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SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS
WITH INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS AT
ARKANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

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**Supporting International Students with International Programs
at Arkansas State University**

Synopsis

This research study explores strategies for International Programs staff at Arkansas State University to support international students. The research will also look at the effectiveness and benefits of the programs and improvements that are needed to support international students enrolled at A-State.

Abstract

International Students study in America to obtain a high-quality education that they may not receive in their home country due to several factors. This decision can be an intimidating experience, and students often feel isolated due to various factors such as academics, socialization, and culture. Students who do not feel supported often struggle because they cannot adjust to changes. Martirosyan et al. (2019) suggest that “when compared to host country students, international students are more likely to experience anxiety, homesickness, and stress in adjusting to college” (p. 175). This presentation will share the best practices of Arkansas State University’s International Student Services department and the most effective activities among international students.

Introduction

International students who enroll in a United States university may feel many emotions, such as excitement and eagerness. However, there is another side of emotions that is not discussed enough: anxiety, fear, and even dread. Leaving for college can be difficult for domestic students traveling anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours away from home. International students traveling to a foreign country to live without knowing much about their new home can be incredibly difficult for their mental health.

While universities benefit from enrolling international students, both for financial and diversity purposes, the return is questionable in terms of student support. Wang and Sun (2021) argue that "international students are treated less like a group of students who need academic and socioemotional support. Rather, they are associated with economic returns, and therefore, any efforts not directly yielding direct economic returns may be deemed as unnecessary" (p. 9). Arkansas State University prides itself on providing a welcoming experience for all international students with our International Student Services department. The staff creates and executes events that support all international students to feel welcomed and prepared for the four years ahead.

Purpose and Research Questions

This paper will share the experiences of international students at Arkansas State University regarding the types of programs provided and ways universities can improve engagement opportunities for these students. The following research questions will be addressed in this paper:

1. Why do international students choose to study in America, and specifically at Arkansas State University?
2. What types of student support and engagement programs exist for A-State international students?
2. What is the value of providing these programs to international students?
3. What programs could be added or improved to better the overall experience of international students on A-State's campus?

Methods

A systematic review of current practices within international programs was conducted to understand the support services given to students in the program. After concluding the research, findings were presented to students in a survey to understand their level of satisfaction. A 10-question survey was sent out via email to students currently enrolled at Arkansas State University as international students for the Spring 2022 semester. The survey opened on April 11, 2022, and closed on May 11, 2022, allowing students one month to participate. Students were not given an incentive for the survey. Six hundred and seventy-five students were invited to participate in the survey, and 30 students completed the survey and consent form successfully.

Findings

Before diving into the engagement opportunities given to our international students, it is important to examine the students who participated in the survey. Most of the students who took the survey have studied at Arkansas State University for less than one year. Quality of education was the prime reason they decided to enroll in a United States university. The following reason for studying in the United States was the affordability and then the school's location. As for Arkansas State University, word of mouth from a trusted source was the main reason for enrollment. The second most significant reason for registration was Arkansas State University's reputation for being a good research facility. Some students used the text box for this answer to provide their own reasoning for why they selected Arkansas State University, such as an exchange agreement and to study with family members. When asked about their plans after graduation, the students were mainly undecided, considering most of the students have only been in the United States for less than a year. The second most popular option was to continue higher education in the United States. When asked about the quality of services provided by Arkansas State University's international programs, from excellent to poor, 54 percent of students stated they felt it was of good quality.

Once we asked the general questions, we asked questions surrounding their preferences surrounding support and engagement opportunities. While most of the students selected more than one option for their favorite activities, there were clear favorites in the survey results. Below, we will discuss the results from the most preferred activities to the least preferred.

Cultural Events

Cultural events are a way for international and domestic students and staff to learn about other cultures. This opportunity allows for the respect of cultures at Arkansas State University and to embrace the unfamiliar. Students can reach out to International Programs staff members to request a certain event, such as tea making, henna designing, or dance classes, to show others what is important to share in their culture. These events are free and held on campus for any student or staff member to attend. When asked for their favorite international student services program, most of the students selected cultural events as their favorite type of activity.

Aside from these events, the staff also hosts an American culture workshop, where students can better understand American culture and customs. This workshop is non-credited, and students can optionally join. While this program may not be a student favorite, staff members believe this type of support is essential for students unfamiliar with American culture and who wish to learn more. International students get a brief introduction to this course during orientation week to give them an idea of American culture.

International Education Week is another important event for international students on A-State's campus that allows them to show their culture to A-State students and staff. Each day brings a different activity for students to participate in, including International Flag Day. The most significant cultural event is the International Food Festival, which is open to the public and generates over 500 attendees each year pre-COVID-19. Representatives from each country can cook a meal for the public and show off their culture with songs, dances, flags, etc. This event was the second most popular event that students selected when surveyed.

Shuttle Services

Students have two options to purchase goods and spend time with other international students via shuttles. Students have the everyday opportunity to hop on a bus that leaves A-State and drives throughout the town with multiple stops to grocery stores and shopping centers. This shuttle allows students to purchase items for their dorm rooms and apartments if they do not have access to vehicles. In addition to local shuttles, the out-of-town shuttles are a great way to incorporate engagement and support for our students who do not have access to cars. Once a month, these students sign up for a trip to Memphis, Tennessee, where various activities await them. Students usually spend time at shopping outlets and farmers' markets to purchase items they may not be able to buy in Jonesboro, Arkansas, or online. This trip especially helps our international students who may not be able to purchase the food they may have been able to find in their home country.

Sports Days

The next most popular event for the students surveyed is sports days thrown exclusively for international students in the recreation center on campus. Each sports day rotates a different sport for students, such as basketball, volleyball, and soccer. Students join teams at random and play against each other in friendly competition.

Game Nights

Game nights are a way for students to meet each other and have a place to call home at a larger university, such as Arkansas State University. We have created a HUB for these students to spend time with each other every day, even when there is no event. When game nights are scheduled, students meet up and compete in certain games, such as those from the PlayStation 5 or karaoke, while others watch or play pool. It is an excellent way for new students who may not have connected with others to engage with others in a small space. While these events were not heavily favored by students surveyed, the HUB is still a place open daily for students to casually play games with each other without needing an event.

Program Effectiveness

These programs assist our students with peer support needed to excel in a new environment. While Arkansas State University has programs open to all students, International Programs wants international students to feel like they have a safe place to go outside of the masses. Creating programs just for international students helps them quickly acclimate and not have to fight for a spot at a large university. While we encourage these students to participate in events open to all students, it is essential for them to feel a sense of belonging and have somewhere to go outside of the dorm room created exclusively for them. The cultural part of our programs also allows our students to educate their international peers, domestic students and staff, and the public about their culture. Giving these students a space to provide a sample of their country to others, whether a meal or a display, can help them feel like they are making a change in the world for the better.

Improving Programs

When asking students what programs should be improved to better their experience at Arkansas State University, most students answered that they would like to experience more cultural events. As of now, cultural events happen once a month and rotate by the countries interested in hosting the event. The issue surrounded international students being uninterested in throwing these events in the past. The result was that the same countries would host the events each time. This issue may be due to time constraints and running out of cultural ideas. The best way to solve this is to continue engagement efforts on both the host and the attendees' end. On the host's side, it is essential that the students feel valued for their work and not as if they are there to work for free. While providing cultural information is important, it is also vital to understand that these are students who have other things going on, such as their studies. Therefore, incentivizing students to host these events can significantly increase cultural events. One way to do this is to give out volunteer credit to students for their courses or put their names in a raffle for a prize at the end of the month.

As for the attendees' side, marketing is critical to the success of these events. Students and staff cannot attend events where they are unaware. Therefore, creating both paper and digital flyers and visiting classrooms and club meetings to promote these events can be a great way to market them. This responsibility can be for staff and international ambassadors during their working hours.

Conclusion

International students are a vital part of the United States and its universities. These students bring so much to the table regarding education, community, and culture. Administrators must continue to support these students from arrival to departure to ensure a smooth transition and a constant feeling of belonging. By providing engagement activities to support students, universities will see higher international admission rates and retention for years to come.

References

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