), 22–36.

Hill, C. E. (2010). *Consensual qualitative research: A practical resource for investigating social science phenomena*. American Psychological Association.

Hill, C. E., Thompson, B. J., & Williams, E. N. (2005). Consensual qualitative research: An update. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 196–205.

Hill, D., Kenyon, J., & Slater, D. (2012). Liberal education and global citizenship. *Liberal Education*, 98(2), 44–51.

Kallio, H., Pietilä, A. M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: Developing a framework for a qualitative semi structured interview guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 72(12), 2954–2965.

Koo, K., Baker, I., & Yoon, J. (2021). The role of campus climate in international students' academic and psychological adjustment. *Journal of International Students*, 11(2), 389–407.

Krsmanovic, M. (2019). Beyond the U-curve: Understanding international student transitions through a sense-making lens. *Journal of International Students*, 9(4), 958–975.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.

Mahmood, S., & Burke, M. G. (2018). Fostering adjustment and belonging: Support strategies for international students. *Journal of International Student Affairs*, 8(1), 22–36.

Myers-Walls, J. A., Frias, L. V., Kwon, K. A., Ko, M. J., & Lu, T. (2011). Living life in two worlds: Acculturative stress among Asian international graduate student parents and spouses. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 42(4), 455–478.

Park, H. (2016). The influence of language proficiency on academic performance and adaptation. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(6), 659–667.

- Ponterotto, J. G. (2010). Qualitative research in multicultural psychology. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 16*(4), 581–589.
- Ra, Y. A., & Trusty, J. (2015). Impact of social support and coping strategies on acculturative stress. *Journal of College Counseling, 18*(2), 132–149.
- Ramos, K., Cassidy, T., & Reicher, S. (2014). The W-Curve revisited: Cross-cultural adjustment of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 40*, 138–146.
- Rose-Redwood, C. R., & Rose-Redwood, R. S. (2018). Fostering successful integration and engagement for international students: An inclusive pedagogical framework. *Journal of International Students, 8*(3), 1204–1226.
- San, S., & Guo, Y. (2022). Comparing international student experiences in different institutional types. *Journal of Comparative Education Research, 11*(3), 201–217.
- Shafaei, A., Nejati, M., & Quazi, A. (2016). The contribution of internationalization to student development. *Studies in Higher Education, 41*(6), 1037–1053.
- Shein, P. P. (2015). Academic experiences of international students in liberal arts colleges. *International Journal of Educational Development, 45*, 147–155.
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life. *American Psychologist, 62*(4), 271–286.
- Su, J., Harrison, A., & Gao, W. (2021). Disconnected or unsupported? Examining international student engagement in large universities. *Journal of International Education Research, 17*(2), 39–55.
- TerMaat, J. M., Croft, L., & Lee, Y. (2023). Ethics, diversity, and global competence in liberal arts education. *Liberal Studies Journal, 9*(1), 24–37.
- Yakunina, E. S., Weigold, I. K., Weigold, A., Hercegovac, S., & Elsayed, N. (2013). Acculturative stress and universal-diverse orientation: Examining the role of social support. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 91*(2), 203–212.

Bio

Seyma Inan, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Mercyhurst University in the US. Her major research interests include bilingual children, immigrant families in the U.S., international students' experiences in the U.S. and multiculturalism. Email: sinan@mercyhurst.edu

Chapter Seven

Managing International Academic Collaboration in a Turbulent World: Swedish Perspectives

Per A. Nilsson & Lars Westin
Umeå University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Increasing geopolitical tensions have created an environment where international collaboration is under scrutiny. This study examines Sweden's transition from a nonaligned country to a member of a regional security-oriented regime. To preserve the advantages of an open academic environment and adapt to the new challenges posed by heightened security demands, this shift represents a crucial research area. It broadens the discussion on security threats and contributes to studies on how international academic mobility is perceived and managed by nations facing increased insecurity. The study focuses on inbound PhD students, revealing that Sweden has a relatively high proportion of doctoral students from China, Iran, and Russia—countries identified by the Swedish Security Service as problematic from a national security perspective. Russia's war in Ukraine, occurring in Sweden's immediate vicinity, along with Finland's and Sweden's subsequent NATO memberships, has heightened public awareness of this new security stance.

Keywords: International doctoral students, Security threats, Sweden

INTRODUCTION

Rising geopolitical tensions have created an environment in which international collaboration can be questioned. The dual use of research for harmful purposes is one concern. Another concern is economic espionage and unauthorized technology transfer (de Witt & Glass, 2025). This contrasts with a previous stand where governments have regarded international academic exchange as positive for their economies and trade, in addition to being a factor in fostering international peace and understanding. In line with this, the Swedish government follows a national strategy of extended academic internationalization, emphasizing the need to include international perspectives in postsecondary education while also encouraging Swedish students to go abroad for studies. It is emphasized that foreign students are welcome to study in Sweden (2020/21:60). As a small, open economy with intense international trade, foreign investments, and international relations at large, Sweden has long encouraged international academic exchange (Åkerlund, 2020). The view has been that international students also add a multitude of perspectives and experiences to higher education and to institutions (HEIs). Hence, over time, Swedish higher education has become less national and more internationally oriented (Börjesson & Dalberg, 2021).

One perspective toward the shift in policy is with respect to migration (Myklebust, 2023). The rhetoric among some politicians now focuses more on the eventual costs of the integration of immigrants into society. This can in turn be traced back to the experiences from 2015, when Sweden received a substantial number of refugees, and the significant effort it required within various parts of society. In terms of academic mobility, the costs and benefits of international commitments were already discussed just after the turn of the millennium. The result was that the previous tuition-free education was abandoned in 2011 in favor of tuition fees for students from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland (Prop 2009/10:65), in response to a rapid increase in the number of non-European students in Sweden. Similar discussions are found in other countries (O'Malley, 2020; Kakuchi, 2023).

This study shares experiences from Sweden moving away from a position as a nonallied country to be part of a regional security-oriented regime. Thus, to maintain the benefits of an open academy and adapt to these new challenges of an increased demand for security. This transition represents an important area of research that may broaden the discussion on security threats and add more studies on how international academic mobility is perceived and managed by national states facing increased insecurity. The study focuses on inbound PhD students, and the following questions are addressed:

- How many international doctoral students have entered Sweden, and from where do they originate?
- How has the Swedish government and other actors managed the tensions between demand for increased control due to security motives and the demand from the small open economy to remain open, especially with respect to information and knowledge?

The outline of the chapter is as follows. In the next section, we examine some of the literature relevant to the topic of our paper. Thereafter, we present data on international doctoral students in Sweden. Finally, we discuss and provide our reflections on the benefits of international mobility within higher education while also addressing the security issues that HEIs now must consider. We conclude the chapter with a summary and offer suggestions for further studies.

ACADEMIC MOBILITY AND NATIONAL SECURITY

As mentioned, the global flow of knowledge is positive for many reasons. However, nation states have long used international mobility for political purposes, and some have even more precisely regarded international students as a specific potential threat to their national security. Allen and Bista (2022) show how migration policies in the U.S. have changed over several decades in response to international threats. For this reason, the U.S. government tracks all foreign entries into the country in a centralized database.

There may naturally be international students who have been sent by some countries with the aim of investigating or spying on the country of study. For example, Chinese citizens in other countries are required by law to assist with Chinese intelligence services when necessary (Swedish Security Service, 2024). According to Özkan and Taşçı (2023), security issues can require efforts by the government in response to potential threats because they significantly threaten national security. Nevertheless, it is often difficult to know whose security to prioritize. For instance, security threats must be considered in their context. With respect to international students, several studies have focused on the security needs of the international students themselves at HEIs (Dostál et al., 2018; Allen & Bista, 2022).

In Sweden, with its increasing awareness of the security issues involved in international academic mobility, the annual report by the Swedish Security Service (Swedish Security Service, 2024) states that several countries are currently carrying out espionage against Sweden. Three countries are judged to pose the greatest security threats to Sweden: Russia, China and Iran. According to the

report, espionage is largely directed at Sweden's territorial sovereignty, economy, and prosperity, as well as its independent decision-making and fundamental freedoms and rights. According to the report, different countries have different purposes for their espionage. Sweden is seen as an attractive country for those who want to illegally acquire knowledge, information, and technology for military and civilian purposes. For a country that has ambitions to become a global superpower, technology acquisition is important—hence, interest in research conducted, for instance, at Swedish HEIs. From a broader perspective, espionage can also involve acquiring knowledge of political decisions or attempting to map them to destabilize a country, as well as mapping dissidents and influencing them or others through threats or ideological motivations.

As mentioned, the Swedish government has assigned an investigation with the task of proposing how HEI competence in security matters can be increased (Egardt, 2024). The government is revising its security policy and taking measures in several areas. Together with the recent membership in NATO, this might be a game changer in Sweden's policies on internationalization regarding HEIs, that is, the aspiration to offer an open educational system for international students.

THE ORIGINS AND NUMBERS OF INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENTS

There are currently approximately 13,000 full-time doctoral students in Sweden, and more than 6,000 of these are international students. While the total number of doctoral students has remained constant since the 1990s, the share of international students has increased from 18 to 50 per cent. This represents a major change in students' origins, but as we will return to later, it also reflects a transformation of the atmosphere at individual departments and faculties. The language among researchers has changed to English, and the thresholds for engaging in international exchange and networks as well as for visiting international conferences have decreased.

As shown in Table 1, which also reproduces the origins of international doctoral students, in 2022, approximately 30 percent were recruited from the European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland, whereas approximately 40 percent came from Asia. In general, and as we touched upon previously when discussing how friction of movement governs the flows of students, we would expect that distance from Sweden, size of the country, and income per capita of the country of origin, as well as cultural factors, would determine the pattern of flows of doctoral students to Sweden. One can also find such patterns in Table 1.

Table 1: International doctoral students in Sweden in autumn of 2014–2022 by country of birth. Source: Statistics Sweden, 2022.

Year	2014 (%)	2016 (%)	2020 (%)	2022 (%)
Asia	2795 (42)	2501 (38)	2415 (37)	2382 (38)
EU/EEA (excl. Nordic countries)	1670 (25)	1832 (28)	1838 (28)	1746 (28)
Europe (excl. EU/EEA)	496 (7)	497 (8)	575 (9)	537 (8)
Africa	401 (6)	389 (6)	332 (5)	306 (5)
South America	226 (3)	225 (3)	279 (4)	288 (5)
North America	271 (4)	263 (4)	267 (4)	251 (4)
Nordic countries (excl. Sweden)	772 (12)	800 (12)	809 (12)	795 (12)
Oceania	28 (0)	27 (0)	35 (1)	32 (1)
TOTAL	6 659	6 534	6 550	6 337
Specific countries				
China	953 (14)	880 (13)	891 (14)	850 (13)
Iran	708 (11)	566 (11)	420 (11)	450 (11)
Russia	145 (2)	141 (2)	137 (2)	119 (2)
TOTAL	1 806	1 582	1 448	1 419

While the low exchange with nearby other Nordic countries may seem surprising, those countries are quite small, more like Sweden, and have their own well-developed doctoral programs. Thus, the benefits of attending doctoral studies in another Nordic country are not obvious.

Interestingly, the number of doctoral students from Iran has declined, and the number of students from Russia is quite small, given that Russia is a large country located very close to Sweden. The number of students from Russia may also have been reduced by the occupation of Crimea in 2014, especially the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Every fourth international doctoral student in Sweden is recruited from the three countries of Russia, China, and Iran, with China dominating.

DISCUSSION

In our analysis of the pattern of incoming doctoral students to Sweden, we observed that Sweden has a relatively high share of doctoral students from China, Iran, and Russia. Those are the three countries the Swedish Security Service explicitly has characterized as problematic from a national security position. Russia's war in Ukraine, in Sweden's immediate neighborhood, and the subsequent NATO memberships by both Finland and Sweden clearly added to the awareness of this new position by the public.

To date, the government has required that Swedish HEIs, together with the Swedish Migration Agency, must ensure that any misuse of residence permits for studies in higher education is minimized. In this respect, HEIs are now obliged to identify study interruptions and promptly report these interruptions to the

Swedish Migration Agency. Of course, we have no information regarding other actions taken by the Security Service. However, there has been a dialog between the government and HEIs regarding administrative changes to strengthen the awareness of and leadership in relation to various aspects of security threats concerning international students and staff. The obvious risk here is that international students and staff in general will come to be regarded as threats.

A comparable debate is unfolding in other countries. The term “outside interference” encompasses actions that may compromise scholars’ academic freedom—such as concerns that sensitive information related to advanced technologies could be transferred to foreign nations, e.g. China (Kakuchi, 2023). In the UK, a discussion has started with the aim of reviewing HEIs and adapting their risk management associated with internationalization. The risks are increasingly dynamic and complex (O’Malley, 2020). Issues that are addressed at most HEIs, not only in Sweden but also around the world, are related to how trustful relations in networks with peers and academic environments may be sustained. This also covers policies surrounding the handling of sensitive information to prevent such information from being transferred by outgoing links.

CONCLUSIONS

Security threats in connection with international academic mobility are and will become an increasing area of research. In this study, we described and analyzed the number and origins of foreign students attending doctoral studies at Swedish HEIs. We address the potential advantages for a society of international student mobility while also pointing to the inherent threats that accompany all sorts of international flows. We assume that HEIs will develop risk-reducing policies and related institutional adaptations. Sweden has just entered this phase of transition. A transition from almost complete openness into a state where the benefits of openness must be balanced by a developed strategy of risk treatment can develop possibilities for a knowledge-intensive society to act on the global arena in the future. In this respect, the study adds to other studies of academic mobility in the context of security threats.

We found that every fourth international doctoral student in Sweden is recruited from three countries: Russia, China, and Iran. Those three are judged to pose the greatest security threats to Sweden. This finding indicates that Sweden will likely have a stronger focus on various security issues connected with international academic mobility. In this respect, Sweden will join the list of countries where similar discussions are taking place (e.g., Allen & Bista, 2022). The support

for an open society and an unrestricted transnational exchange in research and education are now directly challenged by international conflicts involving war, hybrid warfare and espionage—conflicts that have recently moved closer to Sweden’s borders. This study addresses this topic, and thus far, we lack detailed data on specific security measures implemented by higher education institutions in Sweden and their impacts on academics. Such more detailed studies may be carried out when the transition of the Swedish academic environment in response to various international threats has developed further.

REFERENCES

- Åkerlund, A. (2020). A competition state perspective on the development of Swedish policies for internationalization of higher education and research 1960s–2010s. *Nordic Journal of Education History*, 7(2), 99–123. <https://doi.org/10.36368/njedh.v7i2.243>
- Allan, R. M., & Bista, K. (2022). Talented, however, seen with suspicion: Surveillance of international students and scholars in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, 12(1), 175–194. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12i1.3410>
- Börjesson, M., & Dalberg, T. (2021). Massification, unification, marketisation, internationalization: A sociopolitical history of higher education in Sweden 1945–2020. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 11(3), 346–364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2021.1945473>
- De Wit, H., & Glass, C. (2025, January 8). Responsible internationalization: How responsible is it? <https://www.universityworldnews.com/>
- Dostál, J., Chalupová, M., Černá, M., & Prokop, M. (2018). International terrorism as a threat to student mobility. *On the Horizon*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/OTH-10-2017-0078>
- Egardt, P. (2024). *Ökad kompetens i säkerhetsfrågor vid universitet och högskolor* [Increased competence in security matters at HEI] (U2024/00153). Swedish Government.
- Kakuchi, S. (2023, May 17). G7 ministers call for rules to improve research security. *University World News*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com>
- Myklebust, J. (2023, September 22). Security vs openness: Toward responsible internationalization. *University World News*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com>

O'Malley, B. (2020, October 16). New guidance on security threats to internationalization. *University World News*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201016163322110>

Özkan, A., & Taşçı, G. (2023). The security needs of international students: An analysis in terms of the securitization theory. *Gazi Akademik Bakış*, 16(32), 271–291. <https://doi.org/10.19060/gav.1315170>

Prop. 2009/10:65. (2009). *Konkurrera med kvalitet – Studieavgifter för utländska studenter* [Compete with quality – Tuition fees for foreign students]. Government bill. Stockholm, Sweden.

Prop. 2020/21:60. (2020). *Forskning, frihet, framtid – kunskap och innovation för Sverige* [Research, freedom, future – Knowledge and innovation for Sweden]. Government bill. Stockholm, Sweden.

Swedish Security Service. (2024). *Säkerhetspolisen 2023/2024* [Annual report from the Security Service 2023/24]. Stockholm, Sweden. <https://sakerhetspolisen.se/om-sakerhetspolisen/publikationer/sakerhetspolisen-s-arsberattelse/sakerhetspolisen-2023-2024/sammanfattning.html>

Statistics Sweden. (2022). *Universities and colleges: Doctoral students and degrees at research level in 2022 (Universitet och högskolor: Doktorander och examina på forskarnivå 2022)*. <https://www.scb.se/publikation/49878>

Bios

PER A. NILSSON, PhD, is an affiliated research fellow at the Centre for Regional Science at Umeå University, Sweden. His major research interests include international student mobility. Email: per.a.nilsson@umu.se

LARS WESTIN, PhD, is a Professor at the Centre for Regional Science at Umeå University, Sweden. His major research interests include urban economics, infrastructure investments, international trade and spatial development. Email: lars.westin@umu.se



Chapter Eight

Intentional Enrollment Management: A Scalable Approach to Student Success and Institutional Transformation

Greet Provoost

Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar, Qatar

George Burke III

University at Albany, State University of New York, USA

ABSTRACT

Intentional Enrollment Management offers a holistic, scalable framework for advancing institutional sustainability, student success, and mission alignment across a range of higher education contexts. This paper highlights the enrollment management approach developed by Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar through its enrollment management task force and offers a framework for adapting its key strategies to U.S. colleges and universities. Focusing on the student journey from recruitment through first-year retention, this paper highlights critical components such as data-informed planning, cross-unit collaboration, inclusive pedagogy, scholarship infrastructure, and institutional culture. By aligning people, processes, and purpose, intentional enrollment management fosters proactive decision-making and institutional resilience in response to shifting demographics,

evolving learner needs, and increased competition. This approach demonstrates how enrollment efforts can catalyze broader institutional transformation when intentionally designed and integrated across all levels of operation.

Keywords: Data-Informed Decision Making; First-Year Student Experience; Intentional Enrollment Management; Institutional Sustainability; Scholarship Strategy; Strategic Enrollment Planning; Strategic Recruitment; Student Retention; Student Success

THE POWER OF INTENTIONAL ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

In the contemporary higher education landscape, intentional enrollment management (IEM) has emerged as a vital strategic tool for institutional sustainability, growth, and student success. No longer confined to admissions offices or driven solely by application numbers, today's enrollment management must be dynamic, data-informed, and integrated across the entire institution. It encompasses every stage of the student lifecycle—from recruitment through graduation—and requires seamless coordination across academic departments, administrative functions, and student support services.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a period of disruption, isolation, and reflection. As institutions recover, they must also recognize the evolving needs of staff. Investment in professional development, a renewed commitment to institutional missions, and intentional collaboration are essential for building resilient and engaged teams. Supporting staff well-being and growth is foundational to achieving cohesive, institution-wide enrollment strategies.

Facing increased competition, demographic shifts, and evolving student expectations, higher education institutions must move toward holistic enrollment frameworks that are strategic, intentional, and scalable.

The work of the Enrollment Management Task Force (EMTF) at Virginia Commonwealth University School in Qatar (VCUQ) provides one such approach. Grounded in stakeholder collaboration, data-informed decision-making, and alignment with institutional missions, the VCUQ approach demonstrates how enrollment efforts can serve as catalysts for institutional transformation.

With a student body that is generally around 63% Qatari, 3% U.S., and 34% from other nationalities, VCUQ operates within a unique transnational context. This

paper outlines key strategies developed by VCUQ's EMTF and presents a scalable framework that can inform intentional enrollment practices at U.S. colleges and universities. It focuses on three critical transition phases: recruitment to admission, admission to new enrollment, and new enrollment through first-year retention. Across these phases, the paper highlights practical strategies centered on communication, planning, and student engagement.

ENROLLMENT AS A STRATEGIC PRIORITY: BEYOND ADMISSIONS

IEM must be grounded in a university's mission, vision, and long-term sustainability. It must also reflect broader societal needs, including workforce development, regional priorities, and expanding educational access for populations traditionally facing systemic barriers. At its core, IEM is about creating coherence in student-facing operations and establishing systems that ensure the recruitment, support, and retention of students who align with the institution's goals and priorities.

An intentional, mission-aligned IEM strategy shifts enrollment from a reactive process to a proactive institutional priority. For U.S. universities, particularly those experiencing enrollment declines or shifts in student interests, this approach provides a structured path to identify strategic opportunities, such as expanding into new geographic markets, launching interdisciplinary programs, or enhancing support for nontraditional learners. Institutions that embed enrollment within strategic planning efforts are more likely to achieve sustainable outcomes.

DATA-INFORMED DECISIONS

Strategic enrollment planning begins with the development of data-informed targets monitored over multiple years. These targets should include both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the student body, such as academic and psychological readiness, socioeconomic background, varied cultural and demographic profiles, and alignment with institutional values.

Scenario planning is essential. Institutions can create multiple enrollment forecasts, such as normal, surge, and melt scenarios, and develop contingency plans accordingly. This agility enables responsiveness to shifting realities, including public health emergencies, political instability, financial pressures, or regulatory changes in financial aid.

Crucially, these forecasts must be evaluated in the context of physical infrastructure, faculty workload, and financial viability. For example, an enrollment surge may increase tuition revenue but overburden academic and housing resources if not managed proactively. Collaboration among enrollment, academic, and administrative teams ensures institutional readiness and flexibility.

Data-informed planning includes tracking enrollment funnel metrics, student success indicators, market demand, and predictive analytics. Disaggregating data by demographic markers (e.g., race, gender, income level) can reveal disparities and inform targeted interventions. Institutions that anticipate trends and plan strategically are better positioned for long-term resilience and impact.

ADMISSIONS WITH PURPOSE

Effective recruitment and admissions require role clarity, strategic staffing, and alignment with institutional messaging. Institutions should differentiate between external-facing recruitment and the internal operations of admissions. This may entail restructuring staff responsibilities to reflect these distinct functions.

Faculty involvement in recruitment can enhance credibility, particularly when students are seeking insight into academic disciplines and learning outcomes. Recruitment teams must also respond to changing prospective student behavior. Many students begin their search online and expect immediate, personalized responses. Thus, institutions should adopt tech-enabled solutions, such as CRM systems, chatbots, and virtual events, to provide a responsive and student-centered experience.

Admission processes should be clear, accessible, and aligned with institutional values. Institutions should adopt holistic review practices that evaluate academic potential alongside nonacademic factors such as creativity, leadership, and resilience. These processes must also comply with accreditation standards and legal regulations.

STRATEGIC BRANDING AND MARKETING ALIGNMENT

A university's brand is often the first point of contact for prospective students and their families. Branding and enrollment strategies must be coordinated to deliver an authentic and compelling message about the institution's values, strengths, and student experience.

In competitive markets, universities must articulate not only prestige or tradition but also a clear value proposition: does this institution prepare graduates

with both technical skills and ethical, humanistic values? Marketing strategies should feature student and alumni stories, real-world outcomes, and emotionally resonant visuals that convey community, opportunity, and success.

For institutions with multiple campuses or strong online components, a unified yet flexible branding approach is critical. Market segmentation enables institutions to tailor messaging to specific audiences while maintaining institutional coherence. Moreover, marketing should not end at recruitment: ongoing engagement supports student retention by reinforcing institutional identity and community.

COMMUNICATING WITH CLARITY

Institutional collaboration requires continuous and transparent communication among faculty, staff, and leaders. Faculty play a key role in articulating the academic standards and competencies needed for student success, whereas admissions teams ensure that policies are consistently applied.

Frontline staff and advisors must be well versed in admissions criteria and capable of articulating them clearly. Miscommunication—or a lack of communication—can deter applicants or result in inconsistent messaging. Transparency around application trends, yield rates, and scholarship distribution helps align efforts and foster shared accountability.

Clear internal communication also supports cultural change. When departments understand how their work impacts enrollment, collaboration becomes more purposeful. Institutions should strive to reduce ambiguity around decision-making processes and ensure that all stakeholders understand their role in advancing enrollment goals.

SCHOLARSHIPS WITH IMPACT

Scholarships are key tools for attracting, enrolling, and retaining talented students from a range of backgrounds. A sustainable scholarship strategy must include dedicated funding sources, transparent distribution processes, and ongoing assessment of impact.

Students often misunderstand their eligibility for aid or assume that financial support is out of reach. Institutions can counter this through early outreach, clear language, and simplified processes. Proactive communication improves students' perceptions of affordability and increases application conversion rates.

The capacity to offer scholarships varies significantly. Some institutions rely on donor funds, whereas others depend on tuition discounting. High discount rates may reduce gross tuition revenue and strain operational budgets, which can diminish the return on investment in recruitment. Therefore, institutions must carefully monitor metrics such as net tuition revenue, aid-related yield, recruitment costs, and retention by aid level.

A nuanced understanding of these indicators supports the development of scholarship strategies that balance access, affordability, and financial sustainability.

LEVERAGING DATA FOR INSTITUTIONAL GROWTH AND RESILIENCE

Data are the foundation of intentional enrollment management. Institutions must collect and analyze data throughout the student lifecycle, from initial inquiry to postgraduation outcomes. This includes monitoring applicants who decline offers, students who withdraw, and those who persist and graduate.

Integrated data systems that connect admissions, financial aid, academic progress, and student support services are essential. Dashboards and predictive models can help institutions identify melt risks, monitor program demand, and assess the impact of interventions.

Disaggregated data reveal outcome disparities and inform targeted strategies to best support particular student populations. The public sharing of outcomes—for accreditation, government reporting, or fundraising—reinforces transparency and accountability. Institutions that can demonstrate success through evidence are better positioned to secure resources and influence policy.

CRAFTING AN UNFORGETTABLE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE

Retention begins before the first day of class. The transition into college is a critical period during which students form connections, develop skills, and solidify their sense of purpose. Institutions must offer robust support in this phase to ensure long-term student success.

Effective first-year strategies include preenrollment advising, summer bridge programs, orientation redesign, living-learning communities, and skill-building workshops. These initiatives help students integrate academically and socially. Institutions should also support commuter, part-time, and nontraditional students through flexible services and virtual engagement opportunities.

Mental health support, culturally responsive advising, and early career exploration can enhance student engagement and persistence. First-year programs must be attuned to students' unique identities and aspirations. When institutions invest in inclusive, student-centered experiences, they lay the groundwork for higher retention and stronger outcomes.

INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY

Faculty are central to student success. As the primary stewards of learning, they must be engaged partners in enrollment and retention efforts. Inclusive teaching practices—grounded in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), trauma-informed pedagogy, and culturally sustaining instruction—support a broad range of learners and enhance academic outcomes.

Institutions should provide faculty with access to disaggregated student performance data and encourage reflective teaching practices. Aligning course design with institutional missions and student needs fosters more responsive instruction.

Mechanisms for structured faculty feedback, such as surveys, governance participation, or town halls, enhance institutional responsiveness and strengthen shared governance. Faculty who are informed and included in strategic decisions are more likely to support enrollment goals while remaining grounded in the institution's educational mission.

FOSTERING ALIGNMENT

A unified institutional culture is foundational to successful enrollment management. Leaders must reinforce core values through onboarding, training, and consistent messaging. Staff meetings, retreats, and evaluation processes should foster collaboration and mission alignment rather than serve solely as reporting tools.

Everyone on campus plays a role in enrollment. Facilities, IT, financial aid, academic advising, faculty, and student affairs must understand their role in creating a student-centered environment. Cross-training and shared performance metrics help break down silos and enhance coordination.

Leadership must model the desired culture by celebrating success, addressing misalignments, and fostering innovation. Institutions that invest in culture-building are more likely to attract students, faculty, and staff who share their vision and contribute to institutional sustainability.

CONCLUSION

The integrated, intentional framework developed by VCUQ's EMTF offers a compelling approach that is both adaptable and scalable for institutions across the U.S. higher education landscape. At its core, this approach centers the student experience, leverages data strategically, and aligns internal structures with institutional missions and values. However, the success of such intentionality hinges on leadership's ability to bridge the broad institutional vision with the specific goals, daily tasks, and lived realities of frontline staff. Sustainable enrollment strategies emerge not only from high-level planning but also from a culture where strategic direction and individual contributions are meaningfully connected.

Intentional enrollment management is not a prescriptive solution but a flexible, value-based framework that supports adaptation across varied institutional contexts—from large urban universities to small rural or international branch campuses. As higher education confronts demographic shifts, intensifying competition, and evolving student expectations, institutions that embrace IEM will be better positioned to foster resilience, broaden access, and achieve lasting impact.

Ultimately, the future of IEM depends on the capacity and agility of institutions to adapt to emerging realities, including technological innovation, shifting learner demographics, global mobility trends, and the growing demand for flexible learning pathways. When implemented with integrity and purpose, IEM becomes not only a roadmap to institutional sustainability but also a powerful affirmation of a university's commitment to its students, its mission, and its broader societal role.

REFERENCES

American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. (n.d.). *Enrollment management*. AACRAO. <https://www.aacrao.org/resources/enrollment-management>

American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. (n.d.). *Essentials of strategic enrollment management*. AACRAO. <https://www.aacrao.org/events-training/training/online-learning/online-course/essentials-of-strategic-enrollment-management>

American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. (n.d.). *Strategic enrollment management (SEM) readiness review planning*. AACRAO.

<https://www.aacrao.org/consulting/resources/white-papers-documents/strategic-enrollment-management-sem-readiness-review-planning>

American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. (n.d.). *The enrollment manager's role in retention and student success*. AACRAO. <https://www.aacrao.org/resources/newsletters-blogs/aacrao-connect/article/the-enrollment-manager-s-role-in-retention-and-student-success>

Burd, S. J. (2024, July 29). Yes, the enrollment management industry is harming higher ed. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2024/07/29/enrollment-management-industry-harms-higher-ed-opinion>

Carlson, S. (2024, December 4). What higher ed needs from its leaders right now. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/the-edge/2024-12-04>

Chronicle Staff. (2024, November 16). Latitudes: In new international enrollment data, a rebound. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/latitudes/2022-11-16>

Chronicle Staff. (2024, November 19). More international students are staying in the U.S. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/daily-briefing/2024-11-19>

Chronicle Staff. (2024, December 20). Ep. 139: Enrollment management's AI future. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/podcasts/key-podcast/2024/12/20/ep-139-enrollment-managements-ai-future>

Chronicle Staff. (2024, November 11). Beyond the hype: Understanding and unlocking AI's potential in enrollment management. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/reports/2024/11/11/beyond-hype-understanding-and-unlocking-ais-potential-enrollment-management>

Chronicle Staff. (2024, November 12). Six steps to building AI literacy in enrollment management. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2024/11/12/six-steps-building-ai-literacy-enrollment-management>

Chronicle Staff. (2024, May 28). Is enrollment management really ruining higher ed? *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2024/05/28/enrollment-management-really-ruining-higher-ed-opinion>

Chronicle Staff. (2024, May 14). A Q&A with Stephen Burd, enrollment management critic. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/revenue-strategies/2024/05/14/qa-stephen-burd-enrollment-management-critic>

Chronicle Staff. (2025, January 15). How did enrollment researchers get it so wrong? *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/admissions/traditional-age/2025/01/15/erroneous-data-showed-first-year-decline-it-actually>

Chronicle Staff. (2025, January 23). Enrollment passes pre-pandemic levels with first-year surge. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/admissions/traditional-age/2025/01/23/enrollment-passes-pre-pandemic-levels-first-year-surge>

Chronicle Staff. (2022, November 7). Modernizing enrollment management. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/reports/2022/11/07/modernizing-enrollment-management>

Chronicle Staff. (2024, November 3). 34th Annual Strategic Enrollment Management Conference. *AACRAO*. <https://www.aacrao.org/events-training/event/2024/11/03/default-calendar/34th-annual-strategic-enrollment-management-conference>

Grawe, N. D. (2018). *Demographics and the demand for higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Inside Higher Ed & Hanover Research. (2024). *The 2024 Survey of College and University Admissions Officers*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/booklet/2024-survey-college-and-university-admissions-officers>

Levine, A., & Van Pelt, J. (2021). *The great upheaval: Higher education's past, present, and uncertain future*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Matthews, D. (2023, October 10). Why small colleges are leaning harder on enrollment management. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-small-colleges-are-leaning-harder-on-enrollment-management>

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2024). *Current term enrollment estimates: Fall 2024*. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>

Taylor, P. (2023). Reinventing enrollment: Strategies for a changing landscape. *Education Review Quarterly*, 34(2), 25–40.

Enrollment Management Task Force. (2025). *BluePrint strategy, objective, action plans, and final recommendations* [Internal institutional document, 1–100 pages]. VCUQ.

Bios

GREET PROVOOST, M.Ed., is the Assistant Dean of Enrollment and Registration Services at Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar. Her major professional interests include international education, intentional enrollment management, global mobility, student services, and institutional sustainability. Email: glprovoost@vcu.edu

GEORGE BURKE III MPA (Retired) served for 30 years as Director of International Program Services at Cleveland State University, leading initiatives in recruitment, global program development, and student services. He is completing his role as International Recruitment Specialist at the *University at Albany, State University of New York, USA* and remains dedicated to advancing global education. Email: georgecburke@gmail.com

AMERICAN JOURNAL OF STEM EDUCATION

ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES

A multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal that publishes empirical research, reviews, and practitioner opinions related to issues and perspectives in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education.

VOLUME 16
2025



explore online editions at ojed.org/stem



Chapter Nine

A Niche in Transnational Higher Education: The Microcampus Model of the University of Arizona

YoungHoon Koh
The University of Arizona, USA

Yuhyun Park
Auburn University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the microcampus model of the University of Arizona in the U.S. as an innovative strategy in transnational higher education. In contrast to other nontraditional approaches, such as international branch campuses, the microcampus model provides affordable United States degrees through partnerships with foreign higher education institutions. Drawing on disruptive innovation theory and the blue ocean strategy in the business field, this chapter analyzes how microcampus expands access, reduces costs, and creates new value in the current transnational higher education landscape. The results suggest that the microcampus model provides a scalable alternative to conventional internationalization practices,

highlighting new pathways for higher education institutions to engage globally through equity-driven and market-disruptive innovations.

Keywords: dual degree; flipped classroom; international branch campus; internationalization; microcampus; online education; transnational higher education

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the internationalization of higher education has predominantly depended on the physical mobility of international students (de Wit & Altbach 2021; Knight, 2016). However, in the 1990s, several higher education institutions (HEIs) began crossing borders to supply their academic programs to students residing in foreign countries (Knight, 2016). International branch campuses exemplify such practices, which are operated entirely by or at least in partnership with foreign institutions (Becker, 2010). According to data compiled by the Cross-Border Education Research Team (2023), the number of international branch campuses worldwide reached 333 as of March 2023. Compared with that in September 2006 (Becker, 2010), the number for 2023 more than doubled, indicating that transnational higher education suppliers are increasing interest in international branch campuses. Similarly, other nontraditional strategies, including dual degree programs and online education, have also expanded over the last several decades (Knight, 2016).

Moreover, the growth of nontraditional internationalization strategies has faced significant challenges. As of 2023, 58 international branch campuses closed down (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2023), highlighting growing concerns regarding the sustainability of international branch campuses (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Altbach, 2010). Recent closures underscore these concerns. For example, Harrisburg University of Science and Technology closed its branch campuses in Panama and Dubai, reportedly due to financial instability and enrollment uncertainty, whereas Texas A&M University announced the closure of its Qatar campus amid geopolitical tensions (Moody, 2024). Similarly, dual degree programs, where students earn credentials from both participating institutions (Asgary & Robbert, 2010), have struggled with funding instability and sustainability issues (Kuder & Obst, 2009). Moreover, skepticism about online degrees has been one of the major factors hindering the expansion of transnational online higher education programs (Krusekopf, 2018).

While HEIs with experimental attempts have a tough game searching for the niche market in internationalization, it is worth noting the relatively recent and innovative model launched at the University of Arizona in the United States (U.S.): Microcampus. The microcampus model was developed on the basis of the failures of previous internationalization models, especially international branch campuses (Redden, 2017). As the model is represented as “a new model for transnational education” (White, 2017), the purpose of this book chapter is to examine how the microcampus model innovates in transnational higher education. Based on a combined framework derived from two lenses in the business field, disruptive innovation (Christensen et al., 2015) and the blue ocean strategy (Kim & Mauborgne, 2015), this book chapter analyzes the novel features of the microcampus model that led the University of Arizona to a niche in internationalization.

THE MICROCAMPUS MODEL

The microcampus model is a blended model of transnational higher education. Its initial structure was developed in a four-year model in which students enrolled in partner institutions take classes and pay tuition for partner institutions in the first half of their degree and take online lectures codesigned by Arizona and partner faculty in the second half of their degree (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Ghosh, 2018). In the second half, the Arizona faculty delivers online lectures, and the partner faculty helps students apply online lectures to local contexts, which is featured as a cotaught, flipped classroom modality (White, 2017). During this period, students are charged a premium on tuition while the tuition is shared by the University of Arizona and the partner institution. The specific tuition price for this period depends on negotiations with the University of Arizona, thereby varying by partner institution. However, an interview with the model’s founder revealed that students at a Cambodian partner university were charged \$9,000 for an academic year, which was significantly less than the \$32,900 that international students coming to Arizona paid in 2017 (Redden, 2017).

Advertised as “affordable, globally accessible and high-equality education” (White, 2017), the microcampus model has continuously evolved since its first launch in 2015. Currently, the model offers not only four-year programs but also two-year and three-year programs. Moreover, in several microcampus programs, cohorts enroll both at the University of Arizona and the partner institution for all four years or for just three years. Furthermore, the current microcampus model encompasses fully online and/or single-instructor teaching modalities, which are based on, but not limited to, financial and operational negotiations between institutions and requirements from higher education accreditors in both

countries. Given such a flexible structure made through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that equally reflects the interests of the two institutions, the microcampus model has substantially expanded. According to restricted data provided by the University of Arizona International, each year's new enrollment in the microcampus programs surged from 76 in 2015 to 1,090 in 2024. With annual new enrollment increasing nearly fourteenfold over a decade, the number of partner institutions also grew from one in 2015 to 14 in 2025, excluding three partnership terminations during this period. As of 2025, the University of Arizona maintains microcampus partnerships with 14 HEIs across multiple countries in Asia and Latin America, including Cambodia, Indonesia, Mexico, Kazakhstan, and Peru.

DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION AND BLUE OCEAN STRATEGY

Christensen et al. (2015) explain that disruptive innovation is a process in which smaller firms challenge industry incumbents by first targeting overlooked or new markets with simpler, more affordable offerings and then gradually moving up the market. Unlike sustaining innovations, which improve existing products for core customers, disruptive innovations begin as inferior alternatives and gain traction over time. Two pathways exist for disruptive innovation: low-end disruption, which targets overserved customers with decent products, and new-market disruption, which creates markets by serving nonconsumers. The authors warn of misuse of the term, such as labeling Uber disruptive despite its mainstream entry, which may dilute the theory's value.

On the other hand, the blue ocean strategy, developed by Kim and Mauborgne (2005), emphasizes creating an uncontested market space called 'blue oceans' rather than competing in saturated industries called 'red oceans.' The strategy's core concept is value innovation, which achieves both differentiation and low cost through four actions: eliminating factors that no longer add value to customers or that are outdated, reducing overdesigned features, raising quality to differentiate from competitors, and creating entirely new elements that the industry has never offered but that customers value. By challenging common assumptions and targeting noncustomers, firms can redefine market boundaries, align utility costs and prices, and make competition irrelevant.

Combining disruptive innovation and the blue ocean strategy offers a complementary analytical framework. While disruptive innovation targets overlook consumer groups by altering cost and access structures, the blue ocean strategy reflects how value is delivered together. Given that the internationalization practices of HEIs have become increasingly multipolar and

competitive (Glass & Cruz, 2023), this framework helps explore the emergence of innovative models that create a new market in internationalization, such as the microcampus model, which avoids engaging in zero-sum competition.

NEW MARKET DISRUPTION FOR BLUE OCEAN

Microcampus as an innovative model of transnational higher education, was analyzed through disruptive innovation theory (Christensen et al., 2015) and the four-action framework of the blue ocean strategy: eliminate, reduce, raise, and create (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). The analysis was grounded in the original structure of the microcampus model prior to its structural differentiation, as this chapter focuses on the core features that enabled the University of Arizona to position itself within the niche of transnational higher education. Table 1 shows the results of the analysis.

According to the analysis, first, the microcampus model targets nontraditional consumers in transnational higher education who cannot afford expensive tuition of foreign HEIs and/or international mobility. By embedding the delivery of a U.S. degree within local partner HEIs and removing the requirement of international travel, microcampus eliminates the conventional assumption that foreign degrees are exclusively for high-income students. This represents new-market disruption, one of the two pathways of disruptive innovation, making transnational higher education accessible to an entirely new segment: middle- and middle-low-income students.

Second, the microcampus model demonstrates cost efficiency and scalability via its MOU-based operational structure. Contract-based partnerships clarify the divided operational obligations between the University of Arizona and partner institutions. In addition, rather than investing massive capital in new infrastructure, the University of Arizona leverages partner-provided facilities to accommodate local students and uses its existing online learning management system (Desire2Learn; D2L) to support and supervise students' learning. This approach reduces both capital investment and operational complexity, thereby enhancing the model's scalability across regions with unmet demand for U.S. degrees if the interests between partnering entities align.

Third, the microcampus model creates new value in transnational higher education, which distinguishes it from other nontraditional internationalization practices, such as international branch campuses, dual degree programs, and online education. For example, compared with online degree programs, which often encounter skepticism regarding the credibility of their credentials

(Krusekopf, 2018), microcampus programs increase their degree of credibility through curricula codeveloped by faculty from both the University of Arizona and the partner institution. This collaborative design ensures that the curriculum responds to local industry needs while maintaining the academic standards of the University of Arizona, although instruction is delivered online. Therefore, the Arizona degree conferred through dual degree programs is assured to satisfy the equivalent standard as those awarded through in-person programs at the University of Arizona. While awarding credible U.S. credentials, the microcampus model also targets affordability. By employing the existing facilities of partner institutions, the model eliminates the need to establish a standalone physical branch campus, which reduces startup and operational costs. These cost savings enable lower tuition rates for students, enhancing access to U.S. degrees in underserved markets. In doing so, the University of Arizona avoids direct competition with other transnational higher education providers by positioning itself within a third-market niche.

Table 1: Results of the Microcampus Model Analysis

Dimension	Microcampus	Disruptive Innovation: New-Market Disruption	Blue Ocean Strategy
Target	Middle- or middle-low-income local students who cannot afford studying abroad	Traditional nonconsumers	Eliminate: The concept that foreign degrees are exorbitant and/or require to study abroad
Infrastructure	Partner universities provide facilities; Arizona uses its own online learning management system (D2L) and IT support	Minimizing capital investment that enables affordable offerings to students	Eliminate: Campus ownership Reducing: Required capital investment
Scalability	An MOU-based operational model	High scalability due to divided operational responsibilities and the demand for a U.S. degree	Reduce: Operational responsibility and complexity
Cost Structure	Low costs via shared facilities; administrative costs from the Arizona-side	Enabling low-cost entry and operational management	Reduce: Various costs of real estate, construction, student advising, etc.
Value Proposition	An affordable U.S. degree; codeveloped and localized curricula	Improving value for underserved markets in transnational higher education	Raise: Codeveloped localized curricula for credential credibility Create: An affordable U.S. degree
Market Positioning	An alternative model tailored to attract a new pool of students	Avoiding direct competition with existing transnational higher education suppliers	Create: A cotaught, flipped classroom modality-based dual degree model

Notes. The information was sourced from the microcampus website (<https://microcampus.arizona.edu>), news articles (Redden, 2017; White, 2017), and data provided by the University of Arizona International.

CONCLUSIONS

The University of Arizona's microcampus programs present a compelling model that creates a niche market in transnational higher education. Rather than replicating conventional internationalization strategies, especially international branch campuses, the microcampus model introduces a more accessible, scalable,

and cost-efficient pathway for HEIs seeking to engage in transnational education markets. Through the combined framework of disruptive innovation theory and the blue ocean strategy, this chapter demonstrates how the microcampus model eliminates structural barriers, reduces financial and operational burdens, enhances the quality and accessibility of transnational higher education, and fosters new forms of cross-border higher education partnerships.

In particular, the microcampus model's locally embedded and partnership-driven structure avoids the hierarchical dynamics frequently associated with the U.S.-centric transnational higher education landscape. As Lee (2021) noted, U.S. HEIs have benefitted from internationalization in ways that often reproduce global hierarchies and reinforce epistemic dominance. In contrast, the microcampus model offers a partial disruption to the current landscape. Its codeveloped curricula, shared teaching and operational responsibilities, and dual degree structures reflect a more reciprocal and context-sensitive form of partnership, as microcampus was expected to become a new platform for transnational higher education collaboration (White, 2017).

In an increasingly multipolar and competitive transnational higher education landscape (Glass & Cruz, 2023), the microcampus model exemplifies how HEIs might reshape their global presence through innovation, inclusion, and mutual benefit. It represents not only a novel internationalization strategy but also a reorganization of internationalization per se. As experimental attempts at internationalization evolve, the microcampus model offers a promising initiative for HEIs to participate in transnational higher education in a more equitable manner.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We want to express our gratitude to Dr. Jenny Lee and Katelyn Maragi for sharing data and insights and for their valuable feedback in reviewing this book chapter.

REFERENCES

Altbach, P. G. (2010, March 25). Why branch campuses may be unsustainable. *International Higher Education*, 58(Winter), 2–3. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2010.58.8467>

Altbach, P. G., & de Wit, H. (2020, April 14). Rethinking the relevance of international branch campuses. *International Higher Education*, 101(Spring), 14–16. <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ihe/article/view/14269>

Asgary, N., & Robbert, M. A. (2010). A cost–benefit analysis of an international dual degree programme. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 32(3), 317–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600801003743513>

Becker, R. (2010, March 25). International branch campuses: New trends and directions. *International Higher Education*, 58(Winter), 3–5. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2010.58.8464>

Castiello-Gutiérrez, S., & Ghosh, S. (2018). The international micro-campus: An evolution to transnational education models. In L. E. Rumbley & H. de Wit (Eds.), *CIHES Perspectives No. 11* (pp. 13–15). Boston College Center for International Higher Education. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep39587.8>

Christensen, C. M., Raynor, M., & McDonald, R. (2015). What is disruptive innovation? *Harvard Business Review*, 93(12), 44–53. <https://hbr.org/2015/12/what-is-disruptive-innovation>

Cross-Border Education Research Team. (2023, March). *C-BERT international campus listing* [Data originally collected by Kevin Kinser and Jason E. Lane]. <http://cbert.org/intl-campus/>

Glass, C. R., & Cruz, N. I. (2023). Moving towards multipolarity: Shifts in the core–periphery structure of international student mobility and world rankings (2000–2019). *Higher Education*, 85(2), 415–435. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00841-9>

Healey, N. (2015). Managing international branch campuses: What do we know? *Higher Education Quarterly*, 69(4), 386–409. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12082>

Kim, W. C., & Mauborgne, R. (2005). *Blue ocean strategy: How to create uncontested market space and make the competition irrelevant*. Harvard Business School Press.

Krusekopf, C. (2018). Internationalisation of online learning: A double degree model. In A. Altmann, B. Ebersberger, C. Mössenlechner, & D. Wieser (Eds.), *The disruptive power of online education: Challenges, opportunities, responses* (pp. 63–80). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Kuder, M., & Obst, D. (2009). *Joint and double degree programs in the transatlantic context: A survey report*. Institute of International Education. <https://www.iie.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Joint-Degree-Survey-Report-2009.pdf>

Lee, J. J. (2021). *U.S. power in international higher education*. Rutgers University Press.

Moody, J. (2024, August 6). Harrisburg University abruptly closes international campuses. *Inside Higher Education*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/cost-cutting/2024/08/06/harrisburg-university-abruptly-closes-international-campuses>

Redden, E. (2017, May 22). Going big into ‘Microcampuses’. *Inside Higher Education*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/05/23/arizona-embarks-plan-develop-25-global-microcampuses>

White, B. (2017, May 26). Are micro-campuses a new model for international HE? <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php>

Wilkins, S. (2021). Two decades of international branch campus development, 2000–2020: A review. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 35(1), 311–326. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-08-2020-0409>

Bios

YOUNGHOON KOH, MA, is a PhD candidate in the Higher Education Program at the University of Arizona, USA. His major research interests include organizational dynamics and leadership in higher education, higher education internationalization, and higher education policy and finance. Email: yhkoh@arizona.edu

YUHYUN PARK, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling within the College of Education at Auburn University, USA. His primary research interests include substance use disorder treatment, career development and counseling, counselor education and supervision, and the experiences of marginalized populations in higher education. Email: yzp0037@auburn.edu

STARSCSCHOLARS
NETWORK

Plan. Produce. Publish.

RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

WHO SHOULD APPLY:

Faculty members and students seeking structured, hands-on mentorship in academic research, writing, and publication.



PUBLICATION OPPORTUNITIES INCLUDE:

- Peer-reviewed journals
- Academic book series
- Special collections on global education, equity, and STEM innovation

IDEAL FOR:

Scholars recommended by Deans, faculty advisors, or program directors.

WHAT YOU'LL GAIN:

- COMPLETE A MANUSCRIPT**
Draft ready for journal or book submission
- COLLABORATE ON RESEARCH**
Contribute to a peer-reviewed team project.
- MASTER AI WRITING SKILLS**
Use AI tools ethically for academic writing and publishing.
- JOIN EDITORIAL TEAM**
Be selected for reviewer or editor role.
- EARN CERTIFICATE**
Receive recognition for your research training.
- CONNECT GLOBALLY**
Engage with 20,000+ scholars in 100+ countries



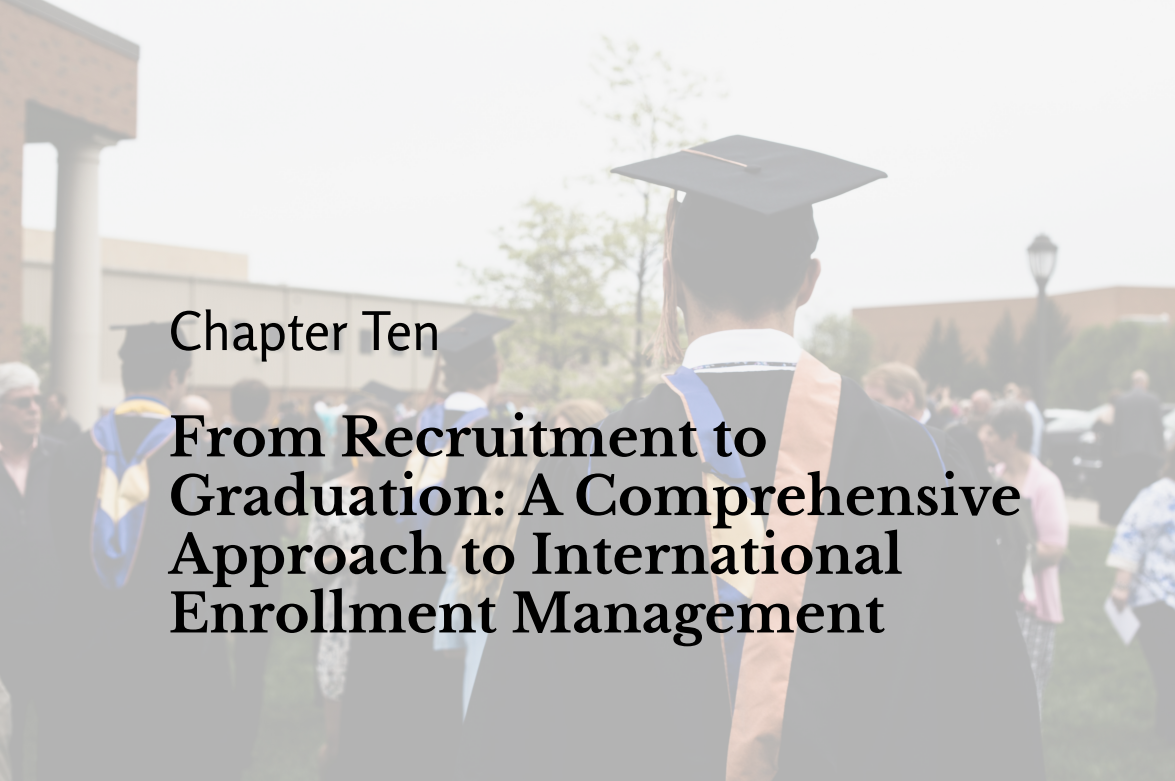
(410) 449-4489



research@starscholars.org



<https://starscholars.org/rfp/>



Chapter Ten

From Recruitment to Graduation: A Comprehensive Approach to International Enrollment Management

Patricee Campbell-Palmer
University of Louisville, United States

Marty Bennett
University of Akron, United States

Megan Mankerian-Stem
Global Leaders Collective, United States

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of international enrollment management (IEM) in addressing challenges faced by U.S. universities, such as budget constraints and shifting demographics. International students play a vital role in enriching campus culture and fostering global competence. It emphasizes the need for a sustainable and scalable, data-driven strategy for recruitment and admissions that is aligned with institutional goals. The article highlights the importance of proactive recruitment, clear growth expectations, and strong transitional services. It explores international students' first-semester experiences, stressing the value of welcoming services, knowledgeable staff, and a balance between pastoral care and immigration

compliance. The article concludes by advocating for a holistic approach that fosters a sense of belonging, ensuring international students' academic and social success.

Keywords: enrollment management, international recruitment, internationalization, strategic planning

INTRODUCTION

The current U.S. administration seems intent on implementing a chaos theory approach to governance—radically reshaping the bureaucracy in the federal government. As a result, the international education profession has experienced a third period of mass disruption in the last quarter century, namely, Post-9/11, COVID-19, and today. With the seeds of uncertainty associated with SEVIS statuses, threats to institutions' ability to enroll international students, visa revocations, visa appointment shortages and delays, dramatic restructuring of the State Department, and travel bans for several countries, the disruptive impact on U.S. institutions is undeniable (Nair, 2025; Study Travel Network, 2025).

One must consider the broader context happening worldwide when looking at how domestic enrollment cliffs, government policy changes, and decreasing university budgets impact why institutions look to maintain or increase their international student enrollment. With nearly seven million students studying outside their home countries in 2024 and the projected volume to increase to over ten million by 2030, opportunities to enroll international students will increase (Goodman & Martel, 2024). In this context, US institutions need a full lifecycle approach from initial prospects to successful alums that are embraced by senior leaders and involve key offices across campuses to enhance international student success. When colleges begin with the end in mind—graduating well-equipped students and working backward through the international student journey—they can implement a scalable and sustainable plan.

IEM STRATEGIC PLANNING

Building a strategic plan requires understanding data points related to student mobility, current trends in international recruitment, and global political and economic factors. Using internal institutional data helps in understanding where current markets exist, although it only tells a part of the story. Institutional data must be paired with external sources, such as Open Doors Reports, to make data-informed decisions—keeping in mind that every country and region needs its own recruitment strategy. For example, many institutions have seen an increase

in applications from Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa but lower enrollment rates than other regions. Some factors include a more aggressive agent structure in these markets, as well as socioeconomic shifts, such as a growing middle class.

Building a strategic plan that includes recruitment from countries that have a history of strong enrollments, along with those that are developing, is important given the ebbs and flows in student mobility. For example, in the mid-2010s, many institutions built budgets around the increase in sponsored student enrollment from the Gulf region; however, a change in government policy drastically decreased enrollment within a few years (Redden, 2016). The decline affected English language programs and undergraduate enrollment numbers, which relied heavily on that population.

All strategic plans require long-term commitment of an institution. A university cannot travel to one country or region once and expects to see immediate growth. Rather, building a multi-year strategy that allows for continuous engagement (in person, armchair, agent, partner, etc.) helps to build brand recognition—necessary for long-term success. The plan should include intentional on-campus support. This includes but is not limited to the creation of an international retention committee composed of key academic and service units, international faculty and international student leaders to provide ample opportunities for cross-cultural training and collaborative efforts to support retention and early action. Part of what we take for granted at U.S. colleges is how significant the campus experience is for international students in their development into adults and contributing members of society (Helms & Spreitzer, 2022).

ADMISSIONS OPERATIONS AND THE APPLICATION PROCESS

One strategy for increasing international student enrollment is the internationalization of the application process. This starts from the application itself—ensuring that the terminology used and expectations are clear to nonnative English speakers. This can be accomplished by inviting current international students from different regions to review applications and communication, as well as receiving feedback on their admissions journey. CRMs such as Slate can also help manage different aspects of the journey by segmenting application processes and communications.

Another strategy includes training internal admissions staff, especially those in document processing. Some examples of processing points that can be updated and streamlined include the following:

- Waiving English language proficiency exams:
 - Ensuring that the list of countries is consistent with that of peer institutions
 - Consider exceptions for students studying in the IB program or Cambridge A-Level program
 - Using internal rules and settings within an application system or CRM to streamline the process
- Transcripts:
 - Understanding expectations of predicted grades for the final year
 - Understanding the terminology used to collect all years of secondary or high school, such as score cards and internal grades, for transcripts and being familiar with educational ladders by region or country.
- Letters of recommendation:
 - Expectations for secondary schools that do not have a college counselor, such as allowing a letter from a teacher or principal.

RECRUITMENT

There cannot be a one-size fits all with international student recruitment. Universities must understand that a mixed approach may be necessary and should vary on the basis of each region's expectations and needs.

- **In-person recruitment** remains the most productive approach for recruiting international students. Universities must consider the types of students (undergraduate or graduate) to determine the type of recruitment on the ground. Many organizations offer recruitment activities, such as public fairs and recruitment tours, in most regions.
- **Virtual recruitment** is easier and less expensive than international travel; however, this is an area where it is important to be creative. The data show that doing sessions on important topics or programs instead of sessions that focus on the institution as a whole results in better engagement. Additionally, high school students, for example, have tuned out most virtual activities.

- **Agents** remain popular in some regions of the world, so finding quality partners can be a great way to build a presence and brand recognition. However, a successful agent partnership requires visiting, training, and supporting the partnership in person.
- **Digital marketing** can be used to build a digital presence in markets of interest. This includes testing new markets or building a stronger brand name in markets you may already be developing.
- **Annual conferences** offer a great opportunity to ensure professional development and ways to stay updated on trends in various markets, as well as building brand recognition with key stakeholders, including high school counselors, independent college counselors, agents, and government organizations.

PREARRIVAL SUPPORT

Effective prearrival support is essential to help students feel confident in their decision to study in the United States. One of the most impactful strategies in this regard is the implementation of effective prearrival communication. Melt campaigns, for example, aim to educate students about university resources, the steps to prepare for their travel, and the intricacies of preparing for their visa appointments. Not only do these campaigns help reduce anxiety, but they also reassure students that they have made the right choice by choosing to study at a particular institution.

Additionally, universities can offer airport arrival services where students are welcomed and introduced to key staff or a vetted volunteer upon arrival. An essential aspect of this initial contact is the first impression international students obtain when they arrive in the U.S. or on campus. Are they welcomed with open arms, or do they feel like a burden? Research has shown that students who feel welcomed and supported during their initial campus interactions are more likely to succeed academically and socially (Johnson, Seifen-Adkins, Sandhu, Arbles, & Makino, 2018).

COMPREHENSIVE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ORIENTATION AND SUPPORT

International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) offices play a crucial role in shaping the experience of international students. Creating a welcoming and supportive environment is essential to fostering international student success. Importantly, international students' needs evolve throughout their academic

journeys. At various stages—such as orientation, mid-program, or nearing graduation—the type of support they require may differ. Understanding this dynamic is key to providing effective services.

While a one-day mandatory orientation is a common practice for international students, it is often insufficient. Given the extensive travel and potential jet lag, students may struggle to absorb all the information presented in a short period of time. To complement in-person orientation, universities can explore digital platforms and resources that provide ongoing virtual support for international students. For example, platforms such as WeChat, WhatsApp or university apps can facilitate easy access to campus services, visa-related updates, and social events, allowing students to engage with the university community before and after their arrival (Prior, Carpenter, & Januszak, 2022; Cipolletta, Tedoldi, & Tomaino, 2024).

Another valuable option is the development of first-year experience (FYE) courses tailored specifically to international students. These courses could span from a few weeks to a full semester or year, giving students a deeper understanding of the services available to them. Incorporating international student-specific content into FYE courses ensures that students feel integrated into the community from day one while also fostering a deeper connection to the ISSS office's resources (Yan & Sendall, 2016). Another option would be the implementation of support programs geared toward international graduate students, athletes or transfers, who often face unique challenges throughout their student journey.

THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN PASTORAL CARE AND IMMIGRATION COMPLIANCE

International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) offices are required to maintain accurate records for students in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), which tracks vital immigration data. Failure to comply with SEVIS regulations can result in severe consequences for institutions, including a loss of ability to host international students. This underscores the importance of understanding the balance between fulfilling legal obligations and providing meaningful pastoral care.

Designated School Officials (DSOs), who often play the role of international student advisors, are also responsible for ensuring that students not only comply with visa regulations but are also supported in understanding these regulations (Crumley-Effinger, 2023). Advisors need to be well versed in the intricacies of the SEVP system and possess the empathy required to guide students during their

academic careers. One example of this balance is providing proactive workshops on immigration status maintenance while simultaneously offering a space where students feel safe in expressing concerns about their experiences and challenges in the U.S. (Veerasingam & Ammigan, 2021).

INTERNATIONALIZING CAMPUS SERVICES BEYOND ISSS

Typically, Admissions and ISSS offices are most directly invested in the academic and social success of international students. However, these two departments cannot be the only ones with that responsibility. Bennett (2024) summarized how a campus-wide approach to international enrollment management is important and how important various constituencies can be to help drive overall enrollment, retention, and graduation of successful international alumni.

The final two stages of the international student journey on campus are the most critical but are most often ignored. Career services and alumni relations are where campus efforts are fully realized or fall apart for international students at the end of their career (NAFSA, n.d.). Institutions can take the extra step to implement specific resources available to address their unique needs, including tracking employers participating in campus jobs or internship fairs who are open to hiring students on OPT and H1B visas or tagging jobs in their databases that are open to this population. For students choosing to return home (or to a third country), institutions should work to provide some support to help them make the best transition.

Leveraging current international students and alumni stories back into the recruitment process is where truly strategic colleges often maximize their efforts (Full Fabric, 2025). Being an alum of a U.S. college is something that most domestic students understand and value. The concept is, however, foreign to international students. Oftentimes, alumni affairs offices on campuses do not begin communicating value until the end of the student journey, and some do not even bother tracking international alumni. Ideally, when career service teams begin working with international students, connecting them with alumni networks in the target cities or countries helps build a lifelong bond with the institution before they graduate.

CONCLUSION

To ensure success, international enrollment must account for global trends, shifting student motivations, and geopolitical realities that influence student mobility. International recruitment relies heavily on relationship building, and universities must be creative in how they engage students and their families.

Strategy should not end when the university obtains the deposit or commitment of the student but rather must also include support through arrival and transition to campus and beyond. All the best plans for recruitment and enrollment are meaningless if students arrive on campus and do not have positive experiences. While academic success is often why students come, fostering a sense of belonging matters most for students who are thousands of miles from their social safety net. Aligning programs and services, defining how campuses approach international students, and implementing robust cross-cultural training/education of units are highly important. When all parts of the international student journey are aligned, true strategic international enrollment management planning can begin.

REFERENCES

- Al Juboori, R., Barker, D., & Kim, Y. J. (2025). Predictors of academic adjustment among international students in rural southern USA. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *22*(2), 253. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph22020253>
- Bennett, M. (2024). The 6 Ps of strategic international enrollment management: A vision-driven approach to global student mobility. In J. L. Luan, D. Habte, D. Di Maria, & K. Bista (Eds.), *Entry points to US education: Accessing the next wave of growth* (pp. 214–232). STAR Scholars Press. <https://doi.org/10.32674/gpwwq677>
- Cipolletta, S., Tedoldi, I., & Tomaino, S. C. M. (2024). A blended group intervention to promote social connectedness and wellbeing among international university students: An exploratory study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *15*, 1497544. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1497544>
- Crumley-Effinger, M. (2023). SEVIS, surveillance, and international students: New avenues for international education surveillance studies. *Journal of International Students*, *13*(2), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v13i2.5291>
- Full Fabric. (2025, March 28). From alumni to ambassadors: How universities can leverage global graduates to boost international student recruitment. <https://www.fullfabric.com/resources/from-alumni-to-ambassadors-how-universities-can-leverage-global-graduates-to-boost-international-student-recruitment>
- Goodman, A. E., & Martel, M. (2024, March). *Outlook 2030: The U.S. and international education*. Institute of International Education.

https://www.iie.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IIE_Outlook-2030_March-2024.pdf

Helms, R. M., & Spreitzer, S. (2022). *International student inclusion and success: Public attitudes, policy imperatives, and practical strategies*.
<https://www.acenet.edu/Research-and-Publications/Pages/ACE-Issues-Brief.aspx>

Johnson, L. R., Seifen-Adkins, T., Sandhu, D. S., Arbles, N., & Makino, H. (2018). Developing culturally responsive programs to promote international student adjustment: A participatory approach. *Journal of International Students*, 8(4), 1865–1878. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i4.235>

NAFSA. (n.d.). *Helping international students navigate career options*.
<https://www.nafsa.org/professional-resources/publications/helping-international-students-navigate-career-options>

Nair, A. (2025, March 17). Price sensitivity and regional options test UK's East Asian enrollment. *The PIE News*. <https://thepienews.com/price-sensitivity-and-regional-options-test-uks-east-asian-enrolment/>

Prior, D., Carpenter, J., & Januszak, S. (2022). Current interventions for the digital onboarding of first-year students in higher education institutions: A scoping review. *Education Sciences*, 12(8), 551. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12080551>

Redden, E. (2016, February 25). Will U.S. colleges and universities see decline in Saudi-funded students?
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/02/25/will-us-colleges-and-universities-see-decline-saudi-funded-students>

StudyTravel Network. (2025, June 1). StudyTravel Network magazine news 31273. *StudyTravel Network*.
<https://studytravel.network/magazine/news/0/31273>

Veerasamy, Y. S., & Ammigan, R. (2021). Reimagining the delivery of international student services during a global pandemic: A case study in the United States. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 26(2), 145–164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153211031652>

Yan, Z., & Sendall, P. (2016). First year experience: How we can better assist first-year international students in higher education. *Journal of International Students*, 6(1), 35–51. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i1.395>

Bios

Patricee Campbell-Palmer, Ed.D. is a scholar-practitioner at the University of Louisville. Her research interests include strategic enrollment management and integrative support and programming for international students. Email: p0camp03@louisville.edu

Marty Bennett, MA, currently serves as director of recruitment and engagement at the University of Akron but has spent his entire 32-year professional career in international education. Email: mbennett@uakron.edu

Megan Mankerian-Stem, MS, is the founder and executive director of the Global Leaders Collective. She has worked with several universities on international admissions, recruitment and enrollment management during her 14-year tenure. Email: megan@glcollective.co

“A compelling framework that transforms international enrollment from a complex challenge into a strategic opportunity for global academic excellence.”

Thomas Tinnefeld, PhD, Saarland University of Applied Sciences, Germany

A valuable resource for higher education administrators and scholars.

John D Branch, PhD, EdD, University of Michigan, USA

An essential resource offering innovative strategies and crucial insights for education leaders navigating international enrollment in today's rapidly evolving global landscape.

Chunipha Poedloknimit, PhD, Western University, Thailand

A rich collection of perspectives that deepens our understanding of how to create supportive and globally connected learning environments for international students.

Lu Lu, PhD, Beijing Language and Culture University, China

In a rapidly changing world, Navigating the Future of International Enrollment offers both clarity and vision for building more inclusive, resilient, and globally engaged campuses.

Thatcher A. Spero, PhD, Musashino University, Japan

With clarity and vision, the authors provide timely strategies that will guide institutions in navigating the evolving global enrollment landscape and highlight the central role of student success and well-being.

Praveen Kumar Rudra, PhD, University of Nebraska at Omaha, USA

A thought-provoking volume that empowers education leaders to embrace diversity and innovation in global enrollment strategies.

Sirirat Na Ranong, PhD, Thammasat University, Thailand

STAR Scholars titles are also available as e-books.
Cover design by Intead.com

