Student Feedback Guides International Initiatives

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According to the 2013 Open Doors report, the University of Illinois ranked third in the United States for the number of international students and ranked first among public institutions enrolling 10,800 international students. Illinois has always enrolled a large number of international graduate students, but in 2005, the number of international undergraduates began to grow significantly. In 2011, the number of international undergraduates at Illinois surpassed the number of international graduate students.

In 2013, the student affairs division at the University of Illinois conducted focus groups to better understand the experiences and challenges inside and outside of the classroom for international undergraduate students and to identify areas for improvement. Researchers conducted 13 focus groups, including 95 students representing 20 countries and a variety of majors, colleges, and class standings. For the most part, the focus groups were conducted in English, but native languages were used to allow international students to best express their opinions. The study produced more than 200 pages of transcripts with the following key findings.

International students are overwhelmed when they arrive on campus. For most international freshmen, the day they arrive on campus to begin classes is the very first time they step foot on campus. For domestic freshmen, navigating various offices on a large campus to complete the initial check-in, registering, settling into the residence halls, finding the bus route to classes, and managing daily needs are tremendous challenges. But international students often have additional concerns such as language barriers, jet lag, and little knowledge of U.S. higher education.

The services provided through residential life are critical in supporting international students’ transition to U.S. college life, and resident advisors play a vital role in extending that support. International students in the residence halls at Illinois reported mostly positive experiences, and many of them believe this experience was key in helping them connect to American culture. They truly appreciated resident advisors’ efforts to provide programs that create a more inclusive experience in the residence halls. International students living in the residence hall in the Global Cross-Road Community, a living learning community with an equal ratio of international students and domestic students, were particularly pleased with their interactions with domestic students and their immersion into American culture.

Food offerings that reflect the cultural diversity of students are essential. Food is a part of individual cultural identity, tradition, and family ties. It is understandable that food becomes an important part of international students’ experience at a university. Discussions in most focus groups, ranging from the quality of cooking to lack of cultural awareness about food offerings, included critical comments from students.

Social life is generally satisfactory, but social segregation is a common concern among international students. The majority of participants were pleased with their social life on campus, but getting to know domestic students was often difficult. They attributed those difficulties to cultural differences and language barriers. Some international students characterized the social life of American students as part of the “alcohol and hook-up culture on campus,” and they preferred to engage in other activities, including sports. In every focus group conducted, students cited the segregated nature of campus. However, many international students acknowledged the role they played in patterns of self-segregation, tending to socialize and live with students from their home countries.

International students appreciate the academic reputation of the University of Illinois, but often struggle in the classroom their first year on campus. The U.S. system of higher education differs from that of other countries in a variety of ways, including educational philosophy, pedagogical approaches, and learning focused on independent thinking. Students reported that their language skills made it difficult to fully express their perspectives and indicated that they learn much better in small classes through greater interaction with peers and faculty members.

A Strategic Response
The focus groups gave international students an opportunity to describe issues in their own words. Their feedback aligned with many areas of concern identified by university faculty and staff who work with international students. A sampling of strategies that have been employed to assist in the transition and help international students achieve success follows.

Transition to Campus Life
In 2014, the university’s student affairs division collaborated with academic affairs and student organizations to conduct in-country orientation programs in both China and South Korea. The programs gave incoming students and their parents a glimpse of campus life, residential life, campus resources, and
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academic advising. To make the first trip to campus as easy as possible, international students could register online for a university-provided bus service to transport them from O'Hare Airport in Chicago to campus residence halls.

On campus, the New Student Programs area worked closely with International Student and Scholar Services to create a well-structured orientation program to minimize the loneliness that many international students may feel and to help them complete the necessary tasks associated with matriculation. International student orientation leaders were hired and trained to introduce international freshman to campus resources and to eliminate student anxiety in navigating the transition to campus.

Campus Crisis
Working collaboratively across units and engaging the input of highly skilled counselors, housing staff, and deans of students has proven highly effective in crisis situations with both U.S. and international students. A highly skilled and knowledgeable team, including members who have strong cultural competency skills, is critical to success. Increased multilingual resources across the student affairs division have been invaluable to the university, particularly in emergencies and circumstances in which the local consulate office, parents, or other family members must be involved.

Staff Development and Hiring
Student affairs units are being encouraged to hire staff members with strong international knowledge and competencies, including language skills and cultural knowledge. The counseling center, health center, office of intercultural relations, the student union, and other units are experiencing success in this endeavor. Efforts are also underway to hire international students in student affairs units to assist in their own transition and integration on campus as well as to help the burgeoning number of international students.

Student affairs staff members have responded positively to staff development programs focused on understanding and effectively working with international students. Another form of professional development is promoting opportunities for administrators to experience and interact with students, parents, foreign delegations, and diplomats. The campus routinely hosts international delegations and embassy diplomatic visits. Student affairs department directors are often invited to meet and to discuss exchange experiences and knowledge about higher education and student life issues. The student affairs division is also working to form international partnerships and create an exchange program to give staff members immersion experiences at international universities.

Social Integration
Successfully integrating international and U.S. students continues to be a challenge, particularly when there are so many students from one particular country. The nearly 5,000 Chinese students on the Illinois campus, for example, are able to socialize among themselves and, to some extent, avoid the language and cultural barriers. Encouraging U.S. students to choose international students as roommates and supporting that relationship in a variety of ways is one integration strategy. Linking U.S. and international student organizations toward a common goal, such as a service project, is another approach. Campus cultural centers invite international students to join and plan activities to teach students about international cultures and traditions. Two positions, one in the student affairs office of intercultural relations and another in academic affairs, have been created to address social integration. A mentoring program for international students that originated in the counseling center matches students with faculty, staff, or peers.

Creating a Multicultural Environment
Promoting collaborations across student affairs and academic affairs, listening closely to international students’ experiences and opinions, hiring full-time and part-time international staff, creating special programs for international students’ needs, and focusing staff development programs on the needs of international students are all viable strategies at the University of Illinois. Since the university has many years of experience with international graduate students, staff members are starting to use the alumni network to better serve students on campus. It is a multifaceted and campus-wide approach that requires a level of coordination that is not always a strong suit for a large, comprehensive university such as Illinois. Our goal of achieving a global educational environment in the corn fields of Illinois is motivating our continual efforts to succeed.

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