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Board 131: Challenges and Innovative Strategies in International Student Education

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Challenges and Innovative Strategies in International Student Education

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Abstract

As the globalization of higher education continues to thrive, American universities have become hubs of cultural diversity, attracting a significant population of international students seeking quality education. Teaching international students on an F-1 visa in this environment, particularly a Data Analytics graduate program, presents many challenges and opportunities. This research paper explores the multifaceted landscape of educating international students in American higher education institutions, delving into their unique challenges and the innovative strategies educators employ to foster inclusive, effective, and culturally enriching learning experiences. The study reviews issues related to language proficiency, academic writing, cultural differences, different education backgrounds, unique learning habits, course delivery, teaching methodology, academic discipline, acculturation, pedagogical adaptations, and support services, shedding light on the evolving role of American universities in shaping the global education landscape. Addressing these challenges and leveraging the diverse perspectives international students bring to the classroom can enrich the educational experience for all students and prepare them for a globally interconnected world.

Introduction

As the globalization of higher education continues to thrive, American universities have become hubs of cultural diversity, attracting a significant population of international students seeking quality education. The author has been teaching international students in a Data Analytics graduate program for the past three years and has experienced many new issues and challenges not seen in the past.

It is essential to address these issues and challenges for a program's success, even though many challenges await solving. This research first investigates the challenges and tries to narrow them down to a few significant issues and challenges to work on to improve the quality of international students learning outcomes and outcomes of the Data Analytics program and eventually shape the global education landscape.

Fact of international students studying in the U.S.

One million fifty-seven thousand one hundred eighty-eight international students studied in the United States in the 2022/23 academic year. This number increased from the previous year when 948,519 international students were studying in the United States [1].
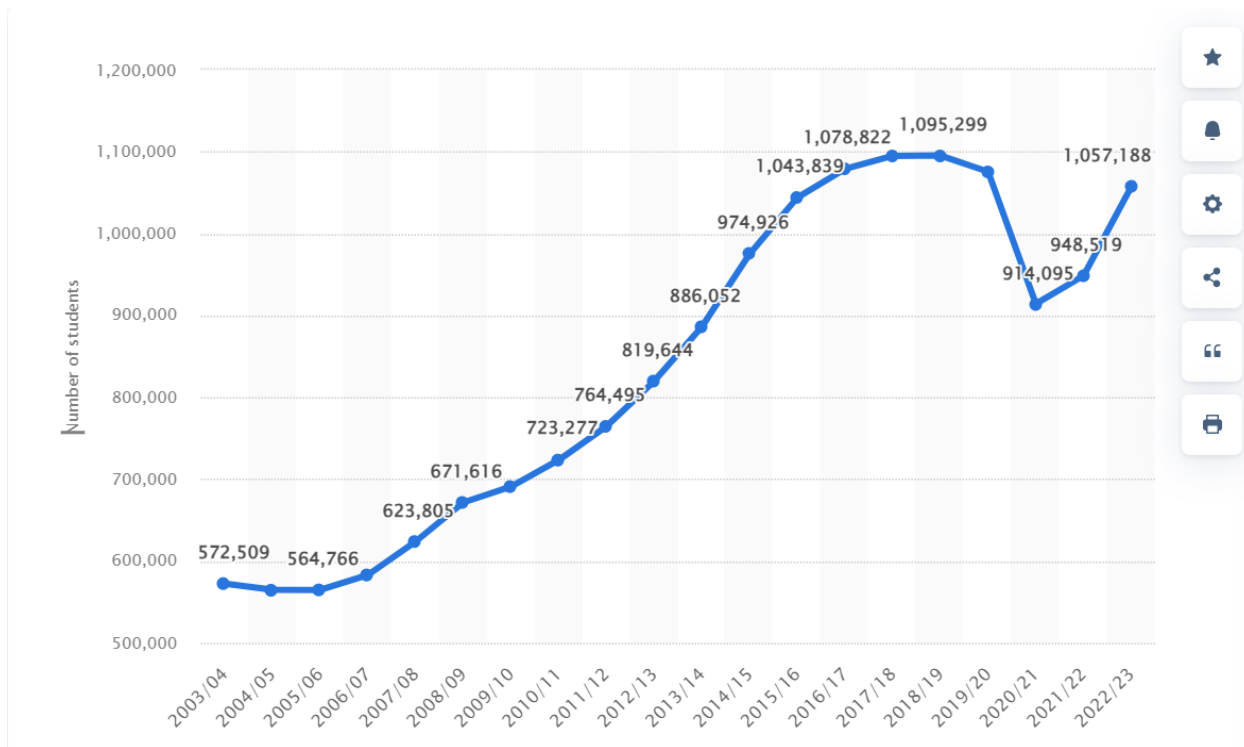
Figure 1. Number of International Students in the U.S. over years.

Let's first look at the fact and trend of more international students coming to the U.S. for undergraduate and graduate studies education. Figure 1 above clearly shows that the number of international students is a significant part of the student population in the U.S. It is worth noting that there is a significant decrease in student population probably due to COVID. After COVID, the number of international students has shifted to an increasing mode. It validates the importance and necessity of studying the common issues among international students and discovering solutions.

United States Remains the Top Choice for Indian Students

The United States remains the top choice for international students, particularly those from India pursuing higher education abroad. For the third year in a row, a record number of students from India traveled to the United States to pursue higher education [4]. In the IT related undergraduate and graduate program I am working, students from India are about 90% of total international students.

Benefits of Studying in U.S. for International Students

Recently, more and more international students come to the U.S. for their education and employment after graduation because they realize many benefits of American education, notably higher education. The benefits of studying in the U.S. for International Students include [2]:
- Academic excellence
- Diverse programs

- Flexibility in choosing subjects
- Best for research programs
- Supporting environment for international students
- Advancement in technology
- Diverse cultures
- Career opportunities

Therefore, international students are motivated to come to the U.S. for their college studies, especially their graduate studies.

Benefits for International Students

In addition to the benefits for international students, many students from India are interested in pursuing higher education in the United States. Several unique factors contribute to the attractiveness of U.S. colleges and universities for students from India:

- Research Opportunities: U.S. universities provide extensive opportunities for research and innovation. Students can access cutting-edge laboratories, libraries, and resources to engage in meaningful research projects.
- International Reputation: A degree from a U.S. university is widely recognized and respected globally. Many employers value the skills and knowledge gained through a U.S. education.
- English as the Medium of Instruction: Studying in the U.S. offers the chance to improve English language proficiency, an essential skill for international communication and a potential asset in the global job market.
- Financial Aid and Scholarships: While studying in the U.S. can be expensive, many universities offer financial aid, scholarships, and assistantship programs to help alleviate some of the financial burden for international students.
- Networking and Alumni Connections: U.S. universities have extensive alumni networks that provide students with valuable connections and networking opportunities during and after graduation.
- Opportunities for Internships and Practical Training: The U.S. offers extensive internships and practical training opportunities, allowing students to gain hands-on experience in their field of study and potentially enhancing future employment prospects.
- Career Opportunities: The U.S. is home to numerous multinational corporations and industries, allowing international students to access internship and job opportunities to enhance their career prospects.
- Pathways to Employment and Immigration: Some Indian students see studying in the U.S. as a pathway to securing employment or exploring immigration opportunities, primarily through CPT, OPT or the H-1B visa program.

The combination of academic excellence, diverse programs, cultural exposure, and potential career opportunities makes the U.S. appealing to students from India seeking higher education abroad, especially in the U.S.

Challenges from International Students from India

Students from India and other foreign countries bring many positive effects, such as their hard work, strong math background, communication, and English, active participation in classroom activities, and motivation to prepare for their future careers after graduation.

However, students from India and other foreign countries may encounter various challenges when studying in the United States. The weaknesses or common issues brought many challenges to the U.S. educators:

- Culture shock and differences
- Reluctance to ask for clarification
- Homesickness, different time zones, financial difficulties, language barriers
- Method of communication to notify tech issue or shy to report study difficulty
- Academic expectations
- Learning styles
- Assignment deadline
- Attendance to class and meeting
- Plagiarism, ChatGPT, copying from each other, using a material with a proper or no citation.

Some of the challenges faced by students from India are surprising to us because many may not think that those students may have such challenges in the areas below.

- Cultural Adjustment: Many believe India is very close to Western countries because of its unique history over the last 100 years. But we still find that many students adapt to a new culture, lifestyle, and social norms after they arrive in the U.S. Like other international students, they may still experience culture shock, homesickness, and difficulty understanding local customs.
- Language Barriers: Naturally, all the students from India are supposed to know English very well, and the proficiency level is as high as that of many American students. While many Indian students are proficient in English, adjusting to the nuances of a different English-speaking environment can still pose challenges. Understanding accents, slang, and colloquial expressions may take time. Most must learn English writing requirements and styles, like APA styles, for their writing.
- Financial Strain: However, every international student must provide proof of financial support. However, studying abroad can be expensive because of inflation. International students may face financial challenges because their tuition, fees, and living expenses keep rising, not to mention there could be a currency exchange rate change, which may hurt their financial burden.
- Healthcare System: Understanding the healthcare system in the U.S., including insurance coverage and accessing medical services, can be complex. International students should be aware of their healthcare options.
- Career Development and Employment Opportunities: Securing internships, part-time jobs, or post-graduation employment opportunities can be competitive. Mastering skills and experience and networking effectively are essential for career development.
- Time Zone Differences: Due to the fact students are located in different time zones, organizing an online meeting/lecture can be challenging. Some students are in India,

which can create more challenges. The different time zones may cause difficulty communicating and even affect the relationships between students and instructors.

It is critical to first recognize many challenges are still there with the international students and researching to discover the proper solutions for the students is essential even though it is hard to find out all solutions. The research is an ongoing process.

However, this type of research is essential for any academic program to reach academic outcomes and for international students to succeed in their college studies. Of course, resolving some issues at a time is only possible. New challenges continue to pop up. So, it is a long journey. However, it is feasible to analyze the current situation and issues. With limited resources, we can only focus on several selected critical issues for the research first and hope to get some of the critical issues resolved soon. So it is natural to study the issues of international students and their study. Then identify several issues and try different methods to find the causes and then come up with solutions. The solutions are based on quantitative analysis on the data collected from the research.

The proposed research methods and process are a repetitive process:

Identify Issues

Set Priority

Conduct Experiment

Modify and Repeat Experiment

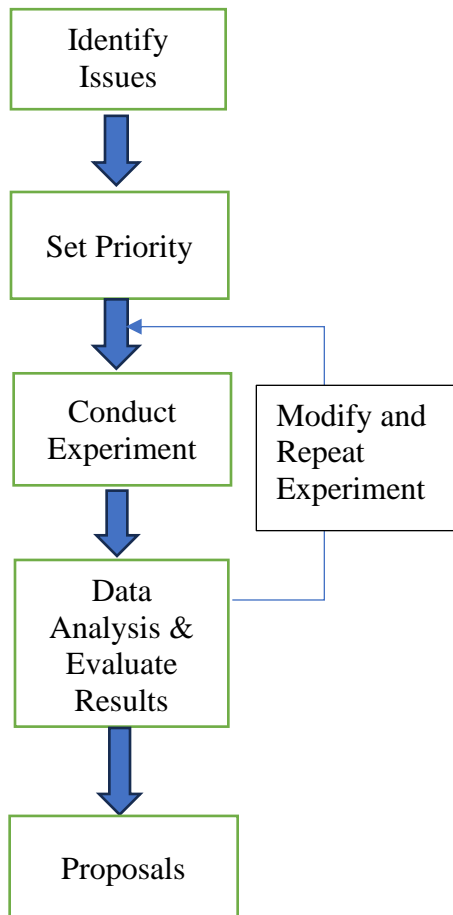Data Analysis & Evaluate Results

Proposals

Figure 2. Proposed Research Method and Process

Studying the issues of international students can benefit the students studying in the US, particularly adult students [11]. It also helps American professors who have international students in these classrooms to understand the differences between American students and international students. Furthermore, the research can help other American professors to be prepared before they send their students to study abroad because there are significant differences in the classrooms, culture, expectations, goals, and even traditions. Proposed methods can be used for the preparation of students studying abroad, especially adult students.

Addressing the Challenges among Students from India and other countries

Transiting from a home country to a host country in pursuit of higher education involves various psychological and sociocultural challenges. Accordingly, choosing the best methods and trusted study strategy can significantly reduce students' challenges during their study and post-study abroad journey. The study further integrates an interdisciplinary approach by including participants from different disciplines to generate an understanding of their collective experiences [7].

- Students from India often need a cultural adjustment. To Implement comprehensive orientation programs or a first-day lecture that provides information on local culture, customs, and expectations. Encourage cultural exchange programs and activities to foster understanding among students.
- Many often think students from India already know English very well. It is valid for some students, but a few still have Language Barriers. It is necessary to ensure students know the help and always offer language support services, such as English language tools and language labs. In every class, always create a supportive environment where students feel comfortable asking for help.
- Most students from India had an education like the Western education system. But there is clearly a difference, and an academic transition always exists among most students.
- U.S. immigration law requires international students to have sufficient financial support before coming to the U.S. However, many students have financial strain because they may have a unique financial background or financial emergency.
- Students may have medical problems and need them from time to time. They may have their medical insurance, but they need to learn the healthcare system in the U.S.
- Some students want to work when they are in school for their experience and financial need. U.S. immigration law has limitations and may cause challenges.

Students may live anywhere in the U.S. and even occasionally in India. They, indeed, live in different Time Zones. Selecting the proper time to accommodate most students is necessary when scheduling class and meeting times.

Education is not simply about a course, homework, quiz, or grade. It is about transforming students, changing their lives, and preparing them for the challenges in their future lives and professional careers.

Addressing the challenges faced by international students studying abroad requires a comprehensive approach involving universities, support services, and the students themselves.

The first and most crucial step is understanding their unique background, cultures, economic and financial situations, needs, goals, etc., before revealing possible causes. For each cause, developing a potential solution for a common problem [5]. Then, it is possible to devise a solution for each critical and urgent problem.

How to Deal with Student's Unrealistic Academic Expectations

Understanding and respecting students' thoughts, needs, difficulties, and expectations are essential when dealing with the student's unrealistic academic expectations. International students may have different academic expectations because of their backgrounds, cultures, economic situations, and plans.

Be proactive in setting realistic expectations and ensuring student workload is manageable by most of them with the consideration of addressing individual differences, designing or modifying assignments to make it easier for students to get used to the new learning environment, standards, rules, best practices, good and bad examples of work. Recognize and accommodate diverse learning styles and individual differences. Be open to discussing accommodations for students with specific needs.

Managing and addressing students' academic expectations is crucial for creating a positive and effective learning environment. Below are strategies to deal with students' academic expectations:

- Address Challenges Proactively and Recognize Struggles**:** Identify students struggling academically. Reach out to offer support and discuss strategies for improvement.
- Set Clear Course Expectations in Syllabus and Other Communications**:** Clearly outline course expectations, including grading criteria, assignment details, and attendance policies in the course syllabus. Distribute the syllabus at the beginning of the semester.
- Offer Guidance on Study Skills**:** Provide resources or workshops on practical study skills, time management, and strategies for academic success. Equip students with tools to meet academic expectations.
- Communicate Effectively for Better Transparency**:** Discuss course objectives, learning outcomes, and the rationale behind assignments and assessments. Clear communication helps align students' expectations with the course structure.
- Clarify Evaluation Methods Assessment Methods**:** Clearly explain the assessment methods, such as exams, projects, and presentations. Provide examples of expectations for each type of assessment.
- Encourage Open Communication with Effective Tools**:** Email, Social Media, and Office Hours. Establish regular office hours to allow students to discuss their concerns, ask questions, and seek clarification on expectations.
- Discuss Academic Standards In Every Possible Way, like Class Discussions**:** Engage students in discussions about academic standards, emphasizing the importance of effort, critical thinking, and continuous improvement.
- Be Approachable**:** Maintain an approachable demeanor to make students comfortable approaching you with questions or concerns about academic expectations.

- Grading Promptly and Provide Timely Feedback: Aim to provide timely feedback on assignments and assessments. Quick turnaround helps students understand their progress and areas for improvement.
- Encourage Peer Support: Foster a collaborative learning environment by encouraging the formation of study groups. Peer support can help students meet academic expectations.

Addressing students' academic expectations often involves clear communication, support services, and fostering a positive and inclusive learning environment. By actively engaging with students and providing the necessary resources, instructors can help students from India navigate academic challenges and work towards meeting their expectations.

Before we can serve students for their academic needs and help them achieve their academic goals, it is better to study the problems we often have. Based on collected data over one year of teaching 5 courses for about 450 international students, it is easier to find out all the problems and identify which problems we must deal with first. The collected data shows all the issues and the number of times we dealt with them:

- Plagiarism
- Missing Assignment Deadline
- Attendance
- APA
- Illness
- Technology issues
- Equipment issues
- Travel issues

Plagiarism	Missing Deadlines	Attendance	APA Style	Illness	Technology Difficulty	Equipment Issues	Travel
121	109	75	68	35	15	12	5

Table 1: Statistical Results of Common Student Issues

The column chart and the horizontal bars below can better show the frequencies of the issues and help set up the priority to deal with.
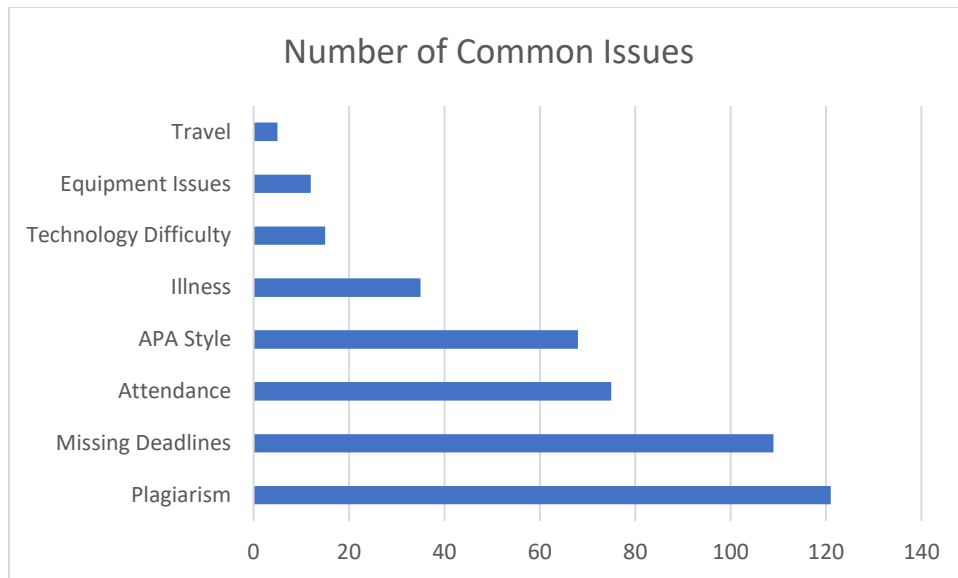
Figure 3. Statistical Results of Common Student Issues

Based on data from one year collected from 5 courses for international students, collected data from those courses find that there are many issues to deal with, But we can only pick a few to study the way to deal with first, and they are plagiarism, deadline, and attendance.

How to Avoid Plagiarism and Deal with Student's Plagiarism Problems

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense that involves using someone else's work, ideas, or intellectual property without giving proper credit.

Being proactive in setting realistic expectations and ensuring the student workload is manageable can somewhat solve this problem. However, ChatGPT and other public resources brought in more challenges because technology makes it easy for students to access and modify valuable resources for their assignments. Students can use a combination of technology to make it more challenging or impossible for instructors to detect and deal with plagiarism issues.

One of the helpful findings is that the standards for recognizing plagiarism often differ between the U.S. and India. There is a gray area between plagiarism and honesty, but the definition of the gray area often differs between the U.S. and India.

To avoid and fix the plagiarism problem, it is necessary to declare the policy against plagiarism and demonstrate examples of plagiarism using online resources, like ChatGPT, to draw a clear line or shrink the gray area at the front. Helping students set realistic expectations regarding the workload, offering to guide prioritizing students' tasks, and the time commitment required for the course can be helpful.

It is essential to select proper methods for avoiding plagiarism:

- Ensure Students Understand What Constitutes Plagiarism: Familiarize yourself with your institution's definition of plagiarism. It includes improper citation, paraphrasing, and presenting someone else's work as your own.
- Require Students to Cite Sources Properly: Whenever you use someone else's ideas, words, or data, cite properly using the appropriate citation style (for example, APA), and include in-text citations and a bibliography or reference page.
- Demand Students to Use Quotation Marks for Direct Quotes: If you use verbatim text from a source, enclose it in quotation marks and provide the necessary citation.
- Remind Students to Paraphrase Carefully: When paraphrasing, rephrase the content in your own words while retaining the original meaning. Properly cite the source to avoid plagiarism.
- Ask Students to Keep Detailed Notes: Record all the information you gather during your research, including author names, publication dates, and page numbers. It will help you create accurate citations later.
- Offer Help and Educate Students to Manage Their Time Effectively: Procrastination can lead to rushed work and increased temptation to plagiarize. Plan your assignments well in advance to avoid last-minute panic.

It is also critical to detect and resolve any student's plagiarism promptly and adequately by these methods:
- Use Plagiarism Checker Tools: Always use plagiarism checker tools (e.g., Turnitin, Grammarly) to identify and correct unintentional plagiarism.
- Use Plagiarism Prevention Techniques: Consider using plagiarism prevention techniques, such as breaking down large assignments into smaller tasks, managing your time effectively, and understanding the importance of originality in academic work.
- Encourage Students to Acknowledge Plagiarism and Learn from Mistakes: If you unintentionally commit plagiarism, acknowledge the mistake. Ignoring or denying plagiarism can lead to more severe consequences. Use instances of plagiarism as learning opportunities. Understand what went wrong and take steps to ensure it doesn't happen again.

The bottom line is to ensure students understand intentional or unintentional plagiarism can have serious consequences, including academic penalties and damage to their reputation. Prioritizing academic integrity and always crediting the work's original authors and sources is essential for preventing intentional or unintentional plagiarism.

Deal with Students' Missing Assignment Deadline

Compared to other student populations, it is common for international students to miss an assignment deadline repeatedly. The student's culture and traditions and the execution of a similar policy by their schools back to their original country may contribute to the problem. On the other hand, instructors may not realize that international students face many challenges that other students may not, for example, homesickness, medical issues, financial burden, and the uncertainty of their future(immigration and job). The extra burden may cause them to focus on those aspects more and allocate less energy for classroom attendance.

They require international students to complete and submit their homework before deadlines, which can be challenging and stressful. Still, following and abiding by the academic rules is integral to their study in the U.S. The methods below help address and resolve the issue quickly and efficiently.

- Prevention: Assignment and deadline must be clearly stated and stored in a public announcement/bulletin. Having the deadline in multiple places, including online LMS (like Brightspace, Blackboard, and Canvas), email, MS Teams, and other social media, is better.

- Common issues from international, and particularly students from India, shall be addressed at the beginning of their classes. For example,
  - Technology cannot be an excuse, as it is one of the admission requirements.

  - International students must prove their illness with a formal document/letter from an American doctor or hospital.

  - International students must get approval from their instructor beforehand and make the arrangements before travel.

  - Other issues (like family issues): If a student has a specific reason for missing the deadline based on a specific event (e.g., a medical issue or other family issues), ask them to provide official documentation to support their claim and explanation.

- State and Review Late Submission Policies at the beginning of their classes (requirements by immigration law and school academic policy) and read the course syllabus. Understanding the policies related to late submissions in your course and institution is essential. This policy can be in the course syllabus, online classroom, and the instructor's policies regarding late submissions. It is practical to clearly state that any late submission or missing deadline can cause instructors to deduct a certain percentage of the grade each day until zero.

- Policy execution matters. Instructors must stay calm and assess the situation when late submission or missing deadline occurs. Working with international student instructors must be understanding because there could be traditions and cultural differences. Be professional, patient, and respectful to students in Communication with students before completing the investigation and hearing the reasons from students.

- Keep every email professional, respectful, and concise. Avoid making excuses and focus on finding a resolution. Use proper email etiquette and address your instructor with appropriate respect.

- Offer a solution for completing the assignment and make up the work to gain full credit, such as submitting it with a penalty for lateness or proposing an alternative assignment demonstrating your understanding of the material.

- Reflect on the reasons for missing the deadline and consider how to prevent similar situations in the future. Improve your time management skills, set reminders, and prioritize assignments to avoid missing deadlines.

- Always follow up if necessary If instructors don't receive a response within a reasonable timeframe, follow up with a polite reminder. Instructors may have busy schedules, and their follow-up shows their commitment to resolving the issue.

International students often need help with the course material. Instructors may seek academic support, such as tutoring or additional resources, to ensure better preparation for future assignments. Communication and honesty are crucial in addressing missed assignment deadlines. Most instructors appreciate proactive communication and a genuine effort to make amends. However, it's essential to help students understand that not all instructors may accept late submissions, so international students must check the course policies with instructors and be prepared for possible consequences.

Improve Student's Attendance to Class Meeting

Improving student attendance at classes and meetings is to meet academic standards. More importantly, it is required by the U.S. immigration law for international students. International students must keep a good record of attendance every semester. However, only a few students understand the seriousness of the law, and they often treat it as a school policy or teacher's requirement.

Solving this problem requires students to understand that attendance is not just a requirement for all students. Still, it is the U.S. immigration law and regulation for all international students with F-1 student visas. Explaining and convincing them it is a severe requirement may take a while. It also requires a combination of strategies that engage and motivate students after they understand it.

Improving student attendance at class meetings involves effective communication, engagement strategies, and creating a positive learning environment. Instructors must review law requirements and policies on student attendance with students at the beginning of every semester or class and make a recording of the session available to all the students. Students must understand the submission policies related to deadlines and late submissions in the course and institution, and the instructor may deduct a certain percentage of the grade each day after the deadline as a part of policy execution.

In addition, instructors can adopt multiple methods to improve student attendance. For example, instructors must connect content to real-world relevance, establish a connection with students, and demonstrate the real-world applications of the course content. It can help students see the practical relevance and how attending classes enhances their understanding and skills.

Building a personal connection with students makes them feel valued and more likely to attend. It includes building a positive classroom environment, establishing clear expectations, implementing an attendance policy, providing regular feedback, and utilizing peer accountability.

Communication is always the key to improving student attendance. Instructors can communicate the importance of attendance and the expectations for participation, highlight how attendance contributes to their learning, grades, and overall success in the course, and create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere where students feel comfortable expressing themselves and sharing their ideas.

Instructors may utilize online LMS platforms effectively and u**se** online platforms for course materials, announcements, and discussions if applicable. An effective tool enhances accessibility and allows students to stay connected even if they can't attend in person. Attendance reports can be an effective tool to track students' attendance, force students to follow academic policy to attend every class and determine punishments.

Another effective method could be for instructors to offer students incentives. Instructors may introduce positive incentives for attendance, such as bonus points, participation grades, or recognition for consistent attendance, consider small rewards or certificates for students with excellent attendance records, and encourage a sense of responsibility among students by incorporating peer accountability. Group projects or activities that rely on everyone's contribution can motivate students to attend regularly.

A positive environment always encourages regular attendance. Creating a positive and engaging learning environment to improve attendance is essential. Instructors must clearly outline an attendance policy in the course syllabus, make students aware of the potential impact of irregular attendance on their grades, and offer timely and constructive feedback on assignments and assessments. This environment helps students understand the connection between attendance, participation, and academic success.

In addition, the instructor's flexibility, understanding of individual student needs, and adapting proper teaching methods contribute to a more prosperous and attended course. Ultimately, educating the students to obey immigration law and school classroom rules is essential for any citizen. Not abiding by the law may hurt their future employment and immigration plan to apply for permanent residence (or Green Card). Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a way to keep track of student's attendance. New technology provides us with tools to track student's attendance, for example, Google Attendance Trackers. The author has used the tool and another similar tool "Attendance Radar" to track student's attendance and compare their performance, which will be reported to the future conference about the comparison results and their effectiveness by statistical data analysis tools [8].

Here is a sample of student's attendance in a two-hour session because not every student arrives in the classroom at the beginning of a session.

Time	9:00	9:30	10:00	10:30	11:00
Student Attendance	15	63	74	70	64

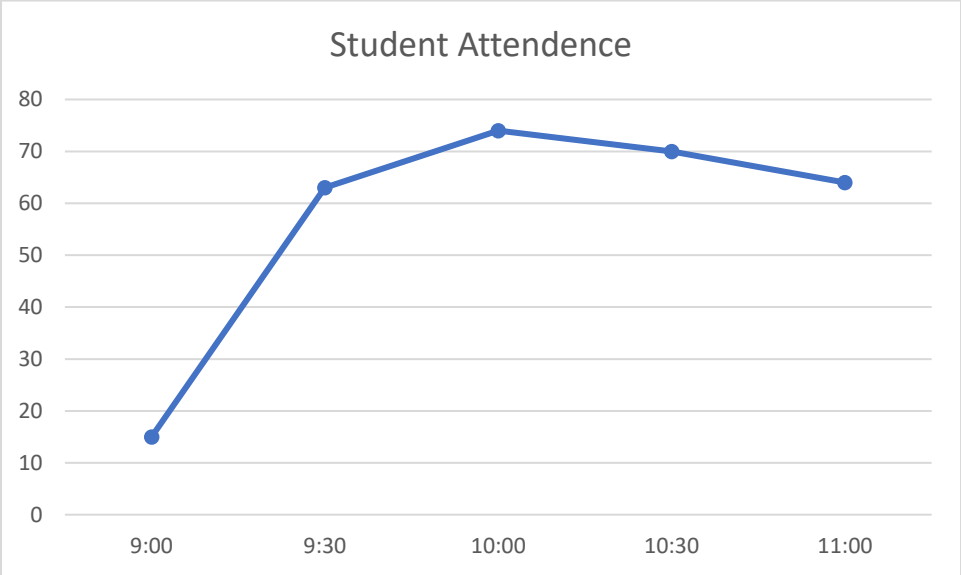Table 2: Student Attendance in a Two-Hour Session

Figure 4. Student Attendance Number by Time

Although this research can tell us the number of students who arrived at a certain time, there is no way to tell whether they are actively engaged in classroom activities. Future research will focus on how much students are engaged in classroom activities and how much it has an impact on students' learning outcomes by focusing on the arrival time to measure student's learning motivation [9]

Another research and data collection will be for student seating because research finds that student seating in a classroom can describe their study motivation[10] [12]. Carefully designed surveys from students and other instructors and classroom pattern data collections are expected to give more data and information for insights after further qualitative and quantitative data analysis.

Conclusion/Discussion

Universities and instructors must foster a welcoming and inclusive environment that addresses the unique needs of international students. Regular feedback mechanisms, surveys, and open communication channels can help identify evolving challenges and improve support services.

Although the research has revealed some new approaches or methods to address the issues and challenges among international students, the approaches or methods could be a partial but imperfect solution for everyone. Building a sense of community and shared responsibility among

staff, faculty, and students contributes to a positive and enriching experience for students from India and other international backgrounds.

This research paper only provides the preliminary results. It is a definite a start point and can lead to more new findings in the future since this research could be an ongoing project. This research is an ongoing effort. The more data collection is under the way to build a larger sample from an international students population. As more students get involved and more precise tools and new effective statistical methods, statistical analysis on the data can reveal more interesting results which can be used to help deal with new challenges and, at the same time, and develop future research and research paper.

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