

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Internationalisation and the role for student affairs professionals: Lessons learned from the International Student Engagement Meeting Initiative

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Internationalisation in higher education is not new; as past studies indicate, it dates back to the beginning of formal higher education (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2013, Guruz, 2011). What is new is that it has intensified and, as a result, a growing number of universities and colleges in countries around the world are developing plans to increase international student enrolment. Universities around the globe are thinking strategically about how best to attract and graduate international students, as reported in *University World News* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In fact, at the African Higher Education Summit, Claudia Costin of the World Bank said that, ‘higher education is growing globally and they are highest in Africa.’ Professional associations such as the NAFSA: Association of International Student Educators have long provided a forum for professional engagement and best practice with still more new emerging organisations that include the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS). In the US, according to the Institute of International Education (2014) *Open Doors* report, almost 900 000 international students enrolled at colleges and universities. This number represents an 8% increase from 2012.

This reflection piece presents some of the lessons learned from an initiative at New York University (NYU) that could be used by other student affairs professionals in other parts of the world, including Africa. The vision and motivation to embark on such a path have been inspired, in part, by three major developments in higher education. The first and most recent has been the growth of the university by expanding its reach outside its own confines, extending its borders, and reaching across boundaries, as we have done at New York University with the establishment of two branch campuses in Shanghai, China, and in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The concept, albeit not new, has been elevated with the creation of stand-alone facilities, a defined school identity, and common-ground government partnerships. This is not common among universities in Africa, even though the University of South Africa has always operated beyond its country’s borders owing to the nature of its

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programme offerings, and there is potential for other institutions to do the same, even if it is within the African continent. The second major development is the push for international student enrolment at home institutions, and this is encouraged among African universities through numerous agreements such as the establishment of the Pan African University as well as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Education and Training. Universities' desire to create and implement proactive plans to increase international student enrolment in an effort to build a global community of learners and global citizens has taken on a sense of urgency. And, finally, it is no surprise that international student enrolment is indeed a source of revenue that remains hotly debated as a rationale for recruitment. The results of increasing revenue by way of an enrolment strategy devoid of strategic and shared outcomes for student affairs, campus stakeholders and, ultimately, the international student would be an opportunity lost by the institution. The tragedy would have a multitude of consequences, for example, it would be a failing in what we know and continue to discover with respect to the deliberate and determined mindset of international students studying in countries other than their own.

New York University has committed to an increase in international student enrolment. In 2014, about 18% of our incoming undergraduate student body of 5 000 students is international. Students come to our campus from more than 100 countries. The rise in enrolment at the NYU campus presents challenges and opportunities. As caretakers of students' educational experience, institutions must address and embrace a greater level of expectation and engagement in order to positively affect student satisfaction. The options to engage in activities that affirm aspects of their cultural identity, introduce and broaden intercultural experiences, and provide resources to meet student needs will be a feature and responsibility of student affairs and services.

When considering what is at stake in how we engage and support our international students, I am reminded of Gordon Brown, former prime minister of the United Kingdom, speaking at NYU in his new role as Distinguished Global Leader in Residence in 2013. Brown said that governments must think more about instituting or cultivating a 'global dimension'. Brown was questioning the motivation and the outcome of governments in their commitment and level of engagement to solve the world's problems. He believes institutions of higher learning can and will play a huge role in how we help prepare our students to lead in a world that is fraught with challenges and unrealised potential that cross all of our borders (Brown, 2013). Where institutions enrol international students, inevitably such students will encounter student affairs programming, personnel and policies, and unbeknownst to the student, student affairs is charged with ensuring that the out-of-classroom experience, a student's development, campus life and related activities complement the rigor and expectations of the classroom, the parish, county, province, village, town or city, and nation where the school resides.

In preparation for an influx of international students at NYU New York¹, including serving as a study-away site for enrolled NYU Shanghai and NYU Abu Dhabi branch campus students, the university knew that being proactive in steps to position itself to discover the goals, motivation and challenges of new first-year students and transfer

undergraduate international students enrolling at NYU New York would guide our thinking, and approaches and manage the complexity of student transition and mobility. Finally, the university decided to place emphasis on being thoughtful and strive for innovation as well.

As an institution, to think more intentionally about how to build a campus community with strong cross-cultural student engagement and highly developed intercultural competence is essential. The hope is that such an environment would lead to a transformative experience. The rise in enrolment at the NYU campus presents a multitude of challenges and opportunities. NYU student affairs has been proactive in addressing this change. The institution was concerned with how well prepared it was in the Student Affairs section of the university to manage the change in the student body. Questions raised included how student affairs professionals would remain a step ahead and prepared to ensure a smooth and successful student transition to a new campus, climate, country and culture. What can we create, implement and learn that will help international students meet their goals for a total campus and community experience? What information and feedback are needed for thoughtful and well-informed practitioners? These and broader questions resulted in the establishment of the NYU Division of Student Affairs International Student Engagement Meeting Initiative.

Approach

Launched in 2012, the International Student Engagement Meeting Initiative includes conversations with approximately 800 international students. I met with undergraduate first-year students and transfer students individually. We designed this project to include 20-minute individual appointments with a senior student affairs professional who was not a staff member of the international student affairs office (i.e. the NYU Office of Global Services). Additionally, this approach, to entrust this assignment to a colleague outside the international student office, was in direct response to the growing chorus that the responsibility of the international student office should be a campus-wide endeavour that exists in all corners of the institution.

The questions I asked during the student meetings were designed in partnership and collaboration with the NYU Division of Student Affairs, Office of Research and Assessment. Students responded to questions that addressed why NYU and New York City became their destination of choice, and the current state of their transition with regard to classes, friendships, activities and challenges. In addition, students were encouraged to ask questions and make recommendations to address current needs in support of their academic and student life goals. The students asked whether the meeting was mandatory. We were upfront and direct about the fact that the initiative was not compulsory. I explained that the meetings were an opportunity to share what is important to them at the present stage of their transition and goals. The meetings were intended as a moment to share information and make referrals, if needed, to a variety of resources, units, and personnel in support of their transition and needs. The final question asked of students is introduced at the beginning of each meeting as part of the introduction. I would ask if there is anything that they recommend that the university address to assist in their transition? In order to use time with students efficiently,

responses were recorded by using an iPad that captured responses for summary and analysis by the NYU Division of Student Affairs, Office of Research and Assessment. Finally, I informed the students that their participation would result in the creation of a year-end report and recommendations submitted to the Senior Vice-President for Student Affairs.

The project: The International Student Engagement Meeting Initiative

At first glance, the NYU International Student Engagement Meeting Initiative may appear to be a complex strategic method. In reality, it was an earnest desire to learn what was on the minds of our new international students. Our curiosity took hold, for it allows us to envision how what we learn can help us indeed manage the complexity that institutions hope will lead to a vibrant campus. We were concerned about the transition, adjustment and acculturation of our students. With the latest information in support of existing programmes, short- and long-term goals, and creating new initiatives, change, which is inevitable, could be managed. Further, we wanted our colleagues in Student Affairs to have the latest knowledge on what our international students were thinking and experiencing as a source of support specific to a school, department and/or unit. We wanted to think about this as a project that could inform what we already knew about first-year students' transition to college. From the outset, it was critical and essential to welcome our international students in a personal and thoughtful way, and with a focused intentionality, in order to better understand their goals, concerns and ideas about how we can make NYU a better place.

With several goals and objectives in mind, the Division of Student Affairs wanted to establish a welcoming experience that offered a more personal touch for students. In this way, we could discover personal goals and objectives the students had in mind for their time at NYU. The meeting could shed light on why they chose to come to NYU and New York City and position the university to respond quickly to any challenges they may have encountered. We could learn about challenges, career interests, academic pursuits, and their unique identity and global mobility experience.

The lessons I learned from the project are outlined in 15 key areas. These areas provide a type of roadmap for the future of international student outreach and transition to college. The lessons reveal what mattered in the heart and mind of the international student, identified how we in Student Affairs should direct resources, enhance programme development, review policy, manage expectations, establish collaboration and improve the intercultural competence of staff, students, faculty and administrators.

1. International student community building on campus

- Establish campus traditions intended for international student community-building that utilise country and international region to foster connecting.

The interest and recommendation of international students to meet other international students from their home country (and city/town) was a recurring theme in the student meetings. Students are clear that this suggestion is not an attempt to become isolated but serves more as a bridge to transitioning to the new campus and New York City.

Students view the interaction as an opportunity not only to meet other students, but also, in particular, to meet upperclassmen who could be a source for developing informal mentoring and gaining knowledge from their experience.

2. Cultivating friendships between international and domestic students

- Create co-curricular programming with outcomes that address friendship-building and networking. Place emphasis on the spaces that students currently cite as the best places to make friends (classes, residences and clubs).

International students are very interested in meeting and becoming friendly with domestic students. Friendships are critically important and serve as a gauge for international students as to how well they are transitioning and functioning in their new environments. Additionally, there is an awareness expressed by international students that domestic students are comfortable in the US yet overwhelmed by their own adjustment to college life. Meeting an international student offers a complexity for domestic students in that domestic students, display a lack of competence or comfort level on which to engage (even mispronouncing a student's name can alter first impressions). Further, we have unintentionally labelled international students as educational transients and not as a vibrant and diverse community of fellow scholars and potential friends and networks.

3. Intercultural competence and community building

- For consistency, clarity, and unity, investigate the establishment of terms and definitions for intercultural competence at your institution.

Social norms, customs, behaviours and daily-living skills present a range of difficulties in the ways students engage one another in residences, classrooms, co-curricular activities and campus environments. Acknowledging the diversity among residents is important, but cultivating a supportive and respected environment gets high marks from international students. There is the concern of offending a student (especially a domestic student) through a bias act or comment, thereby effectively derailing a student's ability to establish friendships. Additionally, defining terms such as social justice, human rights, community service, and diversity is where international students want to gain understanding. Finally, a best practice that emerged was the mention of Model United Nations. Students cited its success in bringing students from global backgrounds together, and those same students were planning on joining or have already joined, the Model United Nations Student Organisation at NYU.

4. Academic advisement services

- Self-review of school policy, information, and outreach about high school/post-high school credit acceptance and communication with an academic advisor.

Academic advisors are, in many ways, first responders by way of an introduction to the

norms of academic choice and the fulfilling of requirements. Be mindful, for themes may emerge that reveal the frustration with the process of acceptance of high school academic credit and/or post-high school credit for college. Students find themselves caught in the middle because a conflict arises from the policies of the students' schools in their home countries, a conflict which can last for months. In addition, most international students plan to study abroad. The result will place greater demands on academic advising to meet student expectations in providing a seamless and global academic experience.

5. Mentorship from upperclassmen

- Create mentoring options for students. Criteria for matching should place emphasis on transition, shared interests, adjustment, and home country/region/continent.

International students have expressed the desire to have a mentor to enable them to navigate and become acquainted with their new surroundings. It appears that the peak time when mentoring is needed most is during the first semester after arrival. Students have recommended that mentors be international upperclassmen or students trained in helping other students to transition to campus life.

6. Career development, student health and wellness

- The complexity of searching for employment, beginning especially with internships and remaining in compliance with US federal policies and the requirements of International Student Services Offices, is confounding for many students.

Collaboration between the international student office, career development, and the study-abroad office can present a united front to help students understand the processes involved in a consistent way. For international students, minimising the challenge of having to visit several offices, and attend various programmes and sessions, would be liberating. Collaboration may also offer units a way to maximise staff time and student participation. For further insights, I recommend the article published by my colleagues in the NASPA Leadership Exchange magazine entitled *International Influx: Student Services Go Global* (Spring 2015).

9. Dining services, options and schedule

- Dining services: Investigate keeping facilities open and/or extending the hours during holidays in the fall, spring and winter breaks.

With the increase in international students remaining on college campuses during the holidays, requests for extending hours and dates to cover these periods will be on the rise. Additionally, there will be an increase in demand for a 'taste of home' by way of menu items and a variety of healthy food choices. Finally, holiday home-stays (Thanksgiving, US), with

international students spending a portion of a holiday with domestic families will grow in demand, creating a shortage of families available.

10. International student transition consulting services

- Offer direct consultation to departments, units and committees at your university.

As a result of the international student meetings, information learned is shared with a variety of units, departments and initiatives charged with the internationalisation of the campus. For example, at NYU, there was: an Internationalizing Washington Square Committee; the Center for Multicultural Education & Programmes: ACT Institute (Administrators Cultural Training Institute) programme for staff intercultural competence training; the NYU Student Affairs Staff Development Committee, and, of course, the Office of Global Services (i.e. the international student services and scholars unit); and NYU schools that range in speciality from business to engineering and education.

12. Financial aid

- Address the growing interest in financial aid, grants and scholarships. Create resources and easy access to information and advisement.

Students in need of financial aid and other forms of monetary support will increasingly look to their university to provide the resources. The issue could become a source of frustration and be contradictory to the university's mission if international students are excluded from forms of aid, but are expected to be full-fledged members of your global student community. Clarity of services, awareness of shifting global economies, up-to-date information, new sources, and sensitivity are paramount when an international student is seeking financial aid.

13. The classroom, culture and environment

- Arrange tutorials, webinars and events that describe the classroom culture at your institution.

Students have commented that, if they knew more about how the US classroom functions, in advance of their first class, this might have decreased their anxiety and provided them with an advance look at what to expect and how to prepare. This service could prove to be an important tool in support of international student adjustment to the classroom culture and norms and create a foundation for making friends. For innovative ideas and resources, NAFSA: The Association for International Educators is an essential source of best practices.

14. Diversity in China

- Yes, there is diversity in China, India, Canada, and Peru...

The countries that send the most international students to New York University are China, India, South Korea and Canada. When the topic of diversity in China was raised with a student from China, she raised her hands in agreement! There is a difference between citizens of Shenzhen and Beijing, Boston and New York. (Bostonians just raised their eyebrows.) Students living in cities and those from rural communities have a language, idioms, lingo and culture that differ in certain respects, and this is a reminder that all communities are diverse. Student affairs professionals must constantly be reminded that the ‘international student’ moniker tells only part of a student’s story. As third culture children, students with identities that reflect a diversity of places of birth, cultural identity, language and where they call home tells us that where a person calls home is subjective. As student affairs professionals, how best can we consider and discover the complexity of our international students and what can that knowledge provide us with in building a respectful and engaged student community, taking full advantage of what such a community has to offer? For further reading, I recommend the *2009 UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics*.

15. Communications, language and cultural acquisition

- These are acute and impact the classroom, student affairs, employment interests, friendships, and academic and research pursuits.

Students who learn English as a second language are in dire need of understanding the culture, historical context, idioms and slang. Students are eager to learn, practise and understand the language, cultural norms and etiquette in a slower-paced environment where they can receive direct support, ask questions and receive explanations. Plagiarism as a result of cultural differences in the gathering, dissemination and exchange of information may indicate that increased collaboration across units is needed. As writing centres are thriving, cultural-centered activities that promote opportunities to understand a culture are less of a responsibility of international student offices.

Conclusion

When you reflect on the journey, figuratively and literally, of international students, the moment their sights are fixed on your part of the world, your institution, is the moment that they have made a courageous choice to entrust their hopes to the vision and mission your college holds most dear. It is known to student affairs professionals that the day a student arrives on campus, being admitted and entering the hallowed halls of your institution, brings joy that we wish could be maintained throughout their academic career. In reality, this joy can wane at times, buffeted by a new-found independence as a young adult. They are in a new and often strange place that can be frightening and then exhilarating, or they can be so experienced that you have ambassadors among you who can serve as catalysts for the community goals that you seek to achieve.

What I discovered and learned doing this work is that the International Student Engagement Meeting Initiative offered the student a moment to reflect, check in, ask

questions about the big picture, and share wonderful feedback that will no doubt make NYU a better place for international students, domestic students, faculty, staff and administrator alike.

Endnote

1. NYU New York is an improved designation, as the university now has in its portfolio a study-away location in Washington DC, as well as several overseas campuses.

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