



CAREER SERVICES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS:

Fulfilling High Expectations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research consistently shows that among their many concerns, international students focus heavily on career prospects both when deciding to study in the U.S. and when evaluating their overall experience at their U.S. institution. The career services office is among the most important student services office on campus to many international students. Career services thus plays an integral part of the international student experience and in institutions' further recruitment efforts.

This report is the result of an exploratory mixed methods study of career services offerings for international students at colleges and universities across the United States and their effectiveness as judged by professionals in the field. The report gives findings from a survey of 175 institutional officers (largely from international student services or global education offices and career services offices) with firsthand knowledge of the subject at their institutions. It also gives promising practices for common challenges from interviews with five career services officers and from a review of the literature on the subject.

Among the main challenges acknowledged by respondents were:

- A lack of a strong network of employers willing to hire international students, often because of misunderstandings regarding the work authorization regulations and process. Such challenges can be met by focusing on building a network and educating employers through workshops or guides on the work authorization regulations.
- Unrealistic expectations among international students regarding their access to jobs and internships at all points during their stay in the U.S. as students. Institutions should find ways to communicate honestly the availability of work opportunities before students arrive and during their time on campus.
- Students' lack of ability in marketing themselves to employers, as is common in U.S. career culture. Institutions can address such challenges through workshops and one-on-one advising to help students address and practice their self-promotional skills.
- Deficits in English language skills among students. Some institutions address this issue through English conversation partners embedded in programs and by finding early internship opportunities where students can improve their English skills.

Of the most common career services practices used for all students that were considered particularly effective for international students were:

- Use of online channels, rather than print media, such as the institution's website and relevant social media, for distributing information to students.
- Providing one-on-one advising by appointment and providing help to students particularly on résumés, curriculum vita, cover letters, and interview skills, largely due cultural differences in these practices.
- Connecting students directly with employers through career fairs, on-campus interviews, and networking events, to help them find internships and jobs.

Additionally, we found that there was a correlation between overall institutional effectiveness (as self-rated by the respondents) and provision of differentiated services for international students. In particular, we asked about the priority levels placed on international students based on career

goals: returning home (or leaving the U.S.) immediately, staying in the U.S. short-term (e.g., for OPT [Optional Practice Training] or Academic Training), or staying in the U.S. long-term (e.g., beyond OPT or Academic Training) or permanently. By far, the lowest priority among respondents was students who return home or go abroad immediately. Based on these results, we believe that many institutions may not be doing enough to help students who return home, whether immediately or after OPT or Academic Training. These students may need help developing connections or reintegrating into their field within their home country (or another country entirely). Institutions can do so by developing opportunities and guidelines for students to complete internships in other countries and by connecting students with alumni working in their home countries.

In the end, institutions need to make the decisions that are right for themselves. The best decisions often come from regular meetings of pertinent offices, particularly the international student services office and the career services office.

Overall, the report makes the following conclusions about effective career services efforts at institutions:

- They work to build and educate a network of employers willing and able to hire international students.
- They understand the unique needs of international students and plan services accordingly.
- They manage student expectations about job and internship availability and the role of career services.
- They focus on helping international students develop culturally appropriate soft skills necessary for securing and thriving in work environments in the U.S. and elsewhere.
- They find ways to assist students in building their careers once they return home through appropriate networking and learning opportunities.
- They communicate through appropriate channels for students, largely online.
- They work across offices to provide the highest level of services possible.

Through these efforts, institutions can help international students meet their career goals in both the short- and long-terms and ensure continued student satisfaction with their experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Career prospects are a top concern for international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities. A 2015 WES report on how master's students choose U.S. institutions found that career prospects are, overall, *the* top factor that sway graduate students toward one institution instead of another (Lu & Schulmann, 2015). A second report produced by NAFSA and WES, *Bridging the Gap* (Choudaha & Schulmann, 2014), cited access to career opportunities as one of the biggest areas of dissatisfaction for undergraduate international students at U.S. higher education institutions. The report explored “what we think we know about the reasons international undergraduates enroll at a particular campus, why they stay, or why they transfer.” Good career services emerged as the third most cited practice for institutions to have in place in order to help international students.

Taken together, these findings highlight a troubling disconnect between international students and the higher education institutions that host them: On the one hand, career prospects are a major pull factor for international students who come to the U.S. On the other, the career services available are often a significant disappointment.

In 2016, WES conducted exploratory research into practices at institutions that provide strong career services to international students. Our objective was to understand the barriers that thwart international students from obtaining work; and to document established and effective practices at effective institutions.

By sharing this work, we hope to benefit students and institutions alike. We strongly believe that international students who arrive in the U.S. hoping to gain valuable work experience deserve every opportunity to do so. We also believe that the right programs and practices can help higher education institutions to achieve goals that are central to their success in an increasingly competitive sector. Paramount among these are increased retention of international students, and improved recruitment opportunities, as positive word of mouth filters back to the far-flung communities that are home to a burgeoning and highly sought after cadre of globally mobile students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There is surprisingly little research on the subject of career services for international students in the U.S., with noticeably more in Australia and the U.K. Our research was conducted in three phases and involved multiple types of sources:

1. A review of the literature on the institutional practices used in providing career services for international students.
2. An exploratory survey of institutional officers with firsthand knowledge of providing career services to international students. The survey included quantitative and open-ended questions.
3. Interviews with select career services officers who rated their office's efforts as 'very effective'.

Off-campus Work Authorization Options for International Students

International students and employers alike often need assistance understanding the work regulations and programs that apply in any given situation. In brief, these include:

The Curricular Practical Training (CPT) Program covers F-1 students seeking work or internship related to their field of study *during* coursework. CPT participants may work either part-time (usually during the school year) or full-time (usually during the summer). After 12 months of full-time CPT, the student is not eligible for OPT.

The Optional Practical Training (OPT) Program covers F-1 students pursuing part- or full-time work, paid or unpaid, related to the field of study for 12 months immediately *after* the end of their program.

The STEM Extension for OPT applies to F-1 students in certain STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) fields can receive a 24-month extension of the 12-month OPT, for a total of 36 months.

Academic Training (AT) Programs apply to J-1 students working or interning in positions related to their fields of study. **AT** programs apply during or immediately after program completion. The length of AT depends on the length of the program of study. During coursework, students can work less than 20 hours a week, but following end of coursework, students must work *at least* 20 hours a week.

Longer-term work authorization options

H1-B visas are temporary, three-year work authorization permits for employees with employer sponsorship. They are renewable for three additional years. There is an annual quota on H1-B visas; however, employees of some organizations such as nonprofits, and research and educational institutions are exempt.

Source: University of California, Berkeley

OBSERVATIONS

Overall, we discovered barriers specific to institutions, barriers specific to employers, and barriers specific to students. What we learned about how ‘effective’ institutions approach these challenges is that they are intentional and strategic. These institutions tend to know (and to work to address) the needs and challenges of international students at a level that extends far beyond predictable issues such as visa requirements. They are adept at identifying the ways in which international students’ career services needs are both similar to and different from those of domestic students, and savvy about communicating across departments and channels to reach students with the right information at the right time

Importantly, the effective institutions are also savvy about working with potential employers, first, to break down common misperceptions about the challenges of hiring international students, and second, to create networks of employers to whom they can refer their job seeking

international students.

Effective institutions typically adopted at least some of the following strategies, each of which can be adapted by other institutions seeking to better address international students' career and employment prospects.

- **They engage a network of external employers willing to hire international students**
Our research indicated that one major barrier to international student employment was lack of a network of employers who are willing to – and who have processes in place to – hire international students. Institutions seeking to improve career services for international students should reach out to potential employers, educate them on perceived barriers such as work authorization, and develop networks of those willing to hire international students.
- **They understand and address international students' distinctive needs** – Beyond visa issues, most international students have job-related needs – in terms of language skills, expectations about what personal information to share with potential employers, and more – that domestic students do not. Institutions should determine how best to address those needs, whether through additional services or a discrete international career services group.
- **They educate students early** – Our research indicates that a large factor in dissatisfaction with career services may stem from misplaced expectations about how readily available job opportunities may be once students arrive on campus. Outreach early in the recruitment process can help set expectations both about job opportunities and about effective support services.
- **They help students to develop soft skills** – Soft skills are often culturally determined. Our research indicated that opportunities to obtain culturally appropriate soft skills were available through low-pressure, on-campus jobs and internships. Participation in jobs fairs can also help international students hone their communication and networking skills, while also offering employers the chance to observe students' potential merits first-hand.
- **They help students who return home once finished in the U.S.** – Many international students do not stay in the U.S. beyond OPT or academic training, and some may even return home immediately. Effective institutions consider these possibilities and develop practices for helping students to network and find employment pathways back home or in other countries.
- **They ensure cross-institutional communication among relevant administrative offices** – Multiple administrators have insight into the barriers that may prevent international students from making their first inroads into professional environments. Scheduled regular meetings of the Career Services and International Student Services offices allow for learning from each other and collaboration. Other offices are included where relevant.
- **They use the right channels to communicate with students** – Social media has created new ways to reach a large number of students cost effectively in order to provide them with information about career and other services. Our research indicates that effective institutions have begun to rely on these channels, concentrating on those where students tend to congregate and disregarding others.

Detailed findings and an overview of participants on the survey and interviews are offered below.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS

A little under half (47 percent) of the respondents¹ to our survey (n = 175) came from an international education office, such as international student services or a comprehensive global education office. Thirty-four percent came from career services, while the remainder came from a variety of offices, such as academic advising, admissions, and the registrar's offices. Over 80 percent of all respondents were responsible for most or all of the institution, while the remainder were responsible for either a specific college or school within the institution (10 percent) or an academic department (7 percent).

We asked respondents to rate their overall effectiveness at providing career services to international students, specifically in helping students work towards their employment and career goals. Over half of respondents (54 percent) labeled themselves as somewhat effective, while one-quarter described themselves as very effective. Throughout our study, we looked particularly at what practices were employed by those rating themselves as somewhat or very effective.

FINDINGS

THE CHALLENGES OF SERVING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS



Survey respondents were asked to name their top two challenges in three different areas related to providing career services to international students: institutional challenges, challenges observed among employers, and challenges observed among students.

Findings - Institutional Challenges and Challenges Observed Among Employers

In terms of institutional challenges, respondents overwhelmingly cited the most significant as lack of an established network of employers willing to hire international students as a major barrier to helping international students find placements. Nearly 85 percent of career services officers named this as one of their top institutional challenges.

The top two challenges respondents reported regarding employers were, by a large margin, hesitation to hire international students because of work authorization regulations (76 percent) or misunderstanding of those regulations (61 percent).

¹ In several cases, more than one respondent responded per institution. We included respondents from different offices and from different scopes of responsibility. In some cases, however, we removed respondents when more than one answered from the same office. Thus, percentages given are not from institutions but from respondents, a limitation of this study.

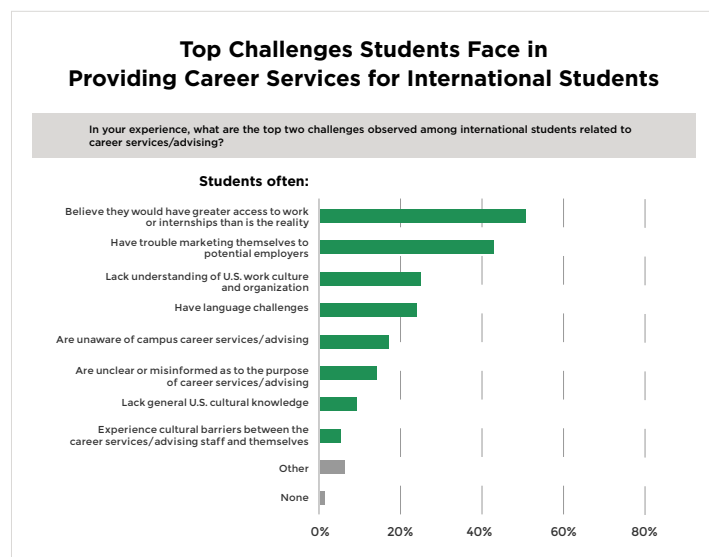
Observations

Building networks of employers often starts with educating them about work authorization, relevant regulations, and the benefits of hiring international students. Institutions that are effective in engaging with employers often take the time to (1) educate employers about hiring international students for jobs and internships, and (2) build up networks of employers who are thus educated. For example, the Equality Challenge Unit (2013), a Scottish nonprofit organization dedicated to improving higher education for diverse groups, recommends that colleges and universities “enhance links with local, national, and international employers, and provide information and networking opportunities inclusive of international students.”

These efforts can involve meetings or workshops with employers, or the use of a “how-to” guide on hiring international students. Such a guide may also include a discussion of the benefits of hiring international students, such as the linguistic and cross-cultural skills and knowledge, along with diverse perspectives, that they can bring.

The University of California, Berkeley (n.d.), for example, provides a brief but comprehensive guide on hiring international students to employers, which is also available on their website. The guide provides an explanation of the benefits of hiring international students and then provides overviews of CPT and OPT for F-1 students, Academic Training for J-1 students, regulations on STEM OPT extension, H1-B visa sponsorship, and other long-term employment pathways, as are relevant to employers. The guide also provides a list of online resources and contact information for both the Career Center and the International Office at UC Berkeley.

Findings – Top Student Challenge



The primary challenge affecting students, according to respondents, is unrealistic expectations about their job prospects while in the U.S. (51 percent). For instance, many said that international students believe that they will have greater access to on-campus jobs while studying or to off-campus jobs. They also sometimes believe they will have relatively easy access to internships during curricular practical training (CPT) or following graduation through optional practical training (OPT) or academic training programs. Such unrealistic expectations may even include the belief that they will be able to stay in the U.S. easily once they

have graduated. These U.S.-based observations are corroborated by some of the international literature on the topic, including research from the UK (see Cappuccini et al., 2005), where international students also believe they will have better access to opportunities and work authorization.

Observations

Early and transparent engagement with students can help institutions mitigate the challenge of mismatched expectations. From recruitment onward, schools should provide transparent information about the availability of on-campus jobs and work opportunities for international students in the U.S.

Once the students are on campus, there may be other ways to help them calibrate their expectations and gain familiarity with the job market. Several respondents indicated that they direct international students to job search websites that are uniquely geared towards their needs. One such site mentioned frequently is Going Global (www.goinglobal.com), which provides a searchable subscription database of jobs at companies nationwide that frequently provide H1-B sponsorship.

Findings – Additional Student Challenges

The second biggest student challenge noted by respondents was students' inability to adequately market themselves to employers (43 percent). International students from many cultures around the world may be unaccustomed to the self-promotional style usually necessary for securing job opportunities in the United States (Chudasama, 2014).

English-language skills are another major roadblock for international students seeking employment in the U.S. This observation was of particular note among career services officers, 37 percent of whom noted it as a significant student-related challenge (compared with 13 percent of international services officers). One of our interview subjects reported that students' English-language skills often improve following early work opportunities in the U.S. (usually on campus due to work restrictions) or internships. Thus, early efforts to link international students to such opportunities may help.

Observations

Workshops and one-on-one advising sessions focused on the topic of self-promotion may help international students develop and become comfortable with the types of communication needed to compete for jobs in the U.S.

Some institutions take an innovative approach to helping students master the more conversational English language skills they may need to find employment. Hawaii Community College, for instance, embeds student English conversation partners, all native speakers, into intensive English programs (IEPs). Although the practice is not specific to career services, it is highly relevant to the challenge of closing the gap between international students' needs and the opportunities they are able to access.

FINDINGS: EFFECTIVENESS OF TYPICAL CAREER SERVICES PRACTICES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

We asked respondents to rate the effectiveness of typical practices used in career services overall for international students.

Practices - Dissemination of Information

One of the chief challenges for career services offices on college or university campuses is dissemination of information. They report challenges reaching international students with information about relevant services including career preparation, jobs, and more. Among the usual information channels, respondents rated e-mail and career services webpage as the most effective. This may reflect both pragmatic and budgetary realities. On the pragmatic side, students are increasingly turning to online sources – rather than physical forms of communication, such as pamphlets and flyers – for information. On the budgetary side, online communication can reach larger audiences at lower costs than printed collateral can.

Observations

Some respondents use social media to share career services information with international students. Not all social media sites are created equal from the perspective of respondents. For instance, 25

percent rated LinkedIn as minimally effective for outreach to international students, and over 15 percent do not use LinkedIn at all. This may be a natural artifact of the fact that LinkedIn targets professionals; many students may not regularly use the platform (or use it at all) during their tenure in higher education. Other social media sites that students use more often, for instance Facebook, were seen more positively.

Practices - Career Preparation

Among typical practices for helping students to obtain the skills needed as part of career preparation, respondents indicated that one-on-one counseling, résumé and cover letter help, and mock interviews were the most effective. Counseling by appointment was seen as significantly more effective than drop-in counseling. A study conducted by the National Career Development Association (NCDA) (2015) similarly found that international students view individual advising as the most helpful.

Résumés, curriculum vita (CVs), and cover letters were a prime concern among many of the respondents. Such career documents often vary tremendously from culture to culture, and particularly between the United States and other countries. It is common in many countries to use a long-form CV in place of the one- or two-page résumé, which is common in the U.S. Particularly jarring to U.S. employers may be the fact that documents in other countries typically contain highly personal information, such as age or marital status, that American résumés do not (and that, in fact, employers are legally barred from requesting or considering, in many cases).



Résumés are often very different in the countries from which international students come. Some practices in other countries are not practiced in our country, so we discuss the differences. For example, in the United States, you don't put your picture on your résumé. You don't put your date of birth. Employers are not going to investigate your family background. I also learn a lot about résumés in their cultures so that I can assist future students.



Helen Nishimoto

Career & Job Development Counselor,
Hawaii Community College

Observations

Those advising international students should become familiar with some common differences in such documents between the U.S. and other countries. One of the best methods is simply asking students to explain how résumés, CVs, and cover letters are typically crafted in their home countries before explaining how they are done in the U.S.

One effective practice is to use paid or volunteer student workers or interns who can help in the advising process. With the right training, such student workers can advise students – both domestic and international students – on some of the basics, such as résumés and cover letters, before international students visit staff advisors.



We have a team of student employees – both domestic and international – we call “peer career advisors.” We trained students to help other students with the basics: résumés, cover letters, using our online job database, and other general topics. So, when students now come to one of the professional staff members, the basics are already handled, and we just work on finishing touches and enhancements. There are two international students from Bangladesh currently working in the program.



Mike Major

Director of Career Services,
Saginaw Valley State University

Practices - Assisting students in finding employment

The most effective practices in helping international students to find employment are those that connect students directly with employers – in-person job fairs, on-campus interviews, and networking events with employers. As mentioned earlier, employers are often reticent to hire international students due to the real and perceived challenges of work authorization regulations. It may be possible that when international students are in front of employers, particularly when the students can competently and confidently discuss their visa status, it may help ease employer hesitations about hiring them. It may also help potential employers to see students’ value as employees.

Observations

Career fairs often present great opportunities for international students to network with potential U.S. employers. The Missouri University of Science and Technology (Missouri S & T) helps students prepare for job searches starting during their first week with a mini-job fair. They visit the career office and attending a small fair with 8 to 10 employers to learn about what competencies they should develop while a student and how to interact with employers. At the State University of New York (SUNY) Plattsburgh, a visa regulations specialist attends all career fairs to assist international students in talking to employers about work authorization issues and to answer employer questions.

Case Study: The Roadmap to Success Program (Career Management Program)

Frank G. Zarb School of Business, Hofstra University

The Office of Graduate Business Career Services at the Zarb School of Business at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York, has found a novel way to help both domestic and international graduate business students prepare for their careers. Roadmap to Success* is a “required” program, ideally to be offered as part of the curriculum, for full-time graduate business students, in which students have to meet certain career-related benchmarks each semester of their program. Such benchmarks include attendance at a certain number of career development workshops, alumni networking events, corporate speaker panels, and corporate information sessions or visits. They also include individual meetings with a career coach and for résumé critiquing, use of Career Leader (www.careerleader.com) (a Harvard-based online self-assessment), internship and job search planning, mock interviews, and more. Student participation is tracked using an online system called Handshake (joinhandshake.com). Meeting these benchmarks throughout the duration of their program allows students to develop the skills and competencies needed to prepare for their careers without waiting until the last minute to prepare. International students have responded particularly well to this program. They are often the most active participants in the program.

Source: Barbara Church-Kattan, Director of Graduate Business Career Services

*See http://www.hofstra.edu/studentaffairs/studentervices/career/zarbcars/zarbcars_car_cms.html for more.

DISCUSSION - TO DIFFERENTIATE OR TO NOT DIFFERENTIATE SERVICES?

International students have unique needs and challenges that set them apart from domestic students: In addition to visa challenges, they have language and cultural barriers, lack of professional networks within the U.S., and often different career objectives. Overall, effective institutions were more likely to provide at least some differentiated services for international students beyond visa-related issues.

In some cases, services may not need to be differentiated when the needs among both domestic and international students are similar; in those cases, it may be worthwhile to make sure that international students’ needs are specifically addressed. For example, student internship panels should include some international students who can speak about their unique experiences interning in the U.S.

In other cases, however, the needs of international students may be different enough that they should be addressed separately when possible. We found, for example, that a majority of “very effective” institutional respondents (56 percent) offer some workshops or seminars to international students specifically on cultural issues related to the workplace.

WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH VARYING CAREER GOALS

In terms of the priority levels placed on helping international students based on career goals, the majority focused on students who stay in the U.S. short-term, either for OPT or academic training, and then leave, usually to return home. Seventy-seven percent of respondents stated that this group

was “high priority.” The next tier included students who want to stay and work in the U.S. long-term (beyond OPT/Academic Training) or permanently (36 percent). Relatively few respondents (27 percent) said that students wishing to return home or go abroad immediately were a priority, though more and more students – particularly Chinese (see Economist, 2013) – are doing so.

This generates an important question: Do institutions focus enough on helping students when they return home? Many international students, particularly at the undergraduate level, come with little or no work experience in their home countries. Once finished with their U.S. education, a significant number will either want to return home or will need to leave the U.S. because of tough visa restrictions and lack of work sponsorship opportunities (Wadhwa, Saxenian, Freeman, & Salkever, 2009; Pagliery, 2013). While there is often prestige in returning home with a U.S. degree, many international students may face challenges in having been out of their home country for a long period of time.

For example, Chinese students who have studied abroad, often called “sea turtles” (*haigui*), often face stiff competition from locally educated students (Shek, 2015). They may not be accustomed to Chinese work culture, and the climate of their particular industries, particularly if they have been away for a long time. Additionally, they may lack connections in their particular fields in China. Thus, U.S. institutions would do well to think about how to help such students. Some already do. Administrators at the Missouri University of Science & Technology, for instance, seek to connect homeward-bound students with alumni, or with international companies that may be more willing to recognize the qualifications of U.S.-educated employees.



We have individual one-on-one sessions where we talk about the students’ unique needs. Maybe there are specific countries that they want to move back to. Then, we take a look at any country-specific requirements in the Going Global database and we can see if there are any former Missouri S & T students that might be living there or have gotten a job there. We can then give them some hints as to what companies have hired our students in that particular country.



Christian Lehman

Student Service Coordinator, Career Opportunities & Employer Relations,
Missouri University of Science and Technology

One strong possibility for helping students returning home or going to other countries is to provide internship opportunities and guidelines for international students in their home countries (or abroad in general). This gives students the opportunity to learn about their career field back home and to develop necessary connections in preparation for returning home. Many Australian institutions have been doing this for a while now, including the Queensland University of Technology, which has instituted a robust home country internship program known as the International Work Placement Scheme (Gibson, E., 2005).

Another practice is to connect international students with alumni working in the intended destination to help the student build a network and a possible pathway into work opportunities there. Additionally, students looking for domestic opportunities can be connected with international alumni working in the U.S., whether on short-term training, an H1-B visa, or other opportunities.

MAKING THE RIGHT DECISIONS FOR YOUR INSTITUTION

Ultimately, institutions need to make decisions that are best for themselves based on their unique characteristics.

One good practice in improved institutional decision-making is data collection and analysis. Most of our respondents indicated that they collect general data, such as job placement rates and levels of satisfaction with career services among all students. Few, however, collected data specifically on international students.

Another strong practice is cross-functional communication. According to many of our respondents and interview subjects, many of the best practices that individual institutions have implemented have come from meetings between or among important offices related to international students (see also Kisch, 2015). In particular, regular meetings, usually at least once a term, between the Career Services Office and the International Student Services Office provide great opportunities for learning amongst each other and cross-fertilization of ideas. At SUNY Plattsburgh, for example, the idea of placing a visa regulations specialist at all career fairs came from a meeting between those two offices.



The career and international offices together came up with some ideas including our SEVIS/immigration advisor having a booth at our career fair for two purposes: One is to give international students at the career fair support and to talk to them about how to approach employers, particularly as people who need H1-B visas to work in the U.S. And secondarily, they support the employers who often categorically dismiss the idea of hiring non-U.S. citizens without really understanding the process. So, the immigration advisor's presence at our career fair is a tremendous help.



Michelle St. Onge

Career Technology Specialist and Global Education Marketing & Communication Coordinator,
SUNY Plattsburgh

CONCLUSION

International students have become increasingly important to U.S. colleges and universities, particularly as funding has dwindled (Pew Research, 2015) and domestic enrollment has declined (Gibson, K., 2015). In order to continue attracting international students over the long term (rather than just getting the next year's crop through the door), institutions need to be mindful of the multiple factors – including career aspirations – that lead students to select one institution over another. International students need to leave knowing that the cost of their education will pay dividends in terms of their careers. It is not an area that can simply be left to chance.

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