Chapter 12

Using Data Wisely to Improve International Student Satisfaction: Insights Gained from International Student Barometer

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ABSTRACT

With increasing interests in international student satisfaction and experience, international educators in pursuit of substantial campus changes should not overlook small pieces of data that can help carve substantial pathways to creating campus change. The purpose of this chapter is to showcase what data revealed about international student experiences and how the data were used to drive campus change within an institution. The authors highlight International Student Barometer (ISB) data collected from international undergraduate students at University of Minnesota-Twin Cities in 2013 regarding student satisfaction and their overall experience. Then, the authors discuss how multiple available sources of data are sought to complement ISB data, and how ISB data have been used collaboratively to inform institutional practice and drive campus internationalization for all students.

INTRODUCTION

The mighty Mississippi River that flows through the center of the United States traverses more than 2,300 miles from northern Minnesota to the southern tip of Louisiana, spanning nearly 11 miles at its widest point. International explorers could easily overlook that the start of this vast waterway is a seemingly insubstantial stream of just 20 feet wide. Likewise, international educators in pursuit of substantial...
campus changes should not overlook that small pieces of data that seem like a “drop in the bucket” can help carve substantial pathways to creating campus change. This chapter focuses on a case study of the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus and the role of a satisfaction survey in improving international students’ experiences.

The student population on countless U.S. campuses has changed. An increasing number of international students are coming to the U.S. to pursue their higher education. In 2013-2014, with the new international student enrollment increased 7.5% to 270,128 students, the total international student enrollment in the U.S. had increased 8.1% arriving to a record high of 886,052 international students in total (Open Doors, 2014). Nationwide, international students have contributed three times more to the U.S. economy than they did 15 years ago. In short, international students choose to attend U.S. institutions at significantly greater numbers today than a few years ago and certainly far more than a decade ago. At the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus, in 2014, international undergraduate students represented eight percent of the undergraduate population at 2,758 students, whereas in 2005, the numbers were in the 200s, representing just two percent of the undergraduate student population. When a few hundred international students take classes, seek services, and become engaged in a large urban community, a campus can choose to continue to operate much as it had been. When those numbers increase by the hundreds, a healthy organizational response is to determine what changes are necessary for all involved in that institution of higher education. Identifying these stakeholders (the administrators, faculty, staff, domestic and international students, and the surrounding community) and having them engage in the satisfaction survey process helps underscore that the responsibility of improving the international student experience is a shared responsibility.

At the heart of considering changes is the philosophy that all students on campus matter and that those who are choosing to study outside of their own nation might have both unique and similar experiences when compared to domestic students. Being attentive to the unique and similar experiences is a balancing act that requires attending to cultural differences in beliefs and behaviors, understanding education systems, imagining what knowledge and experiences might transfer well across contexts, respecting language development, reading cues about identity development, and more. While a large organization may have a vested interest in making changes, systems are complex and decision-makers face significant time and resource constraints, even if it is clear what changes would serve the student population well. Given this complexity, the status quo can be an inviting option. However, the status quo does not necessarily serve international students, domestic students, the staff and faculty engaged with students, or higher education in general.

In writing about theory, research and application in International Education, Savicki (2008) concludes his edited volume with this statement: “As practitioner-educators, it is our responsibility to ensure that students derive as much benefit as possible from time abroad” (p. 349). While Savicki writes about the context of U.S. students studying abroad, the notion that there is a responsibility that staff and faculty bear to the international student is critical to consider in light of the significant resource investment—in time, money, and disruption to their lives—that students and their families make to enroll in U.S. higher education. Thus, it is not appropriate to maintain the status quo but rather it is imperative to focus energy on the international students.

Serving the domestic students and the broader campus is also of significant importance in considering international students on campus. U.S. colleges and universities promote that a college education will include developing intercultural competencies, abilities to work with diverse teams, and in general, a global-mindedness to problem-solving. How does this occur? This occurs through a variety of actions,