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PLUS International Enrollment Management Supplement

By Dana Wilkie

Assessment 101: Measuring the Success of International Student Integration

AT THE STATE UNIVERSITY of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz this fall, 16 students will move into three suites at Crispell Hall set aside for one purpose—to pair U.S. students studying either the romantic languages or Latin American culture with students from France, Italy, Latin America, and Spain.

The program—the Romance Languages Living and Learning Community (RLLLC)—is one of two at the New Paltz campus designed to integrate students from abroad into the school community.

“We have had considerable success using living learning communities to integrate international students,” said Bruce Sillner, dean of the Center for International Programs at the New Paltz campus, who notes that the second program allows domestic students studying Chinese and Japanese to live with students from China and Japan. “We pair as roommates an international student with an American student who might be an area-studies or language major, or may have, or intend to, study abroad. The [students] plan a wide range of activities—lectures, film series, field trips, as well as culinary events.”

The program sounds like a sure way to acclimate foreign students to a U.S. university. But how can international

student advisers and others on campus actually measure how well—how fully—international students are integrating into a school? And how does such an assessment benefit the institution and future international students?

Those who lead university integration programs say that measuring those programs starts with a firm definition of “integration,” requires a clear idea of why integration is important to a school, sometimes demands exhaustive surveys, focus groups, and research, and can never be left solely to international programs, but is instead a campuswide effort involving faculty, academic departments, and domestic students.

“Without the assessment of efforts to integrate international students, there would be no way of knowing whether or not [students] are becoming integrated,” said Sarah McClanahan, student engagement coordinator in the Global Programs Office at Pennsylvania State University.



Penn State's Foundations in Global Engagement first-year program for students assists with integration, relationship building, and cultural awareness. Here is a photo from the end of the year celebration at the culmination of the program.

PENN STATE



UCLA students enjoying free coffee and tea at World Café. World Café is a quarterly program provided by the UCLA Dashew Center, which helps students integrate into campus by connecting with hundreds of other international and domestic students and staff.



UCLA students getting ready to leave on a 4-day skiing and snowboarding trip. The UCLA Dashew Center provides overnight trips each quarter to help international and domestic students to explore California, as well as create lifelong cross-cultural friendships.

“Assessment is an absolute necessity for institutions to measure the success of their initiatives. The assessment results inform the success and shortfalls of integration efforts, and should be the foundation of any planning process regarding international student satisfaction or integration.”

Sillner uses discussion groups to ascertain how international students are faring in the “living and learning communities.” He and his team discovered that by living together, domestic and international students are encouraged to join campus

activities that they may have not tried in the past—language clubs, for instance, or the International Student Union.

Those discussions also made Sillner realize that by living with U.S. students, foreigners are less inclined to become “cliquish” with students from their native countries.

“We see that when there are large concentrations of students of a particular national origin,” he said. “That’s always a challenge. These ‘living and learning’ communities are one way to address that.”

Focus Groups as a Tool for Assessment

McClanahan and her colleagues, who are part of the university’s Global Student Engagement Team, assess the integration of international students in part by using pre- and post-integration program surveys and by conducting focus groups. Some issues that have cropped up during those exercises—and which McClanahan and her colleagues set out to address—included the first-year transition, mental health, campus living, and academic integrity.

For instance, McClanahan leads the Foundations in Global Engagement (FiGE) program for first-year undergraduate, graduate, exchange, and transfer students at Penn State who are interested in engaging in cultural conversations, meeting a diverse group of friends, learning more about U.S. culture, and developing a globally diverse perspective. On the assessment feedback she received from the spring 2016 cohort, McClanahan saw that many students wanted to learn more about Native American history and culture. As a result, she’s planning for the coming school year a trip in collaboration with Penn State’s Interinstitutional Consortium for Indigenous Knowledge to a Native American historical site.

“While focus groups and other qualitative research methods may be a bit more time-consuming to gather and assess, we’ve found that they can provide a plethora of powerful international student stories that are extremely helpful in shedding light on the current state of the international student integration successes and shortfalls on our campus, thus making them worth the extra time and resources to gather,” she said.

Why is this time and effort worth it? McClanahan says that the successful integration of international students at an institution “causes a whole domino effect of positive things to happen at an institution.”

“This integration benefits not only the international students themselves, but also the domestic students, staff, faculty, and even the surrounding community,” she said. “International students who are successfully integrated

will have a richer and more rounded cultural experience in the U.S. because they will be engaged with U.S. students and staff as well as the other international students on campus.”

She also noted that after building close relationships with domestic students, international students tend to feel more comfortable opening up about their own cultural backgrounds, and are more likely to engage in leadership and cultural activities.

The entire campus benefits as well, she said, as domestic students learn more about their foreign classmates’ cultures, which leads the former to “to view the world in a more globally enlightened way.”

Definitions First

Any effective assessment of international student integration must begin with a solid definition of what a campus means by integration, said Shideh Hanasaab, director of the Dashew Center for International Students & Scholars at the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA).

“What does it mean to your students, scholars, office, and campus?” Hanasaab asked. “Your institutional context is important, and the data will have more impact if it engages conversations that are already



International students at the University at Buffalo (SUNY).

occurring on your campus. Once you define it, then you can begin to think about what indicators of integration you want to assess.”

Next, she said, define why integration is important to your campus.

For example, Hanasaab said, UCLA believes that “integration benefits our international and domestic populations. International student success depends on integration since friendship networks, interaction across differences, and access to campus resources support their academic and social lives while at UCLA.”

“One of our international office’s primary goals is to support the success of international students and scholars while at

UCLA, so naturally integration is a key tool in promoting their success,” she said. “Yet our international students and scholars are assets to the UCLA community; they provide critical global perspectives across country, across culture, and across differences. Domestic students and scholars have much to gain from their interactional counterparts within and beyond academic spaces. In other words, integration is a key tool of internationalization. Without integration, internationalization at home will not have the impact with which it’s widely credited.”

Hanasaab and her colleagues survey students—asking about their friendship networks, the frequency of interactions they have with those of differing nationalities, the quality of those interactions, their engagement in campus activities, and their use of campus offices and resources.

Her data suggested that international students may be more integrated than many assume. Most report “mixed” friendship networks—meaning they have domestic, international, and conational friends.

The data also suggested that there was more work to do.

“International students report interacting across [nationalities] most often in academic settings or for academic purposes, such as in study groups,” She said. “[But] international students do not have much conversation across nationalities about their different backgrounds and different opinions. These kinds of conversations require more risk and also point to deeper connections.”

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In addition, the findings indicated that domestic students could be more involved in the international student integration experience.

What did Hanasaab's office do with its findings? For one thing, it partnered with UCLA's Intergroup Relations Program to provide more opportunities for international and domestic students to talk about their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and opinions. For another, it redoubled its efforts to involve domestic students in integration by collaborating more with other departments on campus.

Hanasaab recommended sharing assessment data—preferably using a synthesis or summary—to help those outside the school's international student offices to interpret what the findings mean to a campus. Hanasaab's office shared the data at an annual training for campus staff and administrators so they might have the resources “and inspiration to refer their international and domestic students to our office and create their own integration-based programs in their own settings.” “Data can pave a new way and inspire action, so use it well,” she said. “If it's only the international student and scholar services office doing the work of integration, we should not expect to succeed.”

A Universitywide Effort

The University at Buffalo (UB) assembled a formal task force to suggest ways to improve the integration experience for international students. The Task Force on International Student Inclusion and Engagement started by surveying international students and university faculty.

“Assessment has been key to our integration and inclusion efforts so far,” said Stephen C. Dunnett, professor and vice provost for international education at the University at Buffalo. “We need to be able to evaluate the success of our efforts to date and determine where the greatest areas of need are at UB.”

The school's survey of international students examined all of the important dimensions of the student-abroad experience, including arrival and orientation, academics, housing, campus engagement, and career preparation. The survey of UB faculty

sought to determine how to improve academics and programming so that both were more enriching for international students.

The surveys were followed by focus groups of students and faculty to explore issues and concerns raised in the surveys. Adjustments were made, semester by semester, to integration programs.

“Much of the analysis and the resulting recommendations in the task force report are based on the survey data collected from students and faculty—in addition to the insights of the task force members themselves, who represented all the relevant areas of the university,” he said.

Dunnett strongly recommended such a task force in assessing international integration—in part because it can take a comprehensive and institutional approach to integration, as well as the barriers to it, and in part because such a body tends to earn campuswide attention.

“Our task force demonstrates the value of an institution-wide approach, and its report will command the attention of units across campus, which have to take seriously this responsibility,” he said. “[Our office is] a critical player and the chief advocate, but we must marshal the efforts of colleagues across the university if we are to be successful. Our office alone cannot accomplish the integration of our international students. A key lesson learned is that integration is truly a university-wide responsibility and that domestic students have a critical role to play in making our campus a more welcoming and supportive environment for international students. It's also the responsibility of the academic units which admit international students to be concerned about their integration.” **IE**

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