Supporting International Students across Student Affairs

Custom Research Brief

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I. Research Methodology

**Project Challenge**  Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

- How do institutions amend current student services (e.g., career services, mental health counseling) to better serve the international student population?
- What dedicated international student services do institutions offer and who (department/unit) provides them?
- What events compose international student orientation and who (department/unit) conducts them?
- How do institutions assess these services and programs?
- How do other institutions promote cultural exchange between American students and international students?
- What co-curricular programs support cultural exchange?
- How do other institutions leverage international students to strengthen study abroad programs?
- How do institutions encourage international student usage of student services and programs?
- How do institutions communicate offerings to incoming students and their families?
- What protocol do institutions maintain to contact families of international students?

**Project Sources**  The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- Advisory Board’s internal and online research libraries (www.educationadvisoryboard.com)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (http://nces.ed.gov)
The Forum interviewed directors of international student services offices at six research universities:

**A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Approximate Institutional Enrollment (Undergraduate/Total)</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carnegie Mellon University</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>6,000/11,500</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa State University</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>24,300/29,900</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>7,000/19,000</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Colorado at Boulder</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>26,300/32,300</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Michigan at Ann Arbor</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>27,200/42,300</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Wisconsin at Madison</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>30,000/42,000</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
II. Executive Overview

Key Findings

International student services offices offer dedicated support to international students, primarily through visa support with a secondary focus on academic, cultural, and social comfort. Staff in these offices typically organize orientation and offer programming throughout the year to educate students about how to maintain legal status during the school year, throughout the summer, and after graduation. Additionally, these offices organize social programming, such as day trips and holiday meals, to offer a forum for international students to befriend one another.

Staff within international student services offices serve as consultants to units across student affairs to guide them to best accommodate international students. According to contacts, the following units should adjust to serve international students:

- **Career services**: International students may require additional assistance to address legal issues associated with internships and jobs, and to navigate post-graduation career opportunities in the United States. Some institutions offer workshops with immigration lawyers to advise students on relevant legal issues.

- **Counseling**: Mental health stigmas can exacerbate cultural adjustment—contacts explain that many international students avoid mental health services due to unfamiliarity or discomfort with mental health services in their home cultures. International student services staff often introduce services through a casual setting, such as group discussions on cultural adjustment. Additionally, counseling services staff aim to hire counselors with diverse backgrounds who speak multiple languages.

- **Recreation**: Foreign students’ recreational interests may include sports that are not as common in the United States, such as badminton and cricket. After soliciting feedback, international student services offices often recommend that recreation centers expand facilities to meet international student demand.

- **Disability services**: Staff must account for language barriers when assessing learning disabilities and recommending classroom accommodations (e.g., extended test time, note takers).

- **Leadership**: International students often fill a disproportional low percentage of leadership roles on campus. Administrators organize workshops for international students to develop leadership skills, including public speaking.

- **Student integration**: Student affairs staff often connect international students with multicultural student organizations on campus to help them maintain connections to their home cultures.

International student services offices typically organize international student orientations in the day(s) prior to new student orientation; orientations often address logistical, academic, and cultural concerns. Topics covered include driver’s license applications, immigration paperwork, placement tests, culture shock, weather, American social norms, and academic integrity. Administrators also introduce students to services on campus, such as tutoring and library services. Social events also offer opportunities for international students to befriend each other.

Cultural exchange programs connect international students to community members and American students on campus. Programs that introduce students to the greater community outside of campus include programs that pair students with a family in the community, who invites students on local day trips and meals. On campus, buddy programs during the first semester pair international students with American students. Living and learning communities also offer extensive cultural exchange opportunities to American and international students, who reside together and attend group dinners and day trips together.
International student services offices typically serve as the main point of contact for international students, leveraging mandatory immigration sessions to introduce programming and services available across student affairs. In addition to in-person communication during orientation and programs offered throughout the year, staff advertise upcoming programming and events that benefit international students through social media (e.g., twitter, Facebook), email newsletters, and webpages.

To assess programming, international student services offices typically administer surveys to students. Some institutions use the International Student Barometer (http://www.i-graduate.org/services/international-student-barometer-and-student-barometer/), an online survey administered to students throughout their time at a university, to assess student satisfaction with student affairs services. One institution administers an orientation one month after arrival to assess initial communication and programming; they also administer a survey at the end of the year to assess student satisfaction with the international student services office and solicit feedback regarding potential improvements to services across the campus (e.g., recreational facilities).
III. Dedicated International Student Services

**International Student Services Offices**

*International Student Services Offices Founded to Address Immigration, International Students’ Primary Concern*

All profiled institutions maintain central offices dedicated to international students and scholars, which primarily support visa and immigration compliance. These offices, typically staffed by a director and several advisors, are housed in student affairs at profiled institutions. Contacts at *Carnegie Mellon University* explain that, particularly post-SEVIS (Student Exchange and Visa Information System), both international students and university staff supporting them are primarily consumed by adherence to immigration and visa requirements.

**Prioritizing Services Offered by International Student Services Offices**

1. **Address legal issues associated with immigration**
   - The first priority of international student services offices is to support students in maintaining legal status; staff guide them through necessary paperwork (e.g., I-20s) and organize workshops to explain immigration issues as they pertain to jobs, internships, and post-graduation.

2. **Organize international student-specific programming**
   - Contacts admit they wish they could focus more on programming, however immigration services take precedence. When time and resources allow, contacts focus programming efforts on orientation, social events, and collaboration with other units in student affairs (e.g., career services).

3. **Guide international students to on-campus resources**
   - Advisors in international student services offices often serve as the first point of contact for international students and direct them to helpful services on campus (e.g., mental health services).

**International Student Orientation**

*Organize a Dedicated International Student Orientation Prior to First-Year Orientation*

Five of the six profiled institutions offer a dedicated international student orientation prior to first-year orientation, organized by the international student services office. Most institutions offer day-long orientations; however, the *University of Michigan at Ann Arbor* offers five weeks of orientation programming for international students prior to the start of the first semester. During the five weeks, administrators offer some events multiple times to provide students with scheduling flexibility and a large window of arrival time. Some institutions invite all students who attended high school abroad to international student orientation, including American citizens.

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*Iowa State University* contracts a shuttle service to pick up first-year international students up from the airport and transport them to their housing, usually on campus.
Programming Frequently Offered during Orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Concern</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Logistics</td>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>Hold discussions about expectations and preparation for weather throughout the year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Driver’s Licenses and Identification Cards</td>
<td>Invite local government officials to conduct sessions during which students can apply for driver’s licenses and other legal identification cards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public Transportation</td>
<td>Explain how to use local transportation systems, such as the bus or subway.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>Academic Integrity</td>
<td>Explain expectations regarding academic integrity in the US education system, including plagiarism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support Services</td>
<td>Introduce students to academic support services, such as tutoring, library services, and writing centers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Social Connections</td>
<td>Counteract origin-country cliques with events of interest to many foreigners, such as sports (e.g., cricket, soccer), film, music, and barbecues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American Norms</td>
<td>One of the most popular events at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor’s orientation, “Oops, I’m Sorry” is a skit-based presentation addressing how to avoid social mistakes in the United States, such as tipping expectations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also Educate Parents through Presentations and Q&A Sessions

Some contacts report an increasing presence of parents at international orientations. To accommodate them, some profiled institutions deliver presentations followed by question and answer sessions. The following concerns are most popular among parents:

- **Privacy**: Contacts explain that parents often want to access students’ grades; however, according to privacy laws, it is illegal for institutions to directly provide parents with copies of their students’ transcripts without explicit consent of the students.

> “There are helicopter parents all over the world.”

---Forum Interview
- **Safety**: Administrators explain the safety measures provided by campus units (e.g., department of public safety) and local municipalities (e.g., local police force).
- **Billing**: Administrators review billing procedures with parents, including semester-based billing, online payments, and contact information for the institution’s financial services office.

### Cultural Exchange Programs

**Expose Students to Off-Campus Culture through Partnerships with Community Organizations**

International student services offices coordinate with community organizations to expose international students to the culture and community outside of the immediate university campus.

**Presentations to Community Groups**: At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, International Student Services staff organize public speaking opportunities for international students at local schools and nursing homes. Students make presentations about their home countries, developing leadership and presentation skills in addition to interacting with neighboring community members.

**Furniture Loan Program**: At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, International Student Services coordinates with a local organization, Madison Friends of International Students, to arrange a furniture loan program between international and volunteer community members.

### Host Family Programs

Several institutions have developed programs that connect volunteer families in the community to individual international students. Families invite students to join them in activities such as dinners, movies, or sports games. Additionally, international student services offices plan group events for all host families and participating students to connect, including holiday meals.

### Introduce American Students to International Students in Small-Group Settings

Contacts explain that international students most often develop long-lasting, deeper relationships with American students when they meet with them in unintimidating environments with relatively few people. International student services offices at profiled institutions offer the following programming to connect international students with American students:
Promoting Cultural Exchange between International and American Students

International student services offices often organize conservation hours throughout the semester, typically in partnership with an academic department. During this time, administrators invite international students who speak a foreign language to converse with students studying the language.

At Stanford University, the international student services office organizes lunches during which a faculty member leads a discussion with four to five international students and four to five American students about opportunities for academic and co-curricular involvement.

At Stanford University, the international student services office arranges bus trips to local sites of interest. Offered one to two times per quarter, international students and American students take a day trip together. The office often recruits American students to participate through student organizations relevant to the activity.

International student services offices often pair volunteer American students with first-year international students during their first semester. Administrators expect American students to guide and communicate with students throughout the first semester, both in person and via email, phone, and/or social media. Although volunteers typically commit to one semester, friendships often continue after the first semester.

The University of Michigan at Ann Arbor offers a living and learning community for international students to reside with American students in a dormitory setting. Students within the communities often also organize events independently, such as planning day trips.

Arrange for Exchange Students to Advise Students Interested in Studying Abroad

Profiled institutions most often leverage exchange students, rather than directly-enrolled international students, to advise American students interested in studying abroad because exchange students often have experience with post-secondary education in countries of interest. Study abroad offices often ask exchange students to attend study abroad fairs, information sessions, and related programming.
IV. Accommodations across Other Student Services

Services Provided by Relevant Student Affairs Units

Often in collaboration with international student service offices, units within student affairs develop programming to accommodate the varied needs of international students. In addition to legal concerns regarding immigration, unique obstacles of international students include cultural assimilation, language barriers, and cultural stigmas.

Supporting International Students across Student Affairs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Affiliated Unit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase international student representation in on-campus leadership positions</td>
<td>Organize leadership training workshops for international students</td>
<td>Organizations and Leadership Programs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leadership Program for International Students

At Iowa State University, international students fill only two percent of leadership roles on campus within extracurricular and co-curricular organizations. Therefore, the International Student and Scholars Office offers a leadership program to build relevant skills and experience among international students.

- **Activities**: Non-credit, biweekly seminars focusing on public speaking, project management, networking, team building, conflict management, and time and resource management.
- **Frequency**: Students meet for 90 minutes every two weeks for a full academic year.
- **Incentive**: Students receive a $500 scholarship upon completion of the program.

International Undergraduate Community: Stanford University

In addition to the various multicultural student groups on campus (e.g., Chinese Student Association), the International Undergraduate Community student group organizes events throughout the year that offer the opportunity for international students to meet each other and reflect on their unique perspectives as international students.
### Account for Language Barriers when Assessing Learning Disabilities

Contacts explain that staff within disability services must be aware of language barriers when assessing a learning disability and suggesting respective classroom accommodations (e.g., extended time to complete exams).

### Additional Services to Address Common Mental Health Issues among International Students

**Challenge**
- Cultural stigmas exacerbate reluctance to seek professional help
- Cultural adjustments increase stress during transition to college
- Students feel uncomfortable not speaking in their native language

**Support Service**
- Organize group sessions for international students early in the year to introduce counseling services in a casual setting among peers
- Organize workshops focused on understanding culture shock and developing coping mechanisms
- Hire counselors who speak foreign languages and ideally share ethnic backgrounds with the most international student populations on campus
V. Communication and Marketing

Targeting Students

Advertise Support Programs during Mandatory Immigration Sessions

Many contact institutions leverage mandatory events for international students, such as visa processing workshops, to market campus resources and programming to students. International student services offices serve as the first point of contact for many students, and continually serve as a resource to direct students to other services on campus. Directors of international student services offices also train staff to recognize students of concern in order to direct them to relevant campus units, such as mental health services.

Dual-Purpose Programs

At Stanford University, the international student services office combines social programming with immigration processing. For example, the office combines a holiday party with I-20 paper signing in late November.
Maintain a Virtual Presence

Institutions employ the following methods of communication with international students:

- **Social media:** Many student affairs units and international student services offices maintain a social media presence (e.g., Twitter, Facebook), updating accounts regularly to advertise new programs.

- **Email newsletters:** International student services offices often distribute regular (e.g., biweekly) email newsletters to summarize and highlight programs offered through their offices and across campus.

- **Websites:** International student services offices maintain websites dedicated to office programming and displaying relevant contact information.

- **Interactive video tutorials:** The University of Wisconsin at Madison’s international student services office developed an interactive, 40-minute virtual guide for international students ([http://iss.wisc.edu/Tutorial/index.htm](http://iss.wisc.edu/Tutorial/index.htm)). The tutorial is particularly convenient for students to access outside of business hours—75 percent of students access the site when the international student services office is closed.

Communicating with Parents

**Communicate Electronically with Parents who are Unable to Attend Orientation**

For the majority of parents who do not attend orientation, international student services offices send documents, translated if necessary, to families. For widespread access, some institutions also provide updated documents on their websites. Crucial information to communicate includes the following:

- Emergency contact information for university staff
- Billing information and schedules
- Recommended means of travel (e.g., local airports and hotels)
- Legal protocols (e.g., related to immigration, student academic and health privacy)

Deans of Students Typically Contact Families during Emergencies

Administrators at contact institutions do not maintain specific protocol, instead assessing emergency situations on a case-by-case basis; the dean of students typically contacts families when an emergency regarding a specific international student occurs. However, at Stanford University, the residential dean typically contacts families. In most cases, the dean seeks the aid of international student services administrators to identify a staff member, faculty member to translate if necessary (a translator may be requested if a university staff or faculty member is not available). Additionally, administrators sometimes seek graduate students from the home country of the student to comfort families and facilitate necessary travel.

Collect Accurate Emergency Contact Information

Some contacts explain that students often list friends as emergency contacts rather than parents. Therefore, staff in the international student services office or dean of students’ offices review information for accuracy.
Networking Contacts

Carnegie Mellon University
Linda Gentile
Director, Office of International Education
412.268.5231
lgentile@cmu.edu

Iowa State University
James Dorsett
Director, International Student and Scholars Office
515.294.0375
jdorsett@iastate.edu

Stanford University
John Pearson
Director, Bechtel International Center
650.725.0889
john.pearson@stanford.edu

University of Colorado at Boulder
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Director, International Student and Scholar Services
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University of Michigan at Ann Arbor
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cox@studentlife.wisc.edu