

A Home Away from Home: Recruiting International Students to Fraternal Organizations

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The Institute of International Education (2015) reports almost 1 million (974,926) international students studied in the U.S. in the 2014-2015 academic year, an increase of 10 percent from the previous year and the highest number to date. In fact, the U.S. hosts more international college students than any other country. This means international students make up 4 to 5 percent of students in U.S. higher education institutions, with almost half of these students (41.8%) enrolled in undergraduate education.

However, while international students are coming to the U.S. in larger numbers than ever, are we seeing them represented in fraternity/sorority communities at the same rate? As students away from their homes and families and in a different culture, it would make sense for fraternities and sororities to serve as their home away from home while at college. But a traditional recruitment mindset won't be effective in seeking these members.

It is important to understand who international students are as a whole while also keeping in mind each international student experience and background is different. The characteristics making them distinct offer significant insight into how campuses, chapters, and inter/national organizations can engage and support them.

"International student" is a broad term that can refer to people falling to one of two categories:

1. Traditional international student on a temporary visa for one semester up to the full length of a degree program
2. Student referred to as a "domestic non-citizen," meaning they are a documented (with i-15 or green card) or undocumented immigrant or documented refugee

Some of these students may have attended high school within the U.S, while others, coming to college may be their first time outside their home country. They have chosen to study abroad for a number of reasons, the most common being: wanting new cultural experiences, lack of access to quality education in their home country, the prestige of an American degree abroad, and family tradition or pressure.

Origin

Most international students are coming to the U.S. from Asia and the Middle East, but there has been major growth in the past few years of international scholars from Central and South America as well. Students coming from China represent almost a third of students studying internationally in the U.S. (Institute of International Education, 2015). The most common countries of origin are:

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| 1. China (31.2%) | 6. Brazil (2.4%) |
| 2. India (13.6%) | 7. Taiwan (2.2%) |
| 3. South Korea (6.5%) | 8. Japan (2%) |
| 4. Saudi Arabia (6.1%) | 9. Vietnam (1.9%) |
| 5. Canada (2.8%) | 10. Mexico (1.7%) |

Institution

International students can be found at colleges and universities across the country, with higher populations in larger urban areas such as New York, Los Angeles, Boston, and Philadelphia (Institute of International Education, 2015). However, this does not exclude international students from studying at rural or suburban campuses. The schools with the top 25 largest international student populations

account for 21% of the U.S. international student enrollment. These top schools include all types of institutions including Ivy League (e.g. Penn, Columbia), private (e.g. NYU, Northeastern, Carnegie Mellon), and public universities (e.g. UCLA, Arizona State). Large, public, land-grant schools make up the largest portion of these schools. However, it is important to note international students can also be found at community colleges and music and design schools.

Academic Interest

International students are seen most prominently pursuing degrees in business and management (20%) or STEM fields, like engineering (20%), math and computer science (12%), and physical and life sciences (8%) (Institute of International Education, 2015).

Benefits

While international students may seem to be a small population on many campuses, they offer significant benefits to campuses and fraternal organizations. Outside of just increasing the potential member pool, bringing international students into the fraternal community can create a number of positive outcomes for the university, its students, fraternal organizations, and the international students themselves. In general, the more interaction international students have with local students and the community, the more satisfied they end up being with their educational experience (Barber, 2003; Tidwell, 2007).

Finance

At the university level, international students bring billions of dollars of tuition revenue without taxing the federal financial aid pool, as most are unable to receive federal and government financial assistance (Andrade, 2009). At an organization level, an increase in members of any type will result in more funds coming in to the organization.

Reputation, Branding and Networking

Expanding international student enrollment improves global brand recognition and reputation. Over 216 world leaders from 81 countries were educated in the U.S (Andrade, 2009). This can also be true of international students who join fraternities and sororities. While some hope to stay in the U.S. following graduation, many return to their homes once they complete their degrees. This offers the opportunity for them to be brand ambassadors around the world, which could result in more international presence for fraternal organizations and also help reduce international stereotypes created from media influence and even the interpretation of fraternal organizations in other countries, especially southeast Asia where fraternal hazing has become a very large issue (Diola, 2014).

Social Support

International students have the most to gain from increased engagement with domestic students in social elements and are more likely than domestic students to lack social support. They are also more likely to experience feelings of isolation and alienation but are less likely to seek out formal support services if they are less acculturated. Research has found increased engagement with domestic students will help them adapt to campus more quickly, experience less homesickness, and even decrease mental illness. Fraternities and sororities can contribute greatly to this by providing what many international students refer to as a "home away from home" while studying abroad. For some students, this means having a place to spend holidays or people to celebrate birthdays with if they are unable to travel home for long periods of time. International students have a slightly lower retention rate than domestic students, so any opportunity to support these students can benefit the university as a whole (Andrade, 2005; Barber, 2003; Grayson, 2008; Sam, 2001; Walters, 2011).

Student Development

Cross-cultural experiences are shown to contribute to student development and learning (Hurtado, 2001; Kitsantas, 2004). American students can learn a great deal about other cultures by engaging with international students, while international students also benefit from the cultural immersion that occurs from studying in the U.S. Within the fraternal community, this allows international students to experience American traditions, like holiday celebrations and allows American members to learn about different religions and traditions.

Academics

For most international students, academics are a number one priority. The commitment to academic excellence aligns well with the values of the fraternal community. The support provided within a fraternity or sorority related to academics can also help the international student. Additionally, international students with high academic performance can support other members and improve the overall academic performance of the chapter.

Housing

In some places, international students may be unable to find housing outside of residence halls due to landlord requirements for credit and background checks or general discrimination. Fraternities and sororities can provide potential housing for these students.

Challenges

Of course, recruiting and retaining international students can bring challenges as well.

Finance

The primary source of funding for most international students (80%), specifically at the undergraduate level, is the student's family. Less than 10% receive the majority of their funding from their university and most are not eligible for any government funding like grants and loan programs. Before studying in the U.S., international students must show they have the funds available to pay for their education (Institute of International Education, 2015). International students may also have a harder time finding part-time or off-campus employment due to their immigration and visa status. Because of this, fraternity and sorority dues may preclude many international students from joining.

Language

For international students coming from upbringings where English was not a primary language at home or school, transitioning to an English-speaking educational environment can be a challenge. While TOEFL scores are used in the admission process to gauge a student's understanding of English, they score written, not spoken, language ability. Many times proficiency can vary significantly between students, causing a strain in the classroom and in social situations. Even those students relatively proficient in spoken English can struggle when it comes to slang, people speaking too quickly, and being put on the spot to answer questions. International students may even face discrimination based on their language skills and accents, both inside and outside the classroom. Increased interaction with domestic students during their education does help international students develop more quickly within this area. Increased interaction also reduces the anxiety and stress related to verbal communication, which would be another benefit to the student from fraternal membership (Andrade, 2005; Barber, 2003; Grayson, 2008; Sam, 2001; Walters, 2011). However, this language barrier could affect an international student's decision to participate or how they are perceived in recruitment processes.

Cultural Differences

Differences related to religion, cultural norms and expectations, and even knowledge of popular culture can create difficulty in interactions between U.S. students and staff with international students. Lack of “shared experiences” can make casual recruitment conversations more difficult. If international students grew up with a different kind of life related to family and television shows and even what education looked like, it can be more difficult to engage in conversation on that topic.

International students may come from religious backgrounds including Christianity/Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. This could affect the clothing they are allowed to wear and the acceptance of alcohol use, in addition to overtly religious aspects of Ritual. All of these things should be discussed openly with students looking to join fraternal organizations. In many cases, policy exceptions may be needed by national organizations related to clothing and aspects of Ritual in order to accommodate some international students.

Self-segregation

While many international students look forward to learning about the culture of their new home, on some campuses with a large population from one country or area, students can be seen as self-segregating. This can be caused by institutional structures like separate housing as well as the need for social support and comfort (Cui, 2013). Because of this, it may be challenging to reach certain international students or get them to explore involvement opportunities away from their group.

Application

In order to recruit and ultimately retain international students, staff and members need to be educated about them and their needs. They should be trained to work through the intercultural challenges that may arise during recruitment and membership. Campus-based fraternity and sorority advisors should reach out to the office on campus that works with international students to find information specific to their campus, including the size of the population, where students are coming from, and any challenges specific to these students. Staff at both the campus and organization level should make an effort to track information regarding international student membership to identify support and programming needs and also as a benchmark for recruitment. When looking at diversity of your organization or community, knowing if you reflect the overall demographics of your campus(es) can be beneficial.

When it comes to recruitment, it is important to think about international students’ needs during the planning process. Consider religious holidays such as Ramadan when scheduling recruitment events. Ensure all information is easily accessible online and stay away from using slang and shorthand specific to the fraternity/sorority community. For example, using “recruitment” instead of “rush” will make information easier to understand. It is important that chapters and members do not assume everyone knows about recruitment. Information should include details and anticipate questions. Targeted marketing for international students anticipating these questions has been shown to be effective.

For formal recruitment, consider changing processes to become more inclusive of international students. For example, when discussing dress codes, make sure to show or note how religious or cultural clothing may fit or note the possibility for exceptions. For more traditional communities requiring alumni recommendations, communicate options to join without those to both the potential international member and chapters. Prepare members for potential communication issues and how to handle silence. Evaluate recruitment conversation questions to make sure they do not revolve so much around pop culture that may not be shared by those of different backgrounds.

Most importantly, utilize the best resource you have – current and alumni international students. They will be able to better explain the experience and will make students more comfortable. Telling an international member's story on the office or national organization website or recruiting a current international student to serve as a recruitment counselor or on a recruitment team will help them see others like them within the organizations. The same goes for national organizations in putting together consultant or colonization teams.

Because of the cultural differences that may exist, it is also very important to anticipate questions from parents, much like you would domestic students' parents, but approach these questions from an inclusive perspective and include more details describing pieces of membership. This may include needing to discuss religious based issues such as Ritual, alcohol use, finances, and required clothing and events.

To make connections and reach out to international students, engage with programming, offices, and organizations that support them by:

- Offering scholarships specifically for international student and members
- Participating in international student orientation sessions
- Supporting international student office initiatives with programs such as pre-enrollment pen pal projects and airport pickups during move-in
- Engaging with international and cultural student organizations
- Promoting involvement in heritage month and religious celebrations

By implementing these strategies, you can increase the chance for the students you serve to experience the benefits of calling an international student a brother or a sister.

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