

Opening the Doors for International Students: Are We Ready?

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions in the United States are facing the effects of the so-called enrollment cliff. The cliff refers to the dramatic drop in the college-aged population from where University's traditionally recruit. The authors believe that strategically repositioning the cliff away from the United States into other regions/countries could assist in enrollment growth. The United States continues to be a top destination for higher education needs for international students. Given that 1,057,188 international students were studying in the United states in 2022/23 speaks volumes of the American appeal. To grow their recruitment numbers institutions should strategically decide where they should recruit from, be aware of what appeals to international students, and understand what are the internal and external opportunities and hindrances to a sustainable international enrollment pipeline.

This paper presents the proactive and reactive perspectives in addressing opportunities and issues for an institute in growing its international student population from 7% to 16% in four years. The importance of the academic and the business sides of the institution working together towards a strategic goal is discussed by program areas. Business program areas, specifically strategy, marketing, enrollment, programming, food, transportation, accommodations, orientations, cultural knowledge, community awareness, and work experience are discussed in detail. Likewise, academic program areas, specifically course offerings, faculty availability/assignments, academic resources, faculty workshops, and academic integrity are discussed. It is important for institutions to be welcoming, agile and accommodating in providing a quality student experience for a sustainable enrollment pipeline.

1. Introduction

1.1. *The Enrollment Cliff*

Consistent enrollment or strategized growth is crucial for continuity of higher education institutions. Enrollment defines their academic programs, their student experiences, and the future direction of the institution, specifically financial sustainability. Over the course of 2023, 14 nonprofit four-year colleges announced closures and a handful of others announced mergers or acquisitions [1]. These are mostly small, private, tuition-dependent institutions with meager endowments that have seen enrollment slipping for years and have been unable to recover from those sustained losses [1]. Most of these institutions are small but the trend is being heard of in mid-size to larger private, state related and state 4 year colleges. Enrollment has been trending downwards for the past decade but has really intensified after the recent pandemic.

Research shows that Higher education institutions are facing the effects of the so-called enrollment cliff. The cliff refers to the dramatic drop in the college-age population from where University's traditionally recruit. The birthrate took a nosedive after the 2008 recession and has not recovered though the economy has, resulting in a direct implication for the number of potential high school graduates [2]. Not all institutions will experience the same effect. Regional bachelor's institutions are expected to lose more than 11% of their students by 2029, whereas demand for elite institutions may be up to 14% higher in 2029 than it was in 2012 [2]. For elite colleges researchers say it is the appeal of the job markets that gives them a better advantage.

Will [3] in 2016 states "The United States is projected to produce fewer high school graduates each year from 2014 to 2024, compared to the highest number of recorded number of graduates in 2013. There will be a short period of growth between 2024 to 2026, but between 2027 and 2032, the average size of graduating classes is expected to be smaller than it was in 2023." Figure 1 below depicts [2] the growth, decline and the anticipated enrollment cliff.

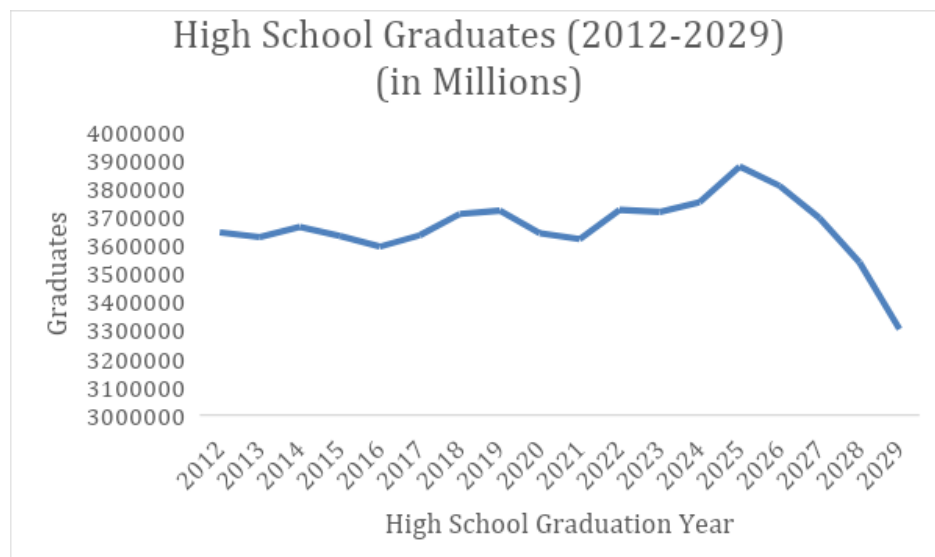


Figure 1: Enrollment Trend [2]

The authors believe that strategically repositioning the cliff away from the United States into other regions/countries could assist in enrollment growth. The United States continues to be a top destination for higher education needs for international students. Given that 948,000

international students were studying in the United States in 2021/22 and over a million in 2022/23 speaks volumes of the American appeal. Figure 2 below depicts a delay in reaching the cliff by expanding enrollment efforts first outside of the current region and next to all of the United States. It is only a matter of time before the cliff catches up with most institutions in the US. The same figure also depicts more reliable predictable enrollment numbers by expanding internationally. The authors also feel that the decline in undergraduate student population should be supplemented by the increase in graduate student population to maintain a healthy revenue generation stream.

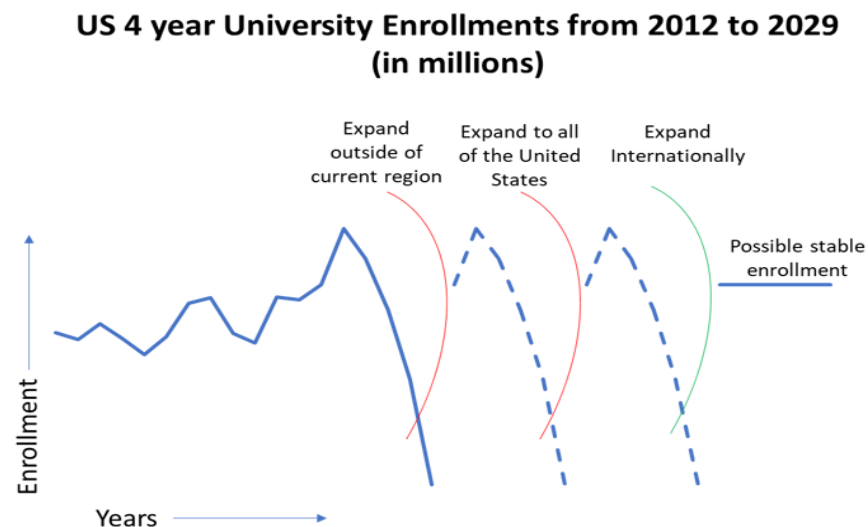


Figure 2: Expanding the Enrollment region

1.2. International Students in the United States

The number of international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities rebounded from lows hit during the pandemic, rising 12% to 1,057,188 in 2022-2023, an increase of more than 100,000 students according to the Open Doors Report by the Institute of International Education (IIE) [4]. See Figure 3 below.

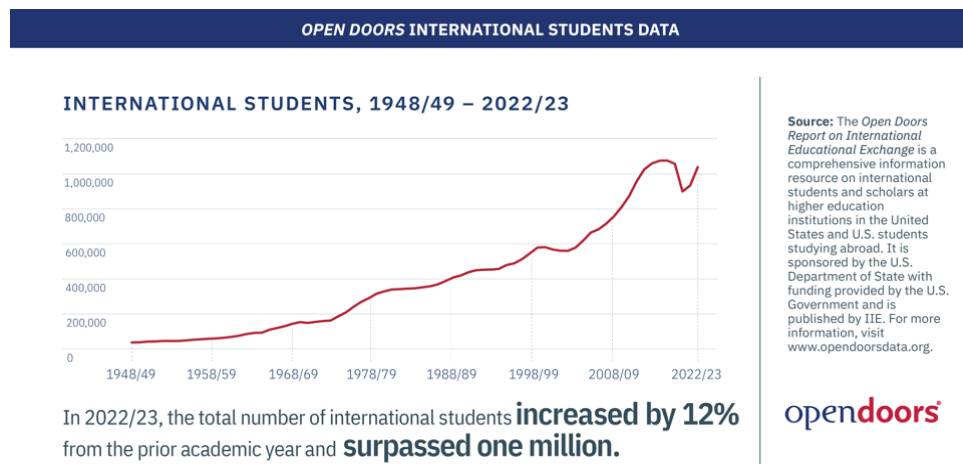


Figure 3 - International Students over the years [4]

Soaring beyond pre-pandemic levels to nearly record highs, the number of international students who enrolled for the first time at a U.S. college or university during the 2022/2023 academic year [increased by 14% to 298,523](#), building on the 80% increase in the prior year. New enrollments continued to increase across all academic levels. [4]

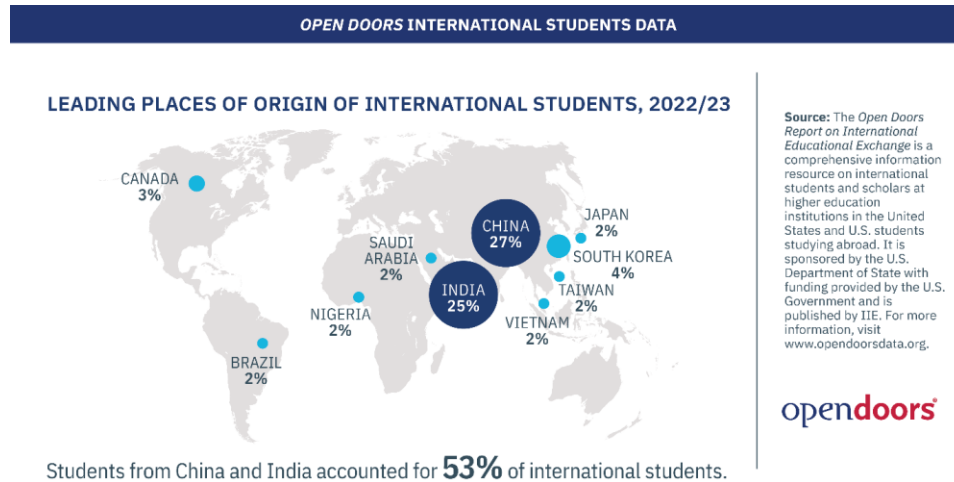


Figure 4: US International Student [5]

China at 27% and India at 25% account for 53% of international students [5]. See Figure 4. In the last decade students from India in the US have doubled whereas the number of Chinese students is on the decline. In 2022, the number of Indian students who headed Stateside jumped considerably to 64,300 while China's number fell to 24,796 [6]. Chinese students are now preferring countries like Australia and the UK due to the US-China political situation, insecurity in the US, and the overall appeal that other countries provide. This is not bad news in any way as India's population overtook China's population in 2023, India is now the fifth largest economy [7] and it's middle class is booming.

1.3. Value of International Students to the Economy and the Institution

Literature suggests that international students assist both the American economy and the institutions that they study in. Hegarty [8] states that the number of international students present at a university makes a significant contribution to the "personality" of that institution, and also to its financial well-being. With the majority of international students paying full tuition the importance of their presence in American academic life cannot be underscored [8]. Ford [9] states:

- International students foster a diverse campus environment
- International students enrich learning environment with cultural perspective
- Recruitment of International students attracts the best of the best
- International students create significant income opportunities

Over one million international students contributed \$40.1 billion to the U.S. economy in the 2022-2023 academic year, marking a significant 19 percent increase compared to the previous academic year, according to data from NAFSA: Association for International Educators in Washington, DC [10]] International students make contributions not only through the tuition

they pay to U.S. higher education institutions but also through their spending on accommodations, transportation, food, and consumer goods while they are living in the U.S. [10]. For every three international students one US job gets created and supported by spending occurring in the higher education, accommodation, dining, retail, transportation, telecommunications and health insurance sectors [11]. The economic contributions of international students are in addition to the immeasurable academic and cultural value these students bring to our campuses and local communities [11].

At the authors University, international students help support the University's "Global Perspective" core value. It is a win-win for both the students and the university. The students receive the American education they seek and the university gets the diversity and revenue it generates.

Seeing the value of international students to the institution and to their communities, more and more US four as well two year institutions are making inroads into recruiting international students, some more strategically than others. While some have had success others have had to slow down or suspend their efforts [12], [13]. Some universities have had retention issues, some have had underperforming students and many have had issues with recruitment agencies. Legacy schools, specifically Ivy League schools, have not had to worry about the international recruitment pipeline as their reputation on securing US internships and jobs for their students is mostly guaranteed.

This paper presents the preparedness for a midsize private University in growing its international student population from 7% to 16% in four years. The paper also discusses proactive and reactive actions in addressing opportunities and issues.

2. Robert Morris University

Robert Morris University was founded in 1921 as the Robert Morris School of Accountancy in Pittsburgh, PA, USA. In 1935 the school changed its name to Robert Morris School of Business. In 1963, classes began at the new residential campus in Moon Township and in 1977 the school joined NCAA Division I for intercollegiate athletics. Robert Morris University, sits on 230 scenic acres about 20 minutes from downtown Pittsburgh. In 2002, following approval by the state Department of Education, the college became Robert Morris University. From a School of Accountancy with 26 students, Robert Morris University has grown to an enrollment of over 3,400 undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students. Robert Morris University's mission is to be the gateway to engaged, productive, and successful careers and lives. True to its heritage of professional education and applied instruction, Robert Morris University builds knowledge, skills, and citizenship and prepares students to lead with integrity and compassion in a diverse and rapidly changing world. Robert Morris University is a nationally ranked university that combines academic excellence with a professional focus.

3. Our Approach to Enrollment Growth

3.1. Student Degree Pathway

In 2020 the authors University strategically decided to grow the international population (undergraduate + graduate) to take the international student population up from 8% to 12% of the total student population. This initiative was timely due to the looming enrollment decrease

expected due to the enrollment cliff. The enrollment data of state related universities in the region also supported this initiative. The University first decided to review existing programs the University had in place that would appeal to international enrollment growth. Next we looked at what more could the University add to its programs to strengthen the appeal. And finally we looked at what new programs needed to be in place. While reviewing the programs we also looked into where these programs fit in in the “Students Degree Pathway” at the University [see figure 5]. In this pathway (see figure 5) the programs were categorized into three broad groups namely, Enrollment, Education, and Experience with the understanding that some programs would already need to be in place whereas others could wait until the students were in the classrooms. This paper discusses major programs required to make a meaningful impact on international student enrollment growth. Not all programs may have been addressed initially or discussed in this paper but the intention is to add new programs or expand on existing programs when the situation arises.

- **Enrollment:** The programs in this category are front facing and related to enrollment strategy, University brand awareness and recruitment initiatives. The final results with proactive and reactive university decisions in these programs would be brand awareness, increase in application numbers and admission of qualified applicants.
- **Education:** The programs in this category are all about the student academic and non-academic experiences at the University. The final results with proactive and reactive university decisions in these programs would be student learning and retention.
- **Experience:** The programs in this category are all about students' Return on Investment (ROI) through end of degree professional experiences. The final results with proactive and reactive university decisions in these programs would help build student confidence in the education they have received and would spread positive message about the University to prospective students.

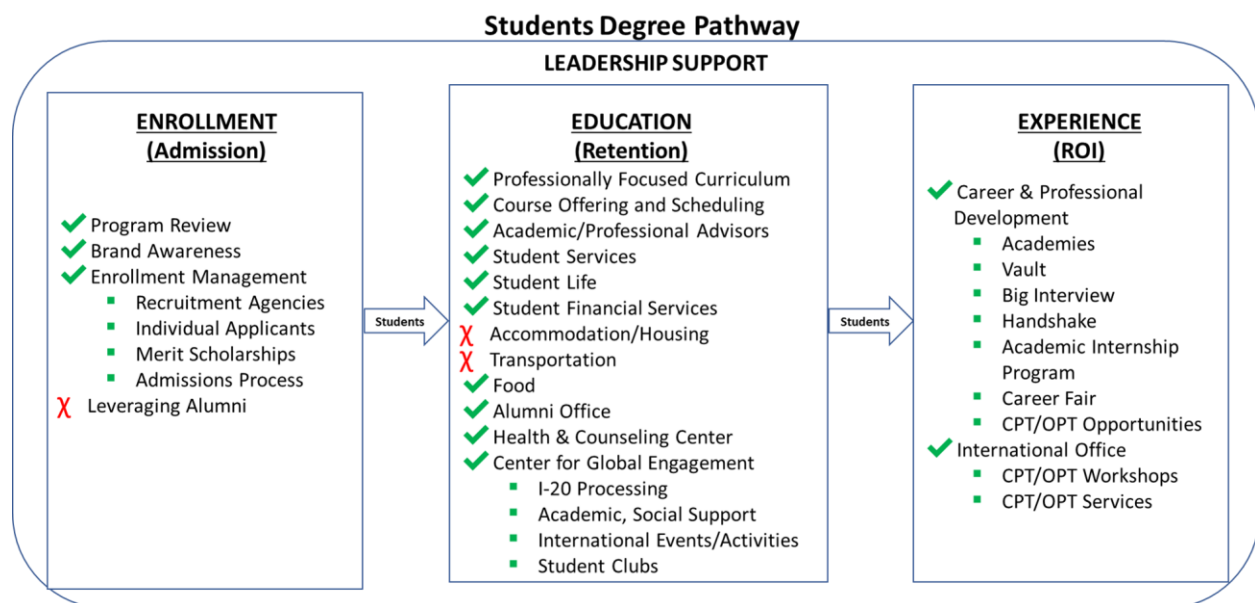


Figure 5: Programs for International Student Growth

3.2. Leadership Support

In an initiative of this magnitude it is crucial to have leadership support. No one individual or a university program could work on such an initiative on its own. The initiative needs a collaborative effort, at times concurrently, from all constituents of the university. Every university entity needs to buy into this initiative. The University leadership saw the value of strategically growing the international student population. With leadership's charge for both the academic and business sides of the university to collaborate and cooperate to achieve the growth goal it was possible to move forward. Proactive decisions (check mark) were taken early on and reactive decisions (cross mark) only when the issue became obvious. Each of the programs in the **Student Degree Pathway** under their categories are discussed below:

3.3. Enrollment

The first stage of the Students Degree Pathway is “Enrollment.” Enrollment Management deals with admission. To grow their recruitment numbers institutions should strategically decide where they should recruit from, be aware of what appeals to international students, and understand what are the internal and external opportunities and hindrances to a sustainable international enrollment pipeline. The University reviewed Opendoor reports, spoke to representatives from the US Commercial Service (US Department of Commerce), studied population growth amongst college age students in target countries, was mindful of government to government relationships, spoke to a few international alumni, and deeply understood the need for diversification in the University. In addition, a program review of existing academic majors at the University that would appeal to both international students and the job market was carried out.

● Program Review

Programs that appeal to domestic students will not necessarily appeal to international students. While each group would like a well-paying job in the field of their choice their appeals are different based on their other needs. International students would like some work experience in the United States which they could take back to their home country or use in the United States if they were offered a path to permanent residency. The federal government permits international students on an F-1 Student Visa to apply for work experience in country after graduation (referred to as Optional Practical Training or OPT) for 1 year (non-STEM degree) or up to 3 years (STEM degree). This is an extension of their F1 student visa. This is very appealing to international students.

The University carried out a program review of its current majors. This review was based on historical international recruitment, market study of workforce needs both in the United States and in targeted countries, thoughts of recruiters, suggestions from alumni, and feedback from companies/organizations where international students were hired for internships and OPT. This exercise helped in identifying existing majors that were more appealing than others. The list of majors made it possible to focus marketing efforts on targeted majors. For example, in the undergraduate level we found the following to be appealing: Business, Engineering, Nursing, Psychology, and User experience/User Interface (UX/UI). And for the graduate level, the following were appealing: Data Science, Data Analytics, Information Management System, Engineering Management, and Cybersecurity.

- **Brand Awareness**

For many years international students were not considered a crucial student population at the University. Their growth or decline was not discussed in detail and the numbers did not impact the University budget line. With Division 1 athletic programs (ice hockey, basketball, tennis) we knew we would consistently have a certain number of international student athletes. However, after we enrolled a large number of students from Saudi Arabia through the country's cultural mission scholarship program (SACM), the University understood the value of international students. The students coming from SACM paid full-tuition and were part of the University budget process. At their peak time the University had 465 students from Saudi Arabia. Once the SACM program started drying up the University realized that it was important to grow the international student numbers. One very important concern the University had was brand awareness. The University did not have brand appeal outside of the tri-state area where it was located and through this initiative we were talking about building awareness internationally. This needed to be built strategically and quickly. Our Brand Office helped in creating marketing materials for our programs and our international faculty disseminated this in their networks. We sought help from our alumni and our recruitment vendors played an important role. We also used student success stories to brand our programs. At this time, our brand is well known in India, some states in China, and in some Middle Eastern countries. We consider this to change over time as we strategically decide from where we want to recruit.

- **Enrollment Management**

The Office of Enrollment Management focuses on recruitment and admission.

Recruitment Agencies: In addition to brand awareness we realized very early on that it is important to work with established recruitment agents in targeted countries. They know the country better, they have made inroads to the recruiting population (high schools, colleges), and they have their subcontract networks. We decided to work with both traditional recruitment agents and a University-Partner. The traditional recruitment agents use their processes, their services, and their subcontract networks to recruit students. The University-Partner represents the university on ground, their staff wear university shirts and have university emails. As recruitment is a big industry in many countries and many students and families alike suspect the true intention of recruiters, our partner looked legitimate and was trusted by students and families. Through this arrangement, the University brand awareness slowly got built. India is one of the target countries and in many states of India the University is now recognized. Since 2020 international applications have grown from hundreds to thousands from India. In 2023 the University was compelled to stop applications in our more appealing programs early in the admissions cycle. These decisions were made anticipating resource constraint issues.

Individual Applicants: While the focus in the initiative may have been on new application pipelines, the University continued to work with individual applicants from our traditional intake countries like Canada, Nigeria, etc. They may not be many from the same country but they add to the much needed diversity in the University. Also as these applicants were not represented by recruiting agencies, 100% of what the students paid was seen as revenue.

Merit Scholarships: Scholarships are much valued by international students. In some countries it is used by parents to brag to families and the society of the recognition of their children. In many countries it is a huge financial relief considering how expensive American education is and not every student has a sponsor. At the University the undergraduate merit scholarships for domestic and international students are very similar and are awarded for both first time and transfer students. As international transcripts often are difficult to interpret, the merit scholarships are given to applicants who get their transcripts evaluated by third party vendors. Unfortunately we do not have scholarships for graduate students.

Admission Process: When a large influx of applications is expected the admission process needs to be scaled. Like domestic students, international students also apply to many universities. However, they lean towards the university that accepts them first. This means applications need to be turned around fairly quickly. At the University the goal was set to turn around an application in 10 working days but factors like incomplete applications, uninterpretable transcripts, unresponsive applicants, etc. hinder the process. To scale the process creativity is important. Hiring staff and adding tools may not always be the solution until a sustained pipeline is realized. In the University while hiring and adding tools are being strategically considered, part-time staff and student workers are used to process applications.

- **Leveraging Alumni**

Though we understood the value of the alumni body, we were not prepared to use them for recruiting. Reason being we had failed to build a good network of international alumni. However, in countries like Saudi Arabia, we did reach out to as many alumni as possible. We consider this to be a work in progress and our Alumni office is expected to work on creating a strong network going forward.

3.4. Education

The next stage of the Student Degree Pathway is “Education”. Education deals with providing a quality curriculum, adequate support, and appealing student experiences. Education helps student retention. It is important for institutions to be welcoming, agile, and accommodating in providing quality student experiences for a sustainable enrollment pipeline.

- **Professionally Focused Curriculum:**

The University is renowned in the region for delivering professionally focused applied curriculum. The University prepares graduates primarily for the workplace. In the case of international students the appeal is more on STEM eligible majors. Understanding workplace demand to complement the list of existing STEM eligible majors, the University added the BS in Applied Computer Science and the MBA in Business Analytics. Programs that appealed to international students were aggressively marketed targeting the desired population.

- **Course Offering and Scheduling:**

It is important to have a thorough understanding of the program and the course requirements for international students. The federal government has defined the number of online vs on ground courses that international students can take per semester. In addition, sponsors have their own definition and restrictions on online and hybrid courses. At the University a combination of on-ground and online courses is offered in the fall and spring semesters meeting the federal

guidelines. In addition, courses are also offered in the summer for students who want to catch up or finish early. First time students are registered into appropriate courses by the admissions or the registrar's offices. Continuing students are advised by their advisors on the courses they should register for. Our international office known as the Center for Global Engagement (CGE) reviews each student's schedule to see if it meets federal guidelines. In the event it did not, students are informed and a schedule change performed.

In programs where a large number of students are expected to be accepted, administrators work early on in offering adequate sections of the courses. Teaching resources became somewhat tight when a large number of students enrolled in Fall 2023. However, the program administrators addressed this issue in a timely manner and all sections were manned prior to class start date. Future admission into these more popular majors like Data Analytics and Information Management System will have a cap to ensure the University will not run into resource constraint issues.

- **Academic/Professional Advisors:**

The University is proud to say we call our students by names and not by numbers. This means we have small class sizes and students are mentored and advised mostly by faculty members who have a PhD or equivalent and by professional advisors. Our advisors not only advise on academic courses and course sequencing of courses, but also talk about career goals, internships, and jobs. Navigate (higher ed. CRM) is used for monitoring student degree progress and if necessary early intervention is carried out. This has helped with student retention as we are able to understand student issues early on. With reporting from Navigate we have been able to add more tutors to the Tutoring Center, extend opening hours for the Writing Center, etc.

- **Student Services:**

All students need support and international students need more as they are in a new country, a new culture, and in a new education system. All undergraduate international students take a 3 credit course called "First Year Seminar Program' (FYSP)' which covers topics like living and studying in the United States in addition to discussing in detail the campus services/processes available to students. All graduate students take a mandatory 3 hours condensed version of this course. Personnel from the Career and Professional Development Center, the Public Safety Office, the Student Financial Services office, the Title IX office, the Registrar's office, and the University Library take turns presenting to the students. Case studies are used to teach the students what to do and not do. The discussions that take place help in student learning. This course has really helped our students navigate the University process and has also helped them live in the community. Almost all University student services are available to our international students. Restriction may be only in graduate and undergraduate services. For example, the Tutoring Center is currently available for undergraduate students only (the University may expand this to graduate students). The Writing Center is available to all students, in fact additional hours have been added to the Center to support international students.

- **Student Life:**

Coming to the United States is not only about studying and getting a degree, it is also about understanding American culture, talking about one's own culture, making friends and participating in university activities. With the growth in international students we added

“Cricket” as a club sport (see figure 6) and started the celebration of “Diwali,” the festival of lights with complimentary food (see figure 6). Two new student clubs “Indian Student Club” and “Kuwaiti Student Club” have started and our students are elated. Pictures and videos are posted in social media which has helped in brand awareness. Through the programs conducted by Student Life and the CGE, our students have a sense of belonging and feel good about coming to the University.



Figure 6: Cricket Trophy and Diwali Celebration

- **Student Financial Services (SFS):**

What works for domestic students does not necessarily work for international students when it comes to making payments. Different countries have different regulations which at times restricts the flow of US dollars. This means students at times are not able to meet University payment deadlines and as a result get slapped late fees. The University understands that it is important to work with international students on payment dates. At the University, Student Financial Services does not penalize students unless they really need to, i.e. only when payments are not processed the day students say they would make the payment. Additionally, SFS added TransferMate, a wire payment service, to enable international students to transfer funds from abroad in a safe and timely manner, discouraging the dangerous practice of bringing large payments in cash from home.

- **Accommodation/Housing**

This is a program for which the University was well prepared for at the undergraduate level but not at the graduate level. We give undergraduate students an option to stay on campus and many do. Unfortunately students who arrive late because of varying reasons are not able to use this service. Until the fall of 2023, the University did not hear of accommodation/housing issues from our international students. Both undergraduate (who opted to stay off campus) and graduate students were able to find reasonable accommodations near the campus. Again the University did not have a large graduate international population and many if not all of them stayed with their relatives in the area. In fall 2023 when we admitted 231 International graduate students, the accommodation issue came up. This was brought to our attention during orientation week. On our part we needed to work on proactive actions as soon as possible. We never imagined that this would be an issue, in fact this was on us that we did not consider this proactively. The city where the University is located is a mid-sized city with single family homes, town homes, and apartment complexes. There are also few economy hotels and larger hotels as the city is near an international airport.

Once we came to know of the accommodation issue all hands were on deck and the University started to use their networks to help our students. While arrangements were being worked on it was important to understand why finding accommodation became difficult. The leadership made a committee to study the situation. It soon became apparent that both availability of units and unavailability of required documents were playing a role. New International students typically did not have a Social Security Card, US bank statements, nor did they have two months of pay stubs to prove sufficient funds. In addition, most if not all did not have someone living in the United States to cosign a lease for them. While calls were being made to local hotels to request weekly rates for temporary accommodation, apartment owners in the areas were requested to allow our students to lease apartments with 2 to 3 months advance rent and to use their I-20 forms as proof of available funds. Some apartment owners agreed but many did not. The University made a case in front of the township economic council stressing that the businesses in the area need to make it easier for international students to find accommodations. It was emphasized that having international students would benefit both the businesses in the community and the University.

Graduate students admitted in Spring 2024, were informed that they should follow a two-step process: 1. Stay in a hotel as they arrive on weekly rates. 2. Explore the area and move to an apartment that suits their needs. All admitted students are given contact names and numbers of accommodations in the vicinity of the University and encouraged to call them from the home country. They should call as soon as they get admitted and not wait until they receive their visa. In addition, the officers of the Indian Student Club were very proactive in creating WhatsApp groups and providing leads on roommates/apartments. The measures taken have helped students enrolled in the Spring 2024 semester. All students have found accommodation in a timely manner.

- **Transportation**

The township where the University is located is not pedestrian friendly and does not have a reliable public transport network. In the past with a low international enrollment, this was not an issue as most graduate students stayed in apartments at a walking distance and almost all undergraduate students stayed in campus dorms. Likewise when the University had a good number of undergraduate students from Saudi Arabia this was not an issue as most students were sponsored by their government and received a sufficient stipend to afford a vehicle. However with a large graduate enrollment increase this issue became a priority action item as the safety of our students was paramount. The University immediately started two shuttle routes covering most apartments and hotels in the vicinity of the University. The shuttle runs every weekday from 4:00-6:00 pm and again from 10:00-11:00 pm. The shuttle also runs when there are student events in the University. Students can also take shuttles to go to a nearby Walmart Superstore for shopping.

- **Food**

While it is important to encourage international students to taste and get used to American food, it is also important to understand that having international cuisines at times helps students enjoy the food they love and helps reduce homesickness. Though some measures were already in place to meet student food requirements more actions were required and very quickly. Three action items were implemented:

1. Frozen Meals: Frozen international meals were available for purchase from the University cafe.
2. Cafeteria Meals: More international cuisines were offered weekly in the cafeteria and twice a week a local restaurant was requested to bring their food truck. Students not only bought lunch or dinner but stocked up on food for the rest of the week.
3. International Vendor: It was decided to introduce a permanent vendor that could serve international food. Currently restaurants are being vetted.

The students are happy to see the food they like being offered in the University.

- **Alumni Office:**

The authors understand that alumni are important ambassadors of the University and play a crucial role in building the enrollment pipeline. Keeping this in mind the alumni office is being asked to treat our alumni not as active donors until 5 years after they graduate but as advisors/mentors to prospective students from their native country. It is expected that they will help build a robust enrollment pipeline. The details of how international alumni programs will work is in progress.

- **Health and Counseling Center**

At the University all international students require proof of health insurance. Our Health Center provides them necessary health services or recommendations. Behavioral health is a big issue worldwide as the number of cases has gone up after the pandemic. At the University behavioral health is taken seriously. Not all countries think behavioral health is treatable. In many countries there is still a strong stigma around behavioral health and people with such issues also experience discrimination. For this reason, affected people do not speak up or seek help. At the University our message to our students is that *“In the United States it is okay to discuss Mental Health with health professionals. Treatments are available.”* We reinforce our message as much as possible. Our Counseling Center is well-staffed to serve our students in need.

- **Center for Global Engagement (international office)**

The Center for Global Engagement (CGE), our international office, serves as the “home away from home” for our international students (see figure 7). Students can talk about both academic and non- academic matters with the CGE staff. If students need a shoulder to cry on, our staff will also provide that. All international programming is handled by this office. With the processes and programming already in place, the CGE was prepared to scale its activities to support international enrollment growth.



Figure 7: Our international students

I-20 Processing: Admitting and enrolling international students can be more time consuming than enrolling domestic students as the process includes the extra step of issuing the I-20 immigration document needed for securing the F-1 Student Visa. The CGE liaises with admissions, academic departments, and other relevant offices to support international enrollment primarily through the processing and issuing of the I-20. Most international students apply to several universities and often the university that can quickly issue the I-20, necessary to schedule the visa interview, will enroll the student. Therefore, in order to streamline the I-20 process and get the I-20 to the student promptly, the CGE worked with the IT department to develop an I-20 process in Slate, our application management system. Now students upload required documents directly into Slate themselves, and the system sends automated emails to students who have missing documents. This process relieves CGE staff from the time consuming process of emailing students back and forth for missing documents and instead frees staff to answer more pertinent questions regarding life as a student at our university.

Academic, Social Support: Academic and social support starts as soon as students arrive on campus for the mandatory three day New Student Orientation. During orientation (see figure 8), students are introduced to offices on campus that support their successful transition to the American Educational System, for example, the Registrar's Office, Tutoring Center, Health Center, Counseling Center, Student Financial Services, etc. The CGE is staffed by experienced professionals in the field of international education who serve as Designated School Officials in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)'s Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), the immigration software that tracks international students in the US, and provide immigration advising so students understand how to stay in compliance with US immigration regulations. CGE staff are available for in-person or virtual meetings with students to tackle any academic or social issue that comes up, and the office sends a biweekly Newsletter that keeps international students informed about important University deadlines (drop/ add, registration, graduation, etc.) as well as campus events.



Figure 8: Welcoming international students

International Events/Activities: CGE offers many internationally focused events to celebrate cultural exchange throughout the semester. The signature event is the spring Global Karneval, where international students showcase their culture in a fashion show, talent show, and also via national foods prepared by staff in the university cafeteria. International student clubs also celebrate their national holidays and invite the campus to join in the celebrations, for example, Diwali-the Festival of Lights hosted by the Indian Student Club, Saudi National Day hosted by the Saudi Club, and Kuwait National Day hosted by the Kuwaiti Student Club. These events contribute to one of our university's core principles of a Global Perspective. To connect international students and domestic students on a personal level, the Conversation Partners program connects students by matching domestic students with international interests with international students who would like to practice their English in a casual setting outside of the typical classroom setting. Small groups of students are matched and agree to meet over the semester for lunch or coffee and chat in English for a minimum of one hour. International students have the opportunity to improve their English while domestic students get to know international students.

Student Clubs: CGE supports international students clubs and staff members have served as club advisors. As the University enrolled a large population of Saudi Students sponsored by the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM) government scholarships, CGE helped students to start the Saudi Student Club with the CGE executive director serving as the Club advisor. As a new wave of sponsored students arrived, the Office connected the newest arrivals with a faculty advisor to start a Kuwaiti Student Club. As graduate students from India gained in population, an Indian Student Club was also formed, advised by a faculty member who is a native of India. As student clubs host their own cultural events (see figure 10), not only do they feel heard and welcomed on campus but they also share their culture with domestic and other international students, increasing cultural awareness and pride among students.



Figure 10: Student Club Activities

Community Outreach: Any campus does a better job of successfully welcoming new groups of students with some advance preparation, therefore, the CGE proactively created several tools to prepare both campus and local community constituencies. For the University community, International Student Spotlight PowerPoint presentations were created for India and Kuwait, to introduce these new cultures and students to grateful and interested faculty and staff. To accommodate religious requirements, foods were labeled with Halal stickers and more vegetarian entrees were added to the cafeteria's standard lineup. In addition, the director of the CGE passed out "Meet our University's Newest Family Member" postcards to neighboring local businesses. These postcards asked our local community to help welcome these new students to the area and their businesses by being patient with their English and by appreciating the diversity they bring to our small suburban town.

Faculty Workshop: Faculty and staff want international students to be successful on campus, however, they are often confused by immigration regulations, sponsor requirements, and cultural differences that can create misunderstandings. In order to empower faculty and staff to support international students, the CGE created a workshop entitled, *Engaging and Supporting International Students*, where CGE staff introduce immigration basics, the challenges international students face while studying in the United States, and strategies and resources to support international students in the classroom and on campus. This workshop was extremely well received when the University welcomed a large cohort of Saudi students and will be updated and deployed to faculty and staff to support our newest cohort of international students.

Academic Integrity: Every university has rules that govern academic integrity and processes and procedures in place to deal with violations of this policy. However, it is often difficult for international students to understand the cultural nuances of these policies. Therefore, the CGE created a PowerPoint presentation that breaks down and explains each of the ten violations in our academic integrity policy, complete with scenarios to test students' understanding- Is this a violation, yes or no? The Presentation serves to not only explain the academic integrity policy, but also to illustrate American cultural values and expectations in the classroom.

3.5. Experience

The last stage of the Student Degree Pathway is "Experience." We also call this the Return on Investment (ROI) stage. This stage is very important to all students. Even before international

students decide on a major they ask questions like: Is the major I am interested in a STEM designated major? Will I get a job? How does OPT work? Will I get an internship or an OPT? Will I need to return back home asap, etc. The students continue to ask these questions during degree progression. We understand how important this is for our international students. We talk about OPT/Internship briefly in the orientation and talk about in more detail in different programs. Our Career and Professional Development Center (CPDC) as well as the CGE are not only well prepared to answer these questions but also provide information and programming to our students early on in their journey at the University.

- **Career and Professional Development**

Our Career and Professional Development Center (CPDC) is an important resource to our students. They understand that international students need more help like writing an American style resume, preparing for interviews, dressing for success, etc. The Center provides the following services and more:

Academies: The Center offers three academies related to the competencies for a career ready workforce: Interviewing Academy, Financial Wellness Academy, and Co-curricular Engagement Academy. Students who successfully complete an Academy earn a digital badge. These are excellent credentials for our students.

Vault: This is a database of employers and helps students find and grow a career that aligns with their skillset, interests, values, and goals.

Big Interview: This service makes use of artificial intelligence (AI) for interview feedback. The students are also provided a Video curriculum for Interviewing, Resume Writing, Job Search/Networking, Salary Negotiation, and what to expect on the “First 90 Days on the Job.”

Handshake: This service is available to the students to search for internships and jobs. Students create their profile to get noticed by prospective employers. Students are then contacted for screening, interviews, and eventually, placements.

Academic Internship Program: Not all majors have an internship as a required course. In undergraduate engineering majors and in some graduate programs internships are required. The Academic Internship Program is an avenue for students to gain these much needed practical work experiences. CPDC has developed an application process for international students which provides the students step-by-step instructions to request the required academic credit for internship.

Career Fair: The University sponsors a career fair each semester. On average 700 students participate in this biyearly event where students search for internships and jobs. Many companies in our region are not well versed in hiring international students. Many are confused by the regulations governing international student employment as they do not understand that employing F-1 students on OPT incurs no additional cost to the employer, in contrast to the H1-B employment visa, and may not realize that a graduate from a STEM designated major can work up to three years for their company. Therefore, the executive director of CGE is invited by CPDC to meet with employers immediately prior to the start of each semester’s career fair to tout

the advantages of internationalizing their companies by encouraging employers to hire eligible F-1 students for appropriate internship and post- graduation work opportunities. Starting last semester international staffing agencies who are fluent in visa sponsorships, etc. are also invited to this event.



Figure 11: International students at the Career Fair

CPT/OPT Opportunities: The CGE works closely with the CPDC to promote appropriate internship and work opportunities both on and off campus. CPDC staff understand basic immigration regulations governing international student employment and know that international students are required to be enrolled in a for-credit internships class for any CPT (Curricular Practical Training) experience. Therefore, CPDC staff, in consultation with CGE, created a “International Student” pathway on their website to ensure international students consult with CGE and meet the requirements for participating in an internship. In addition, CPDC collaborates with CGE to prepare students before and during the Career Fair for students seeking OPT (Optional Practical Training) post-graduation, major appropriate employment opportunities.

- **Center for Global Engagement (international office)**

CPT/OPT Workshops: Most international students come to the US knowing that their F-1 international student visa comes with the benefit of being able to gain practical experience in their field of study after graduation and are eager to learn about employment opportunities. In particular, students studying in a STEM discipline on the Department of Homeland Security's official STEM Designated Majors list have the added benefit of applying for an additional two years of work authorization in addition to their first year, for a total of three years. Therefore, CGE offers workshops on Curricular Practical Training (CPT) or internship opportunities and Optional Practical Training (OPT) or work opportunities in their fields of studies. These workshops cover the immigration eligibility requirements for participating in these work opportunities as well connect students with the CPDC staff and resources for finding discipline appropriate internship and work opportunities via the Career Fair and through platforms like Handshake.

CPT/OPT Services: CGE sends updates via biweekly emails reminding students of requirements and deadlines for applying for CPT/ OPT opportunities. The office has templates for required letters from supervisors/ campus advisors necessary to meet immigration requirements for gaining the CPT designation on their I-20 immigration document. Office staff meet with students to go over their applications for OPT, typically an initial meeting to understand requirements,

then subsequent meetings for help, if necessary, in applying for OPT via the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) online application. The Office liaises with the CPDC to connect students with appropriate CPT/OPT opportunities.

4. Enrollment Results

As programs necessary for international enrollment were improved or developed, brand was recognized and agencies started actively recruiting the number of applications went up. Almost 90% of them of the applications received were in STEM disciplines as the appeal was in these majors. In Fall of 2023 we had huge increase in both applications and admits. Most students admitted were in Engineering, Engineering Management, Data Analytics, Cybersecurity and Information Management disciplines. Prior to that in Spring 2023 the interest in majors was very similar. Enrollment in Healthcare Analytics also picked up. We also got a boost in enrollment when a middle eastern country sponsored 65 students for a BS in Cybersecurity. Figure 12 below depicts number of international students in the University. In 2020 7% of our students were international and in 2023 16% are international.

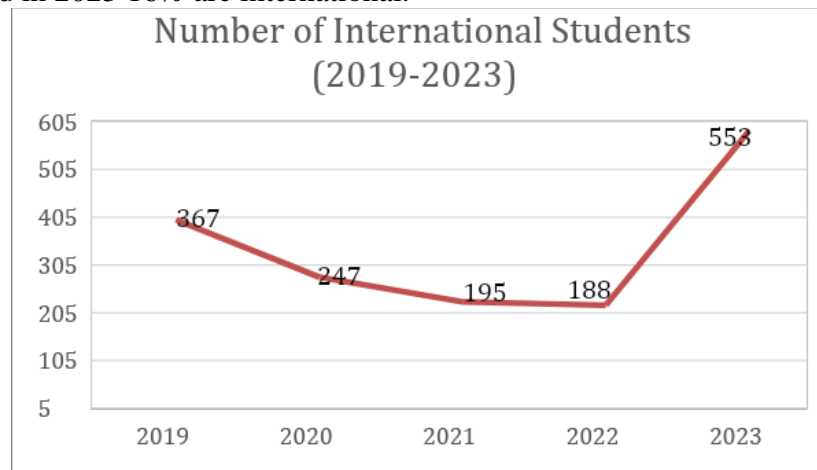


Figure 12: Number of International Students

5. Conclusions and Future Directions

For the most part with the programs in place the University is prepared to welcome a larger number of both undergraduate and graduate students into our majors. We realize that more students will be coming for STEM related majors and we are ready to scale as necessary.

As mentioned earlier, even though we thought we had covered all aspects and were prepared to welcome students, some issues like accommodation and transportation came as a big surprise. Though we did resolve it as soon as possible, we have realized that it's not only what is in the campus that we should focus on but also what is outside of the campus. We will definitely continue working on this to meet the demand of our students.

In addition to the aspects that are discussed we have realized that three other areas also need attention. They are English language proficiency, appropriate staffing, and complacency.

Research shows a strong connection between English proficiency and international student success [14]. Therefore, universities should have a clear plan of how they will support English

language success whether it be a full-fledged ESL program, dedicated Writing Center hours for non-Native speakers, or required ESL-based remedial courses to complete before attempting the university's general education core coursework. Supporting English proficiency early will lead to fewer course repeats and will keep students on the path to degree progression.

The university needs to have enough appropriately trained staff in place to effectively support and retain students [15]. This means having staff who are knowledgeable and experienced on immigration matters so that I-20s can be accurately issued and students can be advised on OPT eligibility.

In terms of success one cannot take it for granted that since we have had success in recruiting from certain countries we can sit back and relax. The international landscape is continuously changing, as universities who depended on the pre-COVID pipeline of Chinese students have learned, now that Chinese students are not choosing to study in the US like in the past [16]. The University needs to be agile to swiftly change strategy if and when necessary.

At this time we are strategically targeting India and we feel we have created adequate brand awareness for certain majors. However, we have to do better for other majors. We have achieved the goal of receiving a large number of applications. However we are now focusing on quality applications. It is not healthy nor does it meet the goal of diversity when we heavily recruit from only one country. We would like to grow the number of countries we recruit from and at the same time maintain the growth at a manageable rate. Our intention is not to be a University of international students but rather a University of more domestic students and a healthy percentage of international students. As Ford [9] states, we would like to foster a diverse campus environment, enrich the learning environment with cultural perspective, recruit the best of the best international students and generate significant income opportunities for the University and the surrounding communities. We have already strategically decided on the next countries we would like to work with and will be moving in that direction.

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