

A Case Study Exploring International Student Engagement at Three Small, Private Colleges

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions continue to face increased scrutiny to better monitor student persistence rates and develop better strategies to retain more students through the attainment of a degree. Retention studies on international students are limited and often focused on large public universities. The researcher interviewed students and the international student officers at three small, private four-year colleges in the Southeast United States. The international students were found to be formally and informally engaged in academic and social activities on campus, and engagement was promoted by formal campus sponsored activities, international staff members' personal involvement, and through faculty and staff interaction. The students became aware of campus resources through college programming, faculty and staff interaction, and peer interaction with other students.

Keywords: international students, small private colleges, student engagement

According to the 2016 report issued by the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), 1.18 million international students were registered in the United States with an academic visa, studying at more than 8,687 U.S. schools. These reported data mark a more than 6% increase in enrolled international students studying in the United States from the previous 2015 SEVP report. The 2016 report also indicated that more than 75% of the

SEVP certified schools hosted 50 or less international students on campus (Student and Exchange Visitor Program [SEVP], 2016). With more than one million international students, it is estimated that more than \$24 billion is infused into the U.S. economy, with a significant portion benefiting higher education institutions and their communities (IIE, 2015).

Enrollment of international students studying at higher education institutions has reached a historical high with more than 1.8 million in the United States (SEVP, 2016). This number has grown steadily over the last 35 years with an increase of more than 10% between 2014 and 2015 (OECD, 2015). With over half of the total international student population studying in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, there has been an increase in competition to attract these students over the last decade (Andrade, 2006; OECD, 2015). Although representing only approximately 4% of the total college student population in the United States, international students are estimated to have contributed more than \$30 billion to the economy during the 2014–2015 academic year (Andrade, 2009; Chin & Bhandari, 2006; IIE, 2015; Wildavsky, 2010). The influx of this new recruitment pipeline has been a promising development for colleges looking for additional funding resources, as many have experienced reduced state and federal funding (Andrade, 2006; Archibald & Feldman, 2008).

In addition to the financial benefits, international students have been strong instruments of change in further diversifying colleges that in turn provide additional benefits for the campus culture, student experience, and overlapping communities (Umbach & Kuh, 2006). Scholars have found students attending colleges that have successfully sponsored more diverse campus cultures have reported higher levels of engagement and favorable experiences (Pascarella, Edison, Hagedorn, & Braxton, 1996). Further, campuses that have been able to create more diverse experiences have reported success with higher levels of self-actualization, academic achievement, and retention rates (Chang, 1999; Umbach & Kuh, 2006). With a better understanding of the benefits these students can bring to the institution, colleges have increased efforts to identify and recruit international students (Mamiseishvili, 2011). However, to date retention efforts have largely ignored international student populations with few retention studies including these rates (Andrade, 2009). Although much of the foundational retention theory was based on domestic student persistence, a number of studies have focused on international student retention in the United States (Kitsos, 2012; Kontaxakis, 2011; Lee, 2012).

Research in the retention of international students is increasing but has largely been focused on large public campuses. With larger student populations, multiple studies have examined these students on the bigger campuses and have been used to make generalizations about their attrition and persistence behaviors in the United States (Aw, 2012; Bista & Foster, 2011; Evans, Carlin & Potts, 2009; Gómez, Urzua & Glass, 2014; Hwang, Bennett & Beauchemin, 2014; Kitsos, 2012; Klomegah, 2006; Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Kwai, 2009; Mamiseishvili, 2011; Smith, 2015; Terrazas-Carrillo, Hong & Pace, 2014). There is also a growing body of research related to the services provided to international students attending large public institutions (Abel, 2002; Bradley, 2000; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Chen, 1999; Evans, 2001; Hwang et al., 2014; Kwon, 2009; Lee, 2012; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). With increasing populations, the efforts to attract, recruit, and retain international students at smaller higher education institutions must become more of a research focus. Small campuses are growing their international populations, and these increases, while not on the same scale as larger institutions, still comprise significant portions of the student bodies at these institutions (Andrade, 2009).

There is a need to continue international student retention research nationally, but there is also an emerging need to study the retention of these students on small, private college campuses that better reflects the uniqueness of these higher education institutions. Previous research has focused on international students' ability to adapt to campus cultures, self-actualization, and social and academic engagement (Andrade, 2009; Misra, Crist & Burant, 2003; Poyrazli, Kavavaugh, Baker & Al-Timimi, 2004). This prior research has primarily focused on students attending large public institutions and the research is nearly silent on the retention of these students at small, private colleges.

The research questions for this case study were the following:

- How are international students engaged at small private colleges?
- What academic and social activity resources on campus are effective in the retention of international students at small private colleges?
- How do international students become aware of and utilize the campus resources designed to retain them?

RESEARCH METHOD

A case study was the most appropriate research methodology for the current study. In accordance with Yin's (2014) definition of a case study, the evaluation of this contemporary phenomenon within the context of three small campus settings provided technically distinctive situations, multiple sources of evidence, and benefited from the prior research collected in the field. Given the small populations and unique circumstances of international student attendance at small private colleges, a case-study approach better allowed for the researcher to capture individual perspectives and provide for better evaluation and analysis of different meanings within this subpopulation of students (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2014). The Human Research Review Committee (IRB) at Northwest Nazarene University issued full approval for the study on September 12, 2016.

Using a group of 12 international student participants from three small, private colleges located in the Southeast United States, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted on each campus. Each student participated in two face-to-face interviews that were recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes. With the help of the international officer on each campus, the students were selected to represent a diverse representation of the student body with special consideration for gender, passport country, and academic year. The researcher selected four international student participants from each school and was able to interview two males and two females per institution, all representing a different passport country. The researcher was therefore able to obtain representation from 12 different countries representing five continents: Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and South America. Three of the student participants indicated they had previously attended another higher education institution.

In addition to the international students selected at each of the three colleges, the three international student officers were interviewed about their work and experiences with this population of students on campus. These officers were selected because of their daily work with this student population, the intimate knowledge they have about campus practices, and their knowledge of industry standards and the federal law regulating the acceptance and administrative management of these students.

Participants

This case study examined three small, private colleges located in the southeastern United States. The three campuses were selected using the following criteria:

- Total student body had less than 2,500 undergraduate students.
- International student population had a minimum of 30 students.
- Institution administered the 2015 NSSE.
- Institution provided on-campus housing facilities for undergraduate students.
- Institution employed a full-time administrator who served as the international student officer.

The purpose of this study was to explore the levels of engagement and the impact of campus resources and environment on the persistence of international students attending a small private college. After selection of the research sites, the researcher then used multiple methods to collect the research data. Each campus had an international student population of between 50 and 200 students, and students were invited to complete a survey about their experiences on campus. These students were selected with the help of the international student officer at each campus and by student responses to an e-mail from the researcher inviting them to participate in the study.

RESULTS

The top 11 common themes identified by the students ranged from responses of 42 for academic resources to 18 for athletic resources. Each of these themes was important for analysis in this study in relation with the academic and social activities on campus. Together, the 11 themes spanned the many areas that encompassed the students' experiences on campus that were vital to their success and persistence on campus.

Table 1. Top Frequent Codes from Student Interviews

International Students	Number of Responses
Academic Resources	42
Academic Rigor	40
Relationship with Professors	39
International Office Resources	38
International Office Programs	32
Transportation and Location Issues	29
Financial Issues	28
Language Barriers	27
Student Activities	26
Campus Housing	25
Food and Cultural Issues	25

Academic Resources

The students (n = 42) consistently reported that academic resources were an important part of their campus experience and critical to their academic success. The library was identified by all of the students as one of the most important academic resources on campus. For the three colleges, each of the libraries operated as a hub for academic resource services. They contained the tutoring offices, writing centers, labs, and space for the students to meet in groups or to have quiet study areas. Each of these resources was noted to be critical to the students' success and was identified early in their college experience.

Tutoring was a recurring theme among all of the students interviewed. Marcela, a student from South College, discussed the importance of tutoring in her adjustment to the campus and how there were ancillary benefits from attending the tutoring sessions on campus. As she explained:

It was a requirement. Yes, but I really don't think I need it, but I think that it's good because it's a way to socialize too, because it's between students....I saw it a lot and I've been in the tutoring center a lot just to help with my friends, but I really

didn't go for tutoring....I can see that actually they help you but personal experience too.

Marcela's experience reemphasized the importance of social interaction even in the academic resource areas. Cecil, an East College student, noted, "Number one, I would say my faculties. They make me; they are the number one reason for me being successful." This experience was commonly viewed by the students, and the faculty were cited as a valuable academic resource.

Academic Rigor

All of the students were asked about the academic rigor of the college, and this presented comments (n = 40) that demonstrated that each student had unique individual experiences based on their circumstances. There was a wide range of responses that indicated the student generally felt well prepared for the academic experiences in the classroom related to the course content. Three of the students reported that they thought they were better prepared than their American counterparts, while the other nine expressed thoughts that they were adequately prepared. Three of the students also expressed frustration with a liberal arts curriculum, not understanding why they needed to take courses that were not directly related to their intended majors.

Relationship with Professors

All 12 of the international students had overwhelming positive responses (n = 39) about their experiences and relationships with professors. Each of the students commented that they understood the importance of having a relationship with the professors and that relationship had to be established early in the semester. Eight of the students had specific examples of how the professor would take time in and out of class to answer questions, clarify lectures, and show an interest in their academic success. Seven of the students also had experienced a relationship with the professor outside of the classroom. One student talked about a relationship he had formed over cycling, and the professor had lent him a bike. Three of the students had experienced the professors inviting them to their home or to dinner in the community to share a meal together. All of the student athletes reported the professors were interested in their athletic success and attended athletic competitions on campus. Cecil also explained that he understood the

importance of having a relationship with his professors to help establish professional resources related to references needed for future endeavors.

International Office Resources

In this theme, the students identified (n = 38) the importance of the role that the international office provided in their welcome, transition, and overall campus experience. All 12 of the students interviewed identified the importance of the international student officer in their experience and stability on campus. At West College, all four of the students identified that the staff member provided a closet of resources that helped welcome them to the campus and get them acclimated to their new environment. Each of these students was provided a basic toiletry kit, linens, and in some cases winter clothes. The students indicated that these resources were important because they did not have the funds for the adequate resources necessary to start the semester.

All 12 of the students identified the importance of the relationship to the international office for maintaining their visa status and campus policies related to international students. The international office often served as a clearinghouse for many of the resources on and off each campus. Airport rides (n = 12), doctor visits (n = 7), retail store visits (n = 7), and government office visits (n = 3) were all identified as resources the international office helped to provide. The international officers were identified (n = 8) often as substituting for a family figure, such as a mother, while at the college. The students often referred to the staff members as their surrogate mothers on the campus. The office functioned as a gateway to services and found ways to make the students aware of these resources.

International Office Programs

The programming that was developed in the international offices was identified (n = 32) as an important part of the campus experience for the students. This programming was reported (n = 12) by the students to be primarily sponsored by the international student clubs at each of the colleges. At South College, the international club was identified as a major student activity programmer on the campus, and the students produced a major show each year that showcased international talent to the entire campus and local community. The peer-to-peer interaction within the international clubs was identified (n = 6) as an immediate opportunity for

involvement on campus, and the transition was eased by spending time with students who shared common experiences.

Each of the colleges reported that the international office programs for the international students supplemented those activities programmed by the larger student activity programming boards on campus. The students identified (n = 7) these international programs as often providing experiences that were responsive to their unique needs and transitional issues on the campus. These programmatic resources were important because they provided targeted supplemental goals to specifically help the students with transitional and cultural adjustment issues on each campus.

Chester, an East College student from Brazil, cited the importance of participating in the international club on campus. He emphasized that the club was a valuable resource for international and American students. He said,

Even sometimes you have an American who is always very involved with international students versus international....[T]hat's one thing I like about International Club: we call [it] International Students Club, but it really doesn't matter where you're from. Even if you're American and you're involved in the club, we're going to treat you as a big family.

Transportation and Location Issues

This theme was identified (n = 29) as a critical component of the campus experience by the students (n = 12). All three of the colleges were located in rural areas that were not well equipped to provide public transportation, close retail shopping experiences, restaurant varieties, or ease of walking with established safe sidewalks. The issues related to this identified theme reinforced the importance of campus resources for the international students. The students (n = 12) discussed the role that not having a personal car or other reliable transportation played in their ability to navigate the community to take care of personal business, such as doctor appointments, or simply to visit local retail shops to buy needed personal items. At West College, the students (n = 4) described how there were only a handful of restaurant choices within walking distance of the campus, and the large retail chain was two miles away. They expressed frustration about how the lack of access to transportation affected in their daily lives by adding an extra layer of needed planning. As Sergio stated,

If you don't have a car, like, for example, if you want to go to Walmart, it's from here, I think by car, five minutes. But if you want to go...by foot, it's like 30 minutes...and later you go back again with your bags, you know...it's not easy.

The students consistently (n = 12) described the extra difficulty and expenses involved in planning flights to school because of the distance from campus. At East College and West College, the closest airport was more than an hour away from the campus. The students (n = 12) also discussed that travel to home was limited, and at best they could only go home two times a year.

Financial Issues

One of the most important identified variables (n = 28) for the students (n = 12) was how their finances impacted every part of their college experience. All of the students explained that without financial aid from the college, they would not be able to attend the institution. Funding from home countries assisted some students (n = 4), and one student reported that during her tenure at the college, a change in government policy cut off her funding from home and left her with an outstanding bill that needed reconciliation before she was able to graduate. Mya, a student at South College, stressed the importance of organizing and planning her finances. Mya reported,

So for me right now, financially, like I try to make sure that I use what I need. And I know definitely...having only \$1,800 a year, that's what our financial aid work-study is, that's the only amount I can earn. So I try to make sure my budget is not more than that. I'm not spending more than that.

The students (n = 5) indicated that expenses related to finding supplemental housing during breaks caused a hardship on their finances.

A common finding (n = 12) indicated that financial decisions impacted almost every part of the international students' college experience. The colleges had tuitions ranging from \$24,000 to \$30,000 annually not including housing, books, and other fees associated with attendance. Students indicated (n = 7) that their parents were unable to help with expenses, and one student indicated that he sent any extra money home to help his family with their expenses. The lack of disposable incomes left the students more reliant on campus resources, such as campus housing, meal

plans, student activities, college-provided transportation, and financial aid. Finances was identified (n = 12) as the variable most often related to the students' ability to persist on each of their current college campuses.

Language Barriers

The interviews found (n = 27) language was one of the major issues that each of the students (n = 12) had to deal with when adjusting to all aspects of the campus. They experienced initial difficulty in classes, social situations, and when seeking resources on campus. There was an initial period of transition that was reported (n = 12) to last for most of the first year on campus. The complexity and severity of this variable were dependent on their level of English language proficiency and context of the conversations. The students (n = 12) expressed that there was a difference between their ability to speak the language versus writing the language. Mario expressed that he really struggled with "writing the stuff in English." There was also indication (n = 9) of the extra level of difficulty the southern dialect created for their ability to understand conversations. Additionally, there was an adjustment period for adjusting to slang terms (n = 6), humor (n = 3), and the situational context of conversations (n = 3). Simon, a West College student from Italy, commented,

One slang word was turd. I thought...it actually meant idiot or jerk. Then,...I looked it up in a dictionary, and I was like, oh, okay, it's not actually that. And so...I didn't use it because when I hear a word that I don't know, I wouldn't use it right away.

The students (n = 8) expressed that their professors were helpful in the classroom with repeating terms and further explaining confusing concepts related to language gaps. Cecil, an East College student from Nigeria, reported,

My professors have been helping me a lot with the language issues and everything because I speak, I speak English back from, my first language is English. But the problem was my accent was deep. That was the problem; my accent was deep, and it took them some time just to understand me. So I have to speak slowly, correct myself and, like, just try to subdivide my voice.

Students who had peers who spoke their language (n = 8) reported that speaking their native language eased the transition on campus by allowing them to be more comfortable initially. Those students without language peers (n = 4) reported that although it initially affected their level of comfort, it forced them to practice English and become more proficient at a faster rate.

Student Activities

This theme was found (n = 26) to be one of the most important variables related to the students' experiences on campus. The students (n = 12) identified the importance that the campus-provided activities played in their experiences and ability to meet and associate with peers on campus. For these students, there were two layers of activities that impacted their experiences. First, the planned student activity events supplemented those planned by the international offices. The activities provided by the campus activity boards were identified (n = 12) as a primary resource for introducing the international students to American students and helping them learn more about American and campus culture. Mya, a South College student, commented,

I have friends who go to huge universities...like 50,000 students, and then my friends are not so involved on campus. So yeah, that shows...how going to a small university can be very helpful in developing your skills not only in academics but social life as well.

These experiences were consistently identified as critical to the campus experience because the international students had limited finances or transportation that would allow for opportunities outside of the campus. Second, the students indicated (n = 12) that college-provided student activities were their primary resource for entertainment. Mario, a student at South College, talked about his experience with the campus recreation and intramurals office. He commented, "They actually provide some outings, not only for sports, but they do some outings to the beach, to the barn, like, camping and stuff." The students were also able to better integrate with the culture of other students (n = 4) by learning popular songs from dances, watching movies (n = 12), and attending cultural events that educated the entire campus (n = 6). Student activities were identified (n = 11) as the main attraction to bring the students out of their residence hall rooms to socialize

with the American students on campus. The students also indicated (n = 7) that participation in student activities also provided leadership opportunities for them on campus that enhanced their campus experiences. These opportunities helped them have more opportunities for engagement in planning these events and in socializing with students on campus. Chester, a student at East College, commented,

So sometimes they don't understand or know a lot from our culture. So one thing we like about the international club, that I personally like, is receiving the American people to our club and interacting with us. And then they get to know something new about our culture.

The students (n = 7) also explained that their college made intentional efforts to integrate cultural programs in their regular student activity schedules and encouraged participation from the international students.

Campus Housing

The students (n = 12) identified that they had lived in campus housing for at least one year. At the time of the interviews, most of the students (n = 11) reported that they continued to live on the campus. Campus housing was another critical resource for the students at each of the colleges. As identified in other themes, the students' finances, lack of transportation, location, and language barriers all contributed to the importance of living on campus. Sophia, a student attending West College, commented,

There are a lot of factors that go into the transition. It's not as easy as people think and, well, it could be easy for some people if you quickly adapt, but it depends on how quickly you can...adapt to the culture. I've never been used to living in a confined space, but coming here, that was something that they offered, and I couldn't afford to stay off campus as an international. So I had to adapt to the culture, and it wasn't easy.

There were no formal policies regarding the placement of international students with American students, but those students (n = 6) who had experienced this type of rooming assignment experienced a variety

of issues related to language, culture, and cleanliness. Overall, they found that the experiences assisted their adjustment to the campus and English language proficiency.

Campus housing was a necessity for the students ($n = 12$) when they first arrived on campus because of issues related to small towns, lack of cash to rent an apartment, lack of documentation to complete an apartment rental, and campus policies prohibiting students from living off campus. Access to campus housing also provided access to the cafeteria and guaranteed daily meals for the students. All three of the colleges had developed flexible policies that provided some opportunities for students to remain on campus during campus breaks. However, the students were charged additional fees for the periods during semester breaks. Mya reported she often traveled or went home with American friends because she could not afford to pay the fees over the break. She commented, "That's why when it's vacations and stuff, I go to...people I know in the U.S....[T]hey have houses so I don't have to pay for housing at least." The students noted ($n = 4$) that they stayed with local American students, traveled ($n = 3$), returned home ($n = 5$), and remained on campus during at least one of the breaks ($n = 10$). The students ($n = 7$) expressed frustration that they did not have access to apartments with kitchens during their first year on campus to be able to cook their own meals. However, it provided additional opportunity for these students to meet other international students on campus with kitchens, which offered them social experiences over meals cooked in campus housing.

Food and Cultural Issues

One of the most important identified issues on campus ($n = 25$) related to adjustment and overall satisfaction was food and the difficulty adjusting to American-style cuisine. The students ($n = 12$) indicated that it was the most consistent issue they experienced from the first day on campus though their senior year. The difficulty in adjusting to the meals was complicated by the small colleges' inability to offer multiple restaurants on the campus. For East College and West College, they had one primary cafeteria that served traditional meal plans. At South College, the campus was large enough to offer a few campus alternatives. However, the students indicated ($n = 9$) that American-style food was not as healthy as they were accustomed to in their home countries. Simon, a West College student, commented that meal selections and times were all issues he had to learn to adapt to. He commented,

You get through it because it's just food and you eat it, but like, the time...like lunch at 11, dinner at five, and what do you have to eat? That's something that for us is almost totally off the wall....At home we have lunch at two and dinner at nine and we eat different things. So that's something you have to live, understand how to deal with.

The students indicated (n = 8) that the campuses tried to offer some cultural options, but these efforts were not sufficient. The most positive feedback on campus meals was related to days when common international cuisine, such as Mexican or Chinese, was offered.

The difficulty adjusting to American cuisine had implications in other areas of the students' lives, such as residential assignments, finances, and student activities. Residential assignments (n = 6) were identified as important for spaces that provided kitchens on campus, allowing them to prepare their own meals. Also, it allowed for additional socialization and acculturation by sharing those experiences with other students. Yet, the necessity to cook meals in apartment kitchens or seek food off campus contributed to the financial strain of these students. Finally, the students indicated (n = 4) that campus activities often provided popular food, such as pizza and subs, which provided extra incentive to attend the events.

Table 2. Top Frequent Codes from International Officer Interviews

International Officer	Number of Responses
Need for Additional Financial Resources	18
Academic Resources	17
Athletic Resources	17
International Office Resources	15
Administrative Bureaucracy	14
Student Financial Issues	14

International Student Officer Themes

The six most common themes identified by the international officers ranged from a response of 18 for need for additional financial resources to nine for cultural issues. Each of these identified themes were important for analyzing the usefulness of social and academic resources in retaining students and student awareness of academic resources on campus. Together,

the eight themes identified areas that overlapped with information obtained from the student interviews.

Need for Additional Financial Resources

The importance of an adequately funded office to support student programming was a commonly reported theme (n = 18). East College and West College reported that the international student offices were managed by one professional with limited budget funds. Laurica reported that she was the primary international student officer, but that responsibility was on top of her full-time duties as a faculty member at the college. Maria indicated she was the only officer, and her full-time responsibilities were associated with the operation of international student services on campus. At West College, the funds covered a few trips, holiday meals, and other services annually. However, Maria indicated that the current budget was a fraction of what could be used to better provide services more consistently throughout the year. Maria reported,

We've been working a lot this year with trying to get more things going on and getting more money to do things so that kids aren't bored and want to stay and don't have too many complications. So previously, the resources have been difficult; they've told me no to things.

At East College, Laurica reported that she had supplemented international program funds with support from local churches. This support had come from donations, dinners, and church events. South College also reported local churches had assisted international students by providing meals and other events in the community, such as sponsor families for the students. Laurica commented, "One church helped me pay for the students. And then they, power bills and everything...we paid the students to split that and then paid it." West College also reported that extra support had been provided by community members who had expressed an interest in assisting with the international students on campus.

South College had the most robust office operations with multiple staff members and funding for all stages from recruitment to programming on campus. This office supplied students with printed materials, such as brochures and a handbook, and hosted a digital presence on the college's website. West College did not provide any printed materials for the students

or website presence specifically dedicated to international student services. Maria often had to use her personal vehicle to transport students due to no campus-owned vehicles. She also reported that she had access to funds to assist with providing meals for the holidays and breaks. At East College, there were few college-dedicated funds for international student programming. Laurica reported using her personal vehicle to transport students and used her house to host meals for the students.

Campus financing of international programs on campus is a critical issue for the long-term sustainability of programs. Lack of resources for transportation and limited staff support at East College and West College demonstrated the budget constraints of a program at a small private campus. These programs were contingent on the administration of the programs by one staff member serving a student population with unique circumstances and needs on campus.

Academic Resources

The staff member interviews (n = 17) supported the overall positive views shared by the students about academic resources on the campus. The staff members indicated that the library was an important resource on the campus and described the availability of a writing center, labs, tutoring, and study space in those areas. The staff reported (n = 3) that international students often used these resources, and often at higher rates than those of the American students. These resources were discovered through campus promotions, international officer referrals, faculty referrals, and peer recommendations. Laurica reported that students often learned about resources from “word of mouth, through me sometimes...or sometimes through their own peers, their friends, and other internationals.”

The academic resources provided on campus were reported to be one of the strongest aspects of the campus efforts to assist international students. The staff members indicated that there were no special services specifically for internationals but rather existing services designated to serve the entire campus community. The officers also reported that faculty members were very responsive to the students’ needs in and out of the classroom. They commented on the faculty members who ate with the students in the cafeteria, at local restaurants, and in their homes. They also suggested that faculty members supported the students at athletic events, performances, and other activities on campus.

Athletic Resources

Resources provided through the students' participation in athletics was another commonly identified theme (n = 17) among the staff members (n = 3). Each of the officers reported a continued relationship with coaches and other athletic staff members. The relationship was often formed when the students were making plans to arrive on campus. At West College, the officer helped pick up students from the airport, provided them with keys to their room, and helped them get adjusted to the campus. At East College, the officer picked up the students from the airport, provided toiletries and linens, and helped them get established on campus. Both of these campuses had the largest number of international students participating in athletics (n = 7), as their students were most dependent on athletic scholarships. Each of these officers reported having significant professional relationships with the coaches to assist the students with campus needs.

International Office Resources

This theme emerged with responses (n = 15) related to the need to provide resources through the office to help students adjust to the campus. All three of the offices reported the need to assist students with visa documents and other government forms, such as obtaining social security cards so that the students could work in the United States. Laurica reported,

I do a workshop on SEVIS to tell them what it means to be on status, out of status, what it means. Right now, I have one kid that most likely would have been out of status because he has just 12 hours. He's failing one class, and I had to call him and tell him...he has no cushion.

There were also consistent findings demonstrating that these students relied heavily on campus-sponsored transportation. All three colleges reported that providing weekly trips to retail stores, doctor offices, entertainment venues, and other areas was a critical resource needed by the students. The interviews confirmed the limited ability for these students to live off campus, own cars, or have access to local resources without some access to transportation. For East College and West College, the majority of all resources were provided and managed by one staff member to plan, organize, and administer to the students.

Administrative Bureaucracy

One of the minor themes that emerged from the interviews (n = 14) was related to some of the difficulties that the staff experienced in administering the international student programs. The interviews demonstrated that the overall communication and administration of international student services were inconsistent and varied greatly between the three colleges. At East College, the officer expressed frustration about the lack of communication between the admitting office and her office. Laurica struggled to get accurate lists of new arriving international students in a timely fashion that allowed her to be prepared for their arrival on campus. She reported that there were circumstances every semester when she found out about a new student from a coach or another student. She indicated she had been working to streamline the process so that admissions, athletics, and the international office could more effectively communicate to prepare for the students' arrival on campus. This communication may have been more disconnected because her office was located in an academic building and away from other student service offices.

At South College, the international student office was more robust and worked in cooperation with the Student Affairs office. Because this office was responsible for every aspect of recruiting the students to management and programming, it was a more seamless operation. The office was conveniently located in the student center that operated as a hub for student involvement on campus. The structure of this office supported collaborative programming with Student Affairs, which provided most of the student service resources on the campus.

At East College, the international student office was located within the Student Affairs department. This organization provided for more cooperation between other student service areas. Maria suggested that additional strides could be made in the communication between her office and other campus offices to better serve the students. The rural location of the college was also identified as a contributor in the difficulties to provide student services. She noted that there was only one car rental agency in town, and because the college did not own any vehicles, she competed with other offices to rent vehicles.

Student Financial Issues

Like the student interviews, the staff interviews produced a theme (n = 14) related to the financial issues that students experienced on campus.

The interviews produced overlapping themes with the students about their ability to work only on campus due to government regulations. Those students without additional family financial support were then limited to whatever funds the students could earn through campus employment. The officers from East College and West College reported that financial constraints were especially tough on international student athletes who did not have much support from their families. Due to the nature of their sports, practice times and competitions severely limited their ability to maintain meaningful campus employment hours.

The South College officer reported that there were not as many international student athletes on her campus, as compared to other private schools, because they had a partnership with a large grant organization that provided most of the financial assistance for their students. This financial assistance ranged from partial to complete coverage of all student expenses and allowed the students to have less of a time commitment to an extracurricular activity. This grant organization was the primary driver in allowing the college to have 200 international students on campus.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

There are a number of variables that affect a college's ability to retain international students through graduation. The students understood the importance of participating in campus events, and this understanding extended in both the social and academic areas college experiences. The experiences of the students represented active involvement in groups organized by international student peers and offices, formal and informal relationships in and out of the classroom, and knowledge of the importance of attending campus sponsored events. The on-campus experiences were critical gateways for allowing the international students to become more proficient in English, fostering relationships that assisted with cultural integration, and utilizing campus resources that provided critical student services.

The staff participants in this study expressed a sincere personal commitment to the international students that often extended beyond the expected job descriptions. The staff indicated that the international students were a unique and valuable population on the college's campus. The interviews revealed that the staff members were often a large factor in providing student services and resources, making the students aware of these

resources, and using campus networking with faculty, staff, and students to identify those in need of extra assistance. The staff appreciated their important role as family surrogates for many of the students and had a firm understanding that culture, language, and other variables such as finances and transportation factored largely into their ability to acculturate into the campus community.

While each college demonstrated a strong commitment to one-to-one attention to these students, there was a large gap in the overall institutional assessment of these services and student satisfaction inventories designed specifically for measuring international student experiences on the campus. Each of the colleges were identified as participants in the 2015 NSSE survey, but none of the colleges reported to use the survey to analyze the international student responses for assessment purposes. The staff indicated that while there were efforts to monitor the overall student retention numbers on campus, little effort or focus had been dedicated to monitoring the retention of international student sub-populations. The officers demonstrated extensive knowledge of their students, personal situations, and examples of how the campus faculty and staff had worked to assist these students with their experiences. However, there was a lack of demonstrated efforts to coordinate retention strategies among these same constituencies.

The staff and students confirmed the importance of participation in campus academic and social activities. The students demonstrated a high level of personal interaction with faculty members that established foundational relationships identified to assist their overall performance and satisfaction in the classroom. The international students understood the importance of establishing relationships with their professors and often chose the small college experience because of those personal opportunities. The staff and students identified the critical role that the international club played in the life of students on campus in relation to academic resource referrals, social programming, and cultural acculturation for the students. Further, the international students participated in campus activities at a high rate demonstrating the important role of these social activities in their college careers.

The staff and students reported that international students are aware of and do utilize campus resources designed to retain students at the institution. At each of the colleges, the academic resources were generally designed and designated for use among the entire student population on

campus. There were not specialty academic services designed for exclusive use of the international students but the students confirmed that the academic resources provided did meet their expectations and were useful. The library was identified as the primary academic resource hub at each of the colleges. The centralization of services such as the writing center, labs, tutoring, and study space all made the library a critical resource for international students. The students identified that awareness of the resources was largely due to informal communication between faculty, staff, and other students. None of the students identified a formal advertisement or online location for service identification. Rather, their awareness of these resources often resulted from casual conversations with peers, international officers, and faculty members.

This study underscores the importance of international students integrating into the campus community through academic and social engagement. In particular, the students were found to be engaged at high levels through both informal and formal interactions, academic and social activity attendance, and leadership activities within those same experiences. This study highlights the need for small colleges to design assessment measures to evaluate international student experiences on campus and their roles in retaining the students.

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