

Growing Pains: Campus Reacts to Fast International Student Enrollment Growth

Ashley Davis

International Educator, Gonzaga University

Email: Ashleyding87@gmail.com

Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; International Student and Scholar Services; Internationalization and Global Learning; Leadership and Strategy; University/Higher Education

Setting

A small private liberal arts university has an explicit commitment to global engagement, intercultural competence, and inclusivity. As the institution continues to prioritize bringing in international students to the campus, the results are amazing in terms of enrollment. Within two years, international student enrollment has grown from 150 international students to 420 among a total student body of 7,500 students. They are supported by the Office of International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS), which has a director and a team of four staff. Recently, a former faculty member has been appointed as the Senior International Officer (SIO) which is a newly created position.

Faculty and staff have been excited to see international students on campus. Most go above and beyond to learn about different cultures and make sure international students are supported in equitable ways. Various structures help ensure international student success. For example, a Student Services Committee is comprised of Housing, Campus Dining, New Student Orientation, Career and Professional Development, Diversity and Inclusion office, and International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS). In addition, an International Student Academic Success Committee is comprised of several academic departments, the English Language Learning Center, and Academic Advising.

Case

Three weeks into the fall semester, the new Senior International Officer (SIO) receives a few emails from faculty sharing their concerns about international students in their classrooms. They report concerns regarding English proficiency, participation in discussions and group work, and difficulty in navigating learning systems such as Canvas. Absenteeism is also an issue. In addition, some international students rely heavily on translation devices, and some seem to use AI to help with their schoolwork.

The SIO conducts listening sessions with these faculty members. Their desire to support international students and their concerns about academic standards are clear. The SIO subsequently organizes meetings with existing offices that offer relevant resources, such as the Learning Strategies Office, ISSS, English Language Learning Center, Academic Advising, and the Writing Center. English Language Learning Center colleagues hold significant expertise in understanding and supporting cultural variation in classrooms. The ISSS Director has also presented several sessions on cultural variations in the classroom on campus. Undoubtedly, other experts on campus could provide valuable insights as well. However, some colleagues express that there is a lack of coordination between these support efforts. Some faculty and staff share that they don't feel proficient in distinguishing between cultural, language, motivation, or other academic issues when supporting international students.

On the way back from one of these meetings, the SIO asks the ISSS Director for thoughts on this multifaceted issue. One question is if they would recommend raising English proficiency scores through the upcoming annual review process. The SIO is aware that the English Proficiency requirements have already been raised in recent years. The SIO also mentions that the administration is anticipating a tightened budget year ahead and loss of international student enrollments would have a negative financial impact.

Meanwhile, the Director of ISSS has just finished another meeting earlier with the Finance Office who asked for help with getting some international students to respond to their emails about completing tax paperwork or if the ISSS team could help enter relevant data on behalf of the students. The frustration expressed is because the students "don't read their emails or respond." The Director knows that the ISSS team is already at capacity. The Director tells the Finance colleagues that they will think about their request and respond later.

The Director recognizes that the situation at hand requires strategic planning and action. They have read studies showing that English language acquisition challenges typically dissipate over time. In addition, they are aware that US immigration regulations allow international students to take a reduced courseload at the beginning of their program to adjust to English-language requirements. The Director offers to develop a comprehensive plan to address some of the concerns and present it to the SIO.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What are some issues in this case?
- What would be the elements of an ideal comprehensive plan?
 - What data should be gathered to support the development of an effective plan?
 - Are there research and studies that might help shed some light on the situation?
- What specific recommendations should the Director make to the SIO?
 - Should the Director suggest changing the English proficiency requirement again? Why or why not? What evidence should be gathered to support that recommendation?
- What are some resources that could be shared with faculty and staff?
- How could the Director advocate for international students?
- What can the Director of ISSS do to support the SIO to make them as effective as possible in cross-campus relationship building?