Chapter 7

Preparing International Students for a Competitive Job Market: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Given the current climate of fierce competition for work, universities are working tirelessly to prepare students for their future professional endeavors. Forms of experiential education, including service-learning and cooperative education, are increasingly used to augment traditional teaching tools and on-campus career services, particularly for domestic students. This chapter describes a mixed methods study that explored professional and vocational challenges faced by international students at Northeastern University. The authors examined experiences of students who have engaged in one of two pathway programs at the university. One pathway program includes service-learning and the other pathway program does not. Data from students and staff illuminate the challenges international students face in obtaining and maintaining paid positions. Study findings are used to offer best practices for professional development staff in preparing international students for future career success.

INTRODUCTION

In conjunction with an increasing number of international students enrolling in United States (U.S.) universities, a growing number of international students are seeking employment in the U.S. upon graduation. Although landmark studies have highlighted the professional and vocational challenges international students face (Lee, Abd-Ella, & Burks, 1981; Leong & Sedlacek, 1989; Shen & Herr, 2004), scholars

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have since suggested that culturally-responsive support services be strengthened to accommodate an increasingly diverse population of students on U.S. campuses. Yet despite their concerns about international students, many universities still remain focused primarily on domestic students’ professional readiness (Shen & Herr, 2004; Crockett & Hays, 2011).

As educators and facilitators of experiential education and international student education at a university in the U.S., we focus this chapter on professional readiness for international students. We will describe our specific interests and expertise in service-learning to expand on findings which emerged from a mixed-methods study of former pathway program students and the university staff members who support students’ preparation for future professional workplace opportunities. We conclude the chapter by offering suggestions for best practices for faculty and staff in preparing and supporting international students for professional success.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

International Students in the U.S.

According to Davis (1996), international students are students who are enrolled in colleges or universities in a foreign country where they are neither citizens nor immigrants. As of the 2013-2014 academic year, approximately 900,000 international students were enrolled in U.S. universities, which increased 8% from the previous year and nearly three times the number from 10 years prior. The continuing trend of international education is rooted in multiple factors, including globalization, increased university recruitment efforts, country-specific politics and agendas, and an increased issuance rate of student visas after 2008 (Institute of International Education, 2014).

While international student enrollment is beneficial to institutions, host universities also recognize the challenges associated with matriculating large numbers of international students in often short periods of time. Kreber (2009) argued that colleges and universities are struggling to support students who lack the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2011) required to succeed without language instruction, cultural awareness, and academic skills support. This shift ultimately manifests in multiple ways including intercultural tensions on campus and increased demand and strain on academic programming and student services, including residential life, spiritual life, dining services, and other related services (Andrade, 2006; Leong & Sedlacek, 1989; Schmidt, 2010). In addition, linguistic and cultural barriers have been shown to negatively affect international students’ abilities to participate and fully integrate into curricular and extracurricular activities with their peers (Campbell, Macpherson, & Sawkins, 2014).

Despite these hurdles, several institutions continue to actively recruit and enroll international students, and with good reason. In the spirit of cross-cultural exchange, universities who host international students invite global perspectives and experiences into their classrooms, support U.S. innovation particularly through Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and business programs, and sustain innovation in campus-based programming, services, and marketable products through out-of-state tuition costs, many of which are subsidized by international student tuition (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008, NAFSA, 2014; Nunn, 2005). In this regard, the U.S. is able to benefit from the “brain drain” many other countries lament (Gribble, 2008).

From an economic perspective, it is evident that the overall system of higher education in the U.S. benefits directly and indirectly from international students studying there; direct benefits include revenue