

**IMPROVING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT  
DIVERSITY IN PENNSYLVANIA STATE  
SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITIES**

**June 2023**

# Contents

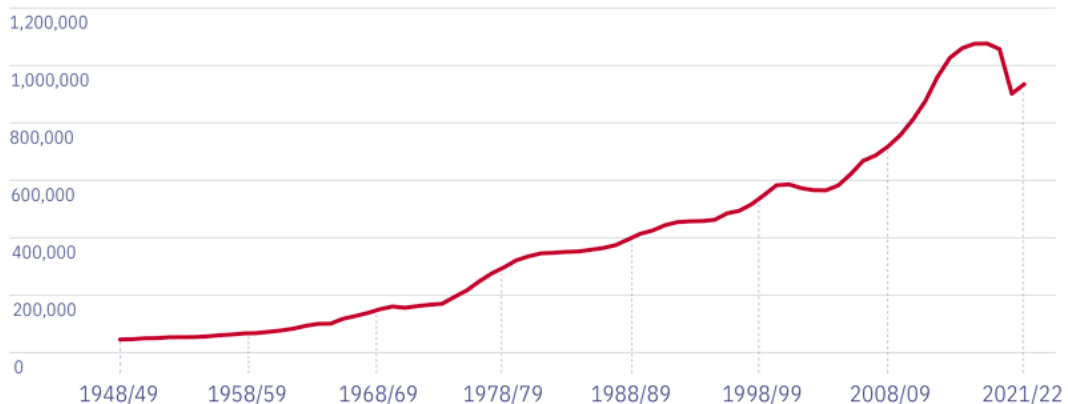
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## INTRODUCTION

The United States has historically been a top destination for international students, with the U.S hosting a larger majority of the global international student population at 1,075,496 students. This is twice the figure of the next popular destination of international students- United Kingdom, which had an enrollment figure of 551,495 in 2021 (Statista, 2022). Other top destination countries for international student are Canada, Australia, Germany, and Singapore.

There had been a steady increase in the number of international students enrolled in the United States over the last decade (figure 1) until 2019/2020 session when the COVID- 19 pandemic resulted in a 15% drop in the number of international students from the 1,075,496 students in 2018/19 to 914,095 in 2020 (Institute of International Education, 2022).

### INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, 1948/49 – 2021/22



(Source: NAFSA 2022)

**Figure 1: International Student Enrollments between 1948 -2021**

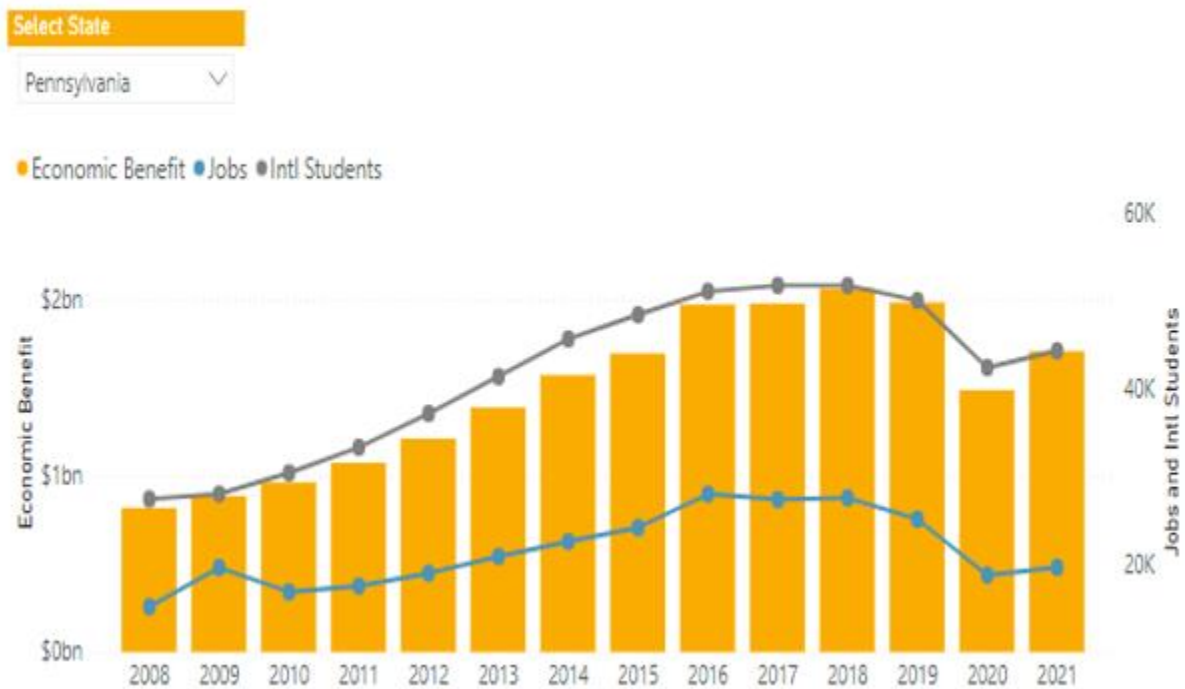
However there has been a rebound to pre-pandemic levels since the easing of travel restrictions and the shift back to in-person programs from the online programs that was occasioned by the

pandemic. The total number of international students in the United States with active SEVIS records for F-1 and M1 status was 1,362,157 in calendar year 2022, which represented an increase of 10.1 percent from calendar year 2021 (Department of homeland security, 2023).

In addition to competing with institutions outside the United States for a share of global international enrollments, there is stiff competition amongst Universities in the United States, leading to different innovative strategies to attract international students to various Universities. The significance of having international students to facilitate a robust academic environment in a multi-cultural setting appears a major drive-in recruitment. There are more than 4,000 higher education institutions in the U.S.; however, half of all international students in the U.S. are enrolled in only 100 universities (Institute of International Education, 2022). There have been several documented benefits that international students bring to their host universities and community at large, Hence the need to examine these factors and adapt documented strategies employed to our peculiar circumstances within the state system.

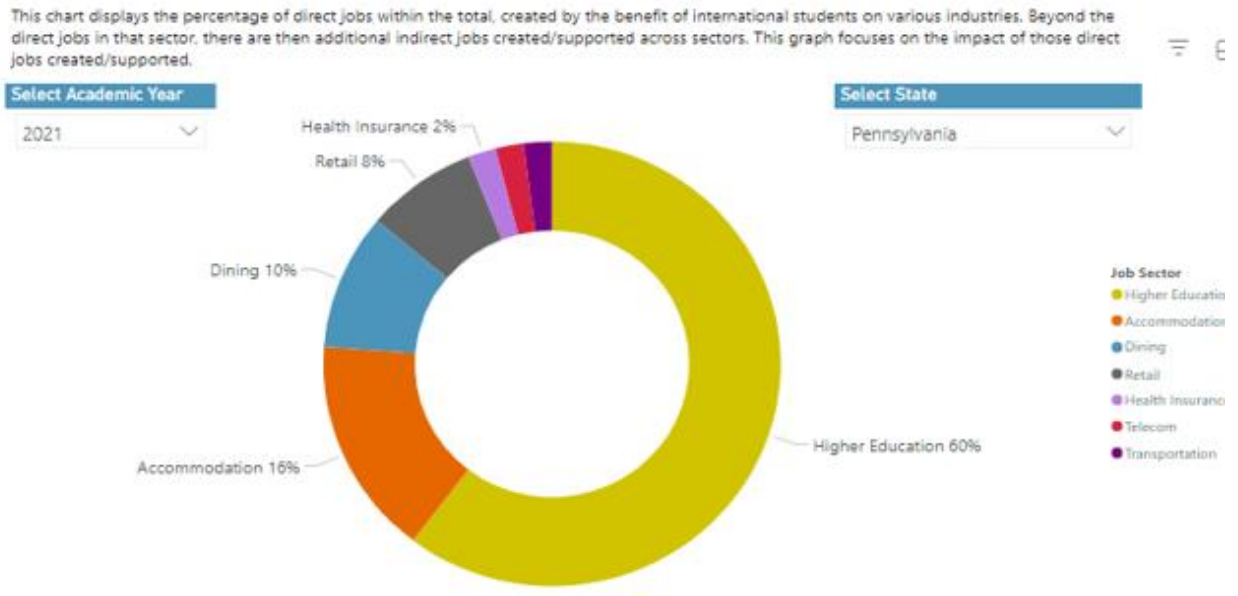
## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to statistics from 2021/2022 statistics from the Association of International Educators (NAFSA) economic value estimator, international students contributed 33.8 billion dollars to the United States economy, and 335,423 jobs were created and supported by their presence – thus for every 3 international students, 1 job was being created (Association of International Educators, 2022). In the commonwealth of Pennsylvania 1.7 billion dollars was brought in from the 44,370 students enrolled in the higher education institutions within the state, with an additional 19,635 jobs created (Fig 2&3). The leading institutions with these enrollments were Penn State University, University of Pennsylvania, and Carnegie Mellon University (Association of International Educators, 2022).



Source: NAFSA 2022

**Figure 2:** The Economic Benefit of International Student Enrollment to Pennsylvania



Source: NAFSA 2022

**Figure 3:** Percentage of Pennsylvania Direct Jobs Created because of Spending in Various Industry Sectors.

In the current environment of reduced public budgeting on education, some institutions have turned to the global international education market to seek self-funded students who also serve as a ready pool of talent to make academic and cultural contributions to the various campuses (Andrade, 2009). The rising cost of private education in the United States has not only made it important but imperative to seek out international students to fill in certain programs with poor domestic student enrollment (Hegarty, 2014). This is critical for the continued existence of the programs and mitigates the potential job losses that may occur from the extinction of these programs. In addition, the potential to cover budget deficits has led to some institutions seeking out international tuition payers to offset the balance. Institutions with less global visibility or not so appealing geographical locations have partnered with third party agencies which not only facilitates the recruitment process, but also brings to speed prospective applicants with the necessary toll for success in university life, most notably were the

Intensive English Programs (IEPs) which grew by 145 percent to accommodate 133,355 students (Choudaha, 2017).

In a study by Chellaraj et al in 2008, larger enrollment of international graduate students as a proportion of the total graduate students resulted in significant increases in total patents awarded to university and non-university institutions. It was noted that a 10% increase in international enrollments was significantly correlated with a 4.5% increase in patent application (Chellaraj et al., 2008). This underscores the important contributions of international graduate students to innovation, especially in the field of Science, Technology, Engineering, and mathematics (STEM). This probably informed the decision of Homeland security to extend the traditional 1-year post graduation Optional practical Training for an additional two years for the STEM international students when compared with non-STEM courses.

The diversity of thought that international students bring to our universities is quite important. International students who have been educated and raised in social and cultural contexts different from their host country serve as a rich resource for knowledge sharing and diverse perspectives to academic engagement in the university. This effect goes beyond the classroom as domestic students get to interact and experience a different culture which they could have hitherto not been exposed to had this opportunity not been afforded (Choudaha & Chang, 2012; Naidoo, 2021). In view of the multicultural nature of the United States, it is imperative for domestic students to achieve cultural competency and humility which will be encountered in the workplace post-graduation and to become global citizens. This interaction between domestic and international students would not only lead to a deeper understanding of each other cultures but also facilitate network building for exchange of information and ideas and support in the future (Andrade, 2009; Grayson, 2008).

Several universities have developed voluntary peer pairing programs in which domestic students who desire closer interaction with an international student are paired and the effect of these programs has been beneficial to both parties (Summers & Volet, 2008). For the international students, social adjustment is easier when compared with non-participating international students (Abe et al., 1998). In addition, Westwood et al noted that international students who participated in these pairing programs also achieved higher educational performance and retention rates (Westwood & Barker, 1990). For the domestic students, increased cultural sensitivity and language adaptability skills which is a critical skill on entering the general population workforce which many at times consist of various persons from different cultural background (Montgomery, 2009). This will be a skillset domestic students need for success over the course of their career in addition to being global citizens. Also, Cheney in her work also noted that these developed international friendships can serve as a valuable source of social, political, cultural and economic knowledge for the domestic students when they enter the workforce (Valentine & Cheney, 2001).

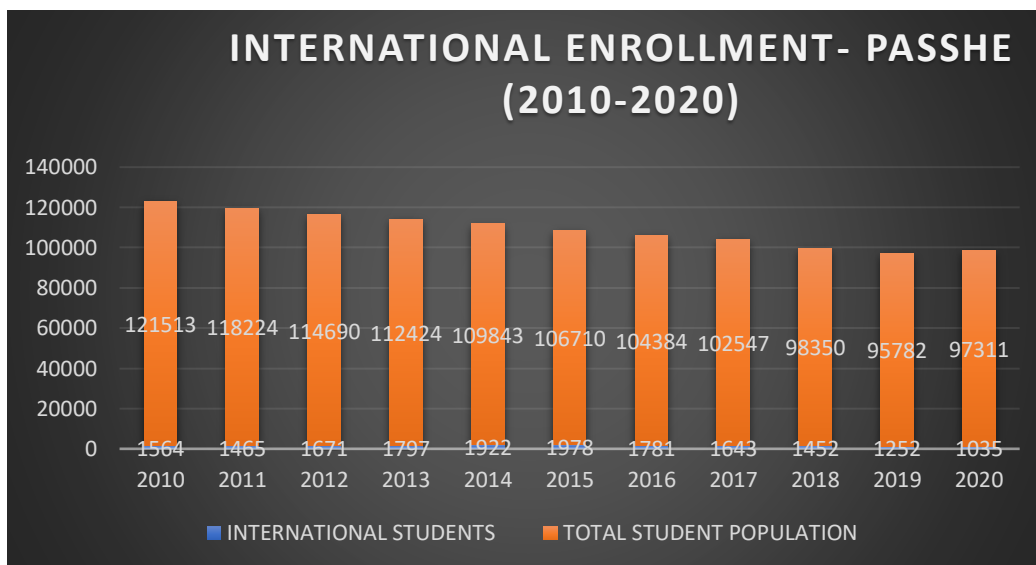
In view of the mentioned advantages of having international student diversity in our university to the international students, domestic students, university, and local economy. It is not only critical but imperative to look beyond enrollment but interrogate the factors that would make the experience the students have on our campuses positive by showing the necessary commitment to the support to these peculiar population of students rather than transactional perspective. Many University leaders have made international student recruitment a top priority given the benefits but have lagged in offering the commensurate supporting services framework that is required for them to have as most positive experience as possible (Marklein,2021).



## INTERNATIONAL ENROLLMENT HISTORY IN PASSHE

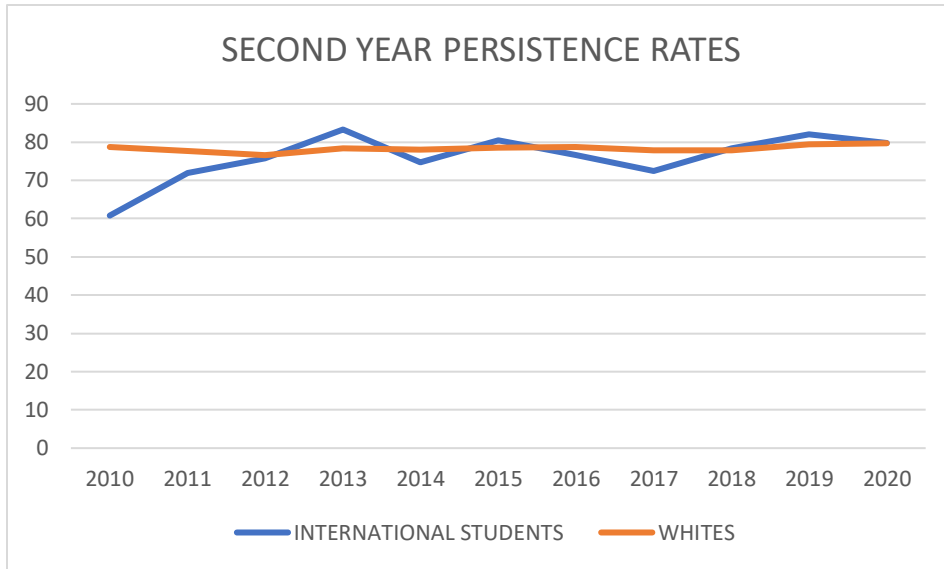
Historically the Universities constituting the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education were designed to cater for the educational needs of the local communities in which they were located. Its mission is to provide high quality education for its students at the lowest possible cost, thereby increasing the educational levels in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania (PASSHE 2022). Given the initial goals of the system, it is understandable that much focus has not been given to the global visibility of the Universities. However, in an ever-changing world, with the obliteration of barriers imposed by geographical boundaries due to the increasing development of technology, it is important that over universities evolve to stay competitive both locally and internationally.

Enrollment statistics from the fall of 2020 show that only 3 (Indiana, Millersville, and Slippery Rock Universities) out of the 14 institutions constituting the system accounted for 60 percent of the 1035 international students in the system. The trend of international students enrolled in the system over a decade as a proportion of the total student population is illustrated in Fig. 4.



Source: PASSHE 2022

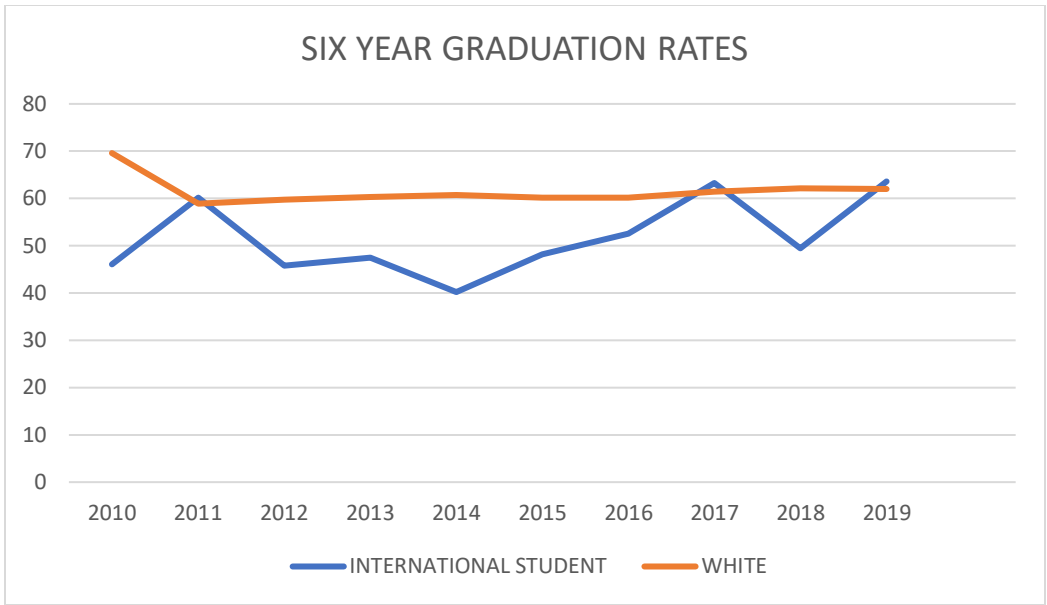
The proportion of international students to the total student population over this decade ranged from 1 – 1.8% with the highest figure of 1.8% in the fall of 2018. This relatively static rate may reflect international student diversity not being a priority, but on the other hand may also be a manifestation of the relatively constant student population numbers. However, given the earlier highlighted benefits to the university community and the local community, it should be an area of consideration.



Source: PASSHE 2022

**Figure 5:** Second Year Persistent Rates (2010 – 2020)

Interestingly, most international students who have come to our university have demonstrated the required resilience to succeed despite the numerous challenges faced by them, and this is evidenced by the high second-year persistence rates and completion rates which is comparable with the non-Hispanic white student population (Fig 5&6).



Source: PASSHE 2022

**Figure 6:** Six-year graduation rates of International Students in PASSHE (2010-2020)

## OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

**GOAL:** To promote international student diversity in PASSHE Universities and enhance its global visibility.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

1. Increase international student enrollment rate by 30% in three years.
2. Identify barriers to positive student experiences and make recommendations to overcome them.

### **METHOD**

This was a project carried out over the course of 8 weeks, consisting of interviews with focal persons across the university who had critical roles in the recruitment and the experience the international students have while on our campus. Virtual interviews and discussions were held at an agreed time over Zoom. These focal persons were the directors of the international student services and Admissions directors where applicable. A structured set of questions were asked (Appendix I), and responses recorded for analysis and discussion. Most of the interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour.

# RESULTS

## Recruitment Strategies

In a bid to attract international students to their various universities, various strategies were employed across the various PASSHE institutions as illustrated in Fig 7.



**Figure 7: Recruitment strategies employed by PASSHE Institutions**

The most often used international recruitment method was conducting Virtual recruitment fairs (44%). This involved virtual meetings with prospective international students to show case the available facilities and program on offer at the university. It has the benefit of reduced travel costs and the potential to reach a diverse group of students at the same time across different geographical borders. Virtual recruitment fairs may have been necessitated by the COVID 19 pandemic and navigating funding challenges associated with international student recruitment.

Another method currently being employed is utilizing established partnerships with foreign high schools in which counsellors collaborate in identifying high school graduates interested in acquiring a

foreign education. The high schools are identified from trends of currently enrolled international undergraduate students. Some foreign high schools being collaborated with are in Canada and Zimbabwe. Thirty-three (33%) of PASSHE Institutions currently utilize this.

Other recruitment approaches involve having competitive programs such as computer science and engineering which has a significant appeal to international students. The use of recruiting agents is also employed, though this has its drawbacks of associated cost and finding the right contractual framework can make this option more challenging. Exchange students who come to our institutions for a limited period and have a positive experience end up returning at a future date for a full degree. This has been the case in 22% of our institutions while sports coaches play a significant role in the recruitment of student athletes in two universities.

## RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES

The recruitment methods highlighted are not without their challenges with most respondents (78%) alluding to the fact that funding for recruitment constitutes a major burden to these efforts as shown in Fig 8. It does not appear a major priority, hence no proper funding structure has been allocated to international recruitment.

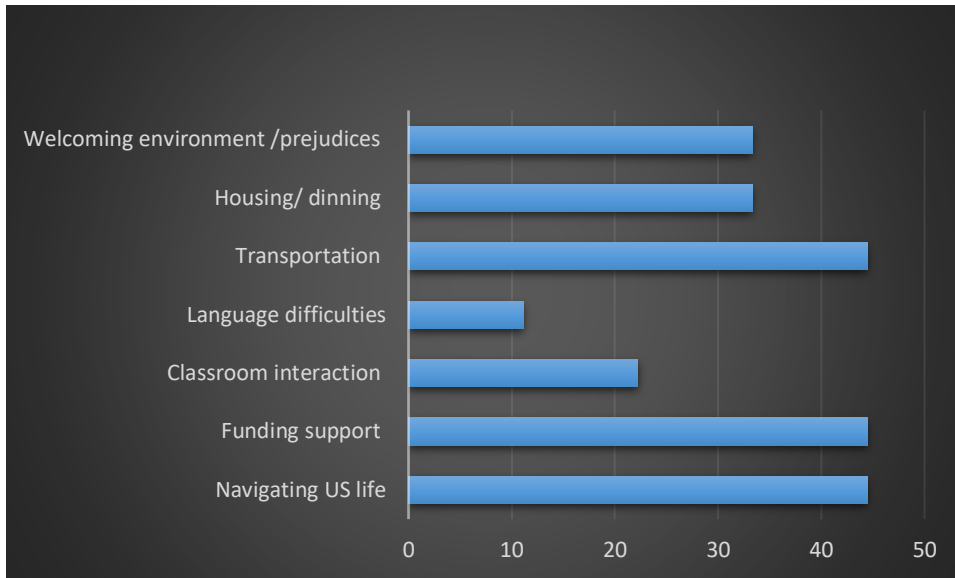


**Figure 8:** International Student recruitment challenges

Other challenges noted were Visa difficulty for admitted students (44%), Inadequate staffing of the international offices (67%), Non waiver of English test for some countries who have English as their first official language (22%), Administrative turnover (22%), which comes with different priorities and moving programs to the online format (11%) which could have been mostly necessitated by the pandemic.

## DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

As having a positive experience is critical for the enrolled international students, we sought the most frequent challenges they experienced while on campus. There are a variety of factors which can affect the experience the experience of the students negatively as shown in Fig 9.



**Figure 9:** Challenges experienced by international students.

As illustrated 44% of the PASSHE institutions noted poor funding support that are specific to the international students given the significantly higher tuition rates. Similarly, 44% of the international offices reported difficulty of their students navigating and adapting to life in the US which will negatively impart their experiences. Transportation was a significant issue also for 44% of the universities which are mostly located in rural/ suburban areas given the time required to sort out documentation to drive and the cost of a car for a new student.

Despite institutional policies of inclusive environments being promoted, 33% of the offices still their students experience prejudices and an unwelcome environment. Housing was another significant challenge identified (33%), this worsens during the breaks when halls of residence will be closed, and the student will need a place to keep personal belongings until the start of a new semester and many at times there are difficulty securing an apartment for a short period of time till school resumes back.



## PROGRAMMING FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS.

### Pre- Arrival/ Arrival

A few institutions have structured programs to give admitted students help navigating their arrival in the United States, what to expect and support settling in on arrival e.g., “Voyage to Ville at Millersville”. This includes airport pick-ups (44%) and the international orientation mandated by Homeland security. Only 4 institutions have this orientation spread over a period of at least 3 days.

### Continuing Programs

There were various programs in place to foster interaction amongst the students and with the University community. Programs ranging from international friendship program (44%), Peer mentorship program (22.9%), Cross cultural pairing student & community (22.9%), Intentional scholarships: (33%), International student organization (56%), International education week (100%), Career workshops - interviewing skills, immigration support and post-graduation support (22%).

### Communication

All the international offices maintained an open-door policy for international students to come discuss whatever challenges they may be encountering with 56 % maintaining constant communication by sending out weekly emails to keep students abreast of happenings on campus which may be relevant and applicable to them.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since most universities in the United States have autonomy even when government owned, various institutions have adopted different recruitment strategies with respect to international enrollments. The most common strategy employed in our state University system to attract international students is the use of a virtual international recruitment fair. This was similar to the findings of Ozturgut et al who had surveyed the top 40 US universities with the highest international enrollment rates, the most commonly used strategy by these were virtual and in-person recruitment fairs (Ozturgut, 2013). However due to budgeting constraints, most of our institutions have been limited to virtual fairs thus losing out on the person touch the in-person event may afford.

It is important to not only attract these students to our campuses, but also to provide enabling support services specific to their needs as this can be a potential recruitment strategy. Given the challenges we found out are the most experienced by those international students in our institution; funding support, transportation difficulties and navigating life in the United States overall were the most common. Addressing these challenges would increase the likelihood of the students to recommend our institution and it is effective as demonstrated by the study of Ozturgut when he examined the strategies used by the universities with the highest enrollment (Ozturgut, 2013).

With most of the universities in our system rurally located, peer- pairing programs with domestic students can help navigate the challenges of adapting to life in the United States and the inadequate public transportations infrastructure at the rural locations. The benefit of these programs were highlighted in a study by Summers et al (Summers & Volet, 2008). The domestic students can help offset the transportation difficulty occasioned by securing a driver's licenses and purchasing a car for the newly arrived international student. The domestic students also benefit by achieving cultural competence and tolerance from this interaction.

The Importance of staffing was also highlighted in our study, given the mission and goals of most of the universities in our system, it is understandable much attention has not been given to international students, however with the ever changing educational landscape and technological advancements that has made the world a global village, it is imperative we evolve and re-adapt to remain competitive both nationally and internationally given the earlier highlighted benefits international students bring to our campuses. Most of the international offices which should provide most of the support services for these students are understaffed with one staff alone administering both the international students and the study abroad programs.

The institutions with the highest international enrollment rates in our system are those with a robust programming to foster an inclusive environment for the international students right from when they are admitted to when they arrive on the United States. Programs such as pre-arrival orientation, Airport pick-ups, international friendship program, Peer mentorship program, Cross cultural pairing student & community, international student organization permit easy adaptation and acculturation of the students to their new environment, with the overall impact of a more positive experience while they are here.

A major challenge experienced by these students is funding support, with the significantly higher tuition rates when compared with domestic students, and ineligibility for most scholarships and tuition aid, most of the respondents agreed that having intentional scholarships dedicated to international student can help offset the cost associated with their education and by extension attract students to our campuses. This finding was similarly reported by Forbes-Mewett and Ozturgut in different studies (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Ozturgut, 2013).

## Recommendations

Recruitment, retention, and international student satisfaction and success are interwoven.

### Recruitment

1. Making concrete commitment towards international recruitment by provision of consistent budgetary support: This is critical to proper planning and execution of recruitment efforts. A set amount given at a set time will be a right step to aiding recruitment efforts.
2. Create new relationships with foreign high schools and universities and nurturing existing partnerships: There are some existing relationships with some foreign high schools and universities. These can be further strengthened will new partnerships established for interinstitutional collaborations and research partnerships which will facilitate academic exchange.
3. Diversify recruitment sources to avoid having students from one (or two) countries dominating the international student body on campus and creating the bubble effect: It is important to make the recruitment efforts as diverse as possible to prevent the clustering of all the international students from just a region, resulting in minimal cultural benefit and diversity to the community.
4. Invest in English second language programs: This will be a critical support to international students from non-English speaking countries to achieve proficiency in the English language and overcome the barriers occasioned by language difficulties. Some of these ESL programs have been offered in the past. Revisiting this will be the right step in the right direction.

Thinking beyond student matriculation to the on-campus experiences of students throughout their education and even beyond graduation.

## Services

Programming: positive experiences increasing likelihood to recommend.

1. Extending orientation to at least 3 days: The impact of starting the international students right on arrival cannot be overemphasized. Our institutions with the highest figures have the international orientation spread across days as against just a day in others. There is a lot of information to be assimilated on arrival and staggering this over a period will allow proper understanding of the extent of services and support facilities available to the student.
2. Peer- Friendship programs: This has the dual benefit of achieving cross-cultural competence for both parties and navigating the transport challenges due to the lack of public transport infrastructure in the predominantly rural areas.
3. Tailor programs to unique needs of different strata of international students: It is important to note that different international students from different region may have different unique needs, hence it would be great to factor this when developing programs to foster inclusiveness and social interaction among them.
4. Increasing staffing at the international office: To provide the needed support services to this set of students, the staffing levels at the offices must be increased. This requires commitment and budgeting.
5. Provision of scholarships applicable to students: Taking into cognizance of the fact that most international students are not eligible for most financial aid and scholarships, being intentional by making specific scholarships available for them or removing the strict restrictions to increase their eligibility can contribute to these students having a positive experience, thus increasing the likelihood of our institutions to be recommended.

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