Chapter 2
International Students in Higher Education: More Than a Fish Out of Water

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ABSTRACT

The world continues to experience rapid advances in technology and transportation that increasingly expand opportunities and accessibility for international students to study in ways that were not possible even a few decades ago. Such changes create both challenges and solutions for the modern higher education institution in the U.S. With the goal of higher education to work toward opening minds and creating a space for sharing and learning within an open and diverse learning community, it is imperative that international students be incorporated in a way that engages and invigorates the quality of learning on campus. Some of the challenges to this notion include a variety of learner variables influencing how international students integrate into the broader learning community. This chapter focuses on some of these variables impacting international students with an emphasis on the problems, potential solutions, and critical areas for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The world continues to experience rapid advances in technology and transportation that increasingly expand opportunities and accessibility for international students to study in ways that were not possible even a few decades ago. Technological advancements have brought opportunities for learners to study in online and hybrid formats, in addition to the more traditional brick and mortar classroom. These changes have actually spurred modifications in societal expectations for the educational experience, with an ever-increasing demand for flexibility (Nicolson, Murphy, & Southgate, 2011). These shifting expectations collide with the reality that the typical classroom (online, hybrid, or traditional) is growing increasingly diverse as internationalization becomes a dominant trend in the global community.

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As an example of the internationalization of higher education, the number of international students studying in the United States has continued to increase according to the Institute of International Education (2015). Aside from a slight dip in the number of international students around the time of the global economic collapse represented in the 2009-2010 academic year, enrollment has remained positive since the 2006-2007 academic year. Although this does not suggest that international student enrollment in higher education is immune from economic downturns, it does point to the priority of these students to seek educational opportunities abroad. This positive trend in increases in international student populations also demonstrates that US higher education institutions (HEI) need to build an infrastructure that meets the needs of this growing population.

These shifts in the modern reality of the HEI are indicative of rapid and prolonged changes to the academy that appear to be signaling a new normal. What is currently unclear is how these changes in societal expectation and internationalization of higher education will affect academe over time. Whether these shifts signal how higher education looks in term of infrastructure or practices, or if both will be impacted is yet to be seen. What is clear is that one of the major challenges facing the modern HEI is the need to continually adapt to changes in a field that looks much different than it did in its recent past.

Although there are a multitude of issues surrounding colleges and universities, it is clear that there are unique opportunities and challenges related to the perfect storm that internationalization brings to the modern post-secondary institution in the U.S.A. This chapter focuses on how academe has to adapt to the unique learning needs of an increasingly diverse and international classroom by better integrating international students into the wider learning community. By focusing on the opportunities and challenges for U.S.-based institutions, it is possible to begin to find unique and innovative ways to address the needs of international students more broadly in higher education.

BACKGROUND

Several themes emerge from the literature on the internationalization of higher education including: the role of the HEI in internationalization, engagement of international students within the learning community, English as a reality in the modern HEI, the need to effectively incorporate cultural exchange as a new reality in the HEI, and the varied educational expectations and habits that international students bring to the learning experience. Because these themes affect and shape the reality of the modern higher education institution, they will be explored in depth. These chosen aspects are by no means the only ones worth considering; rather, they represent pressing ones in relation to these students. By better understanding the international student experience in the context of the US-based HEI, it is possible to better understand and address their needs.

The Role of the Higher Education Institution in Internationalization

Two competing agendas can shape the way in which the HEI views its role in working with international students: 1) as an agent of hegemony, or 2) as a means of expanding the overall learning experience. Knight (2014) suggested that the role of internationalization should be to do the latter. While both roles do require change, the former suggests the HEI’s role is to affect a specific type of change, imposing the will and intentions of the institution on international students. The latter point suggests that the post-secondary institution serves as a change-agent by expanding the mental and physical realities of