

International Students on the U.S. College Campus: Intercultural Communication and Enrollment Management

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Abstract

Recruiting and retaining international students is one way for academic institutions to ensure diversity and positive student outcomes while also expanding their potential enrollment base. Universities and their stakeholders stand to benefit substantially from enrolling students from outside of the United States. However, cultural-centric marketing practices may not be appropriate for varied target populations nor for the specific focus of education. In addition, there must be infrastructure in place to support nonnative students adequately. Intercultural communication concepts can be combined with standpoint theory to create a grounded approach to the successful recruitment and retention of international students.

“There are truths on this side of the Pyrenees that are falsehoods on the other.” – Blaise Pascal

“Know your audience.” – Communication Axiom

Enrollment management, institutional marketing, and intercultural communication are inextricably entwined in the challenge to diversify student bodies and to expand markets in U.S. higher education. According to Hossler and Bean (1990), the goals of the enrollment manager are to “exert more control over the characteristics of” and to “control the size of” the student body (p. 5). Both of these goals are directly related to marketing. Indeed, the authors go on to point out that one responsibility of the enrollment manager is to use institutional research in developing *appropriate* market strategies. For some, this may mean appropriate to the university (a source-based approach to communication). For others, it takes on a broader scope. Zemsky, Shaman, and

Shapiro (2001) make specific reference to being “market smart” as well as “mission centered” (p. 96). This implies a more receiver-based communication approach. Successful approaches, both sender and receiver-based, require audience or market analysis. This is especially true when communicating across cultures. Marketing academic institutions involves unique challenges. Marketing to international audiences increases the complexity of these challenges. Different cultures and foreign markets can test even the most seasoned professionals.

In order to draw enrollments, colleges and universities (like hospitals—another institution traditionally not openly marketed) have bought billboards, airtime on radio and television, print ads, Internet ads, and have designed interactive Web sites. Twenty years ago, one would have been hard pressed to find a commercial or billboard advertisement for educational purposes. This shift in marketing reflects the growing competition for students who must choose between options that are often unfamiliar, especially for those residing outside the United States. These individuals and their families have the task of taking in this information and deciding which colleges to apply to, the first step in the enrollment funnel (see Figure 1).

The decision-making process can vary across cultures based on differences such as locus of control, values, and beliefs (Scollon & Scollon, 1995). Logically, these differences would be magnified with the increasing importance or impact of the topic under consideration. The decision to attend an educational institution far from one's homeland is influenced by many factors: internal factors including the family's money, the student's academic standing, and the student's language ability; and factors outside the control of the family, such as visa restrictions. Given all of the attendance prerequisites, U.S. American higher education has much to gain from the continued and increased recruitment of international students. An increased number of international students matriculating at U.S. universities could result in both a more diverse student body and additional tuition dollars. A firm understanding of target cultures and intercultural communication principles places those interested in competition for this market at an advantage.