

Internationalization for All: Designing Exchange Programs for Disadvantaged Students

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Setting

In 2012, Brazil introduced a quota system to increase the enrollment of historically marginalized groups in government-funded universities that offer tuition-free higher education. There is also a significant achievement gap between public and private high schools in Brazil. Thus, there are two main types of quotas: quotas based on graduation from public high schools and racial quotas designed to increase the representation of Black, Indigenous, and mixed-race students. Students accessing universities through the quota systems often face barriers related to their academic and language skills that can impact their competitiveness for international opportunities and grants.

A public, state, research-driven university in Brazil enrolls 6,500 new students per year in its undergraduate programs, 50% of whom are admitted through the quota system. Currently, the institution has 5,000 undergraduate students benefiting from need-based aid programs. From this group, 70% of them (3,500) accessed the university through the quota systems and normally attend night courses and/or have to work part-time during their studies.

The university has been actively pursuing internationalization and providing opportunities for international mobility of students is a major goal. The institution sends out 500 students a year on international exchange

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programs, but participation from the group of students who were admitted through the quota system and receiving need-based aid was limited. Over the years, the programs officer in the international office noticed that students from this specific background were not able to access grants and scholarships in international exchange programs due to the lack of academic resources and language barriers. Many of those students reported feeling that international exchange was something that did not belong to them, that it was an opportunity for wealthier students. Scholarships are rare and the requirements in terms of GPA and language proficiency are very high.

Case

The administration was very aware that internationalization efforts mainly reached students coming from privileged backgrounds and made efforts and financial investments to develop inclusive approaches. Taking this into consideration and thinking of the university's strategic goal to develop a global perspective in students, the international office decided to build specific programs for students enrolled in financial aid programs, who were admitted through the quota system. The program design process was challenging and consisted of many steps. First, the office had to identify and understand the needs of this group of students. Then, they had to design a feasible program, build a fair selection process, prospect partners, fully fund it, and ensure sustainability for the future.

After consideration, the office decided to partner with international universities and design fully-funded exchange programs. They started by searching for potential partners, universities that understood the mission and were willing to collaborate and be flexible.

The first partner was a Spanish university due to the language proximity and the institution's funding structure. The first program received 104 applications for nine placements and was a very successful experience for all partners. Students participated in international conferences, increased their language skills, earned honor roll accolades, and developed willingness and confidence to further access other international opportunities as researchers. They all reported that the international exchange was a life-changing experience.

Based on this success, the office decided to continue with the Spanish partner and also develop new programs with some English-speaking partner universities. One major challenge was finding partners that were willing to waive tuition for the students, with the expectation of an equalized exchange balance in the future.

The partners for this endeavor were four higher education institutions in the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia. The international office selected 40 students to take an intensive English course for six months, culminating in a TOEFL exam. Both the language preparation and tests were funded by the international office, which then selected nine students from the 40 to participate in the exchanges. The nine students came from a variety of academic fields.

Given that the target population for these programs is comprised of thousands of students, the institution funded fewer than one percent of them for an international exchange period, even with all this effort and investment. Looking forward, the institution would like to increase this number to at least ten percent.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Given the time and effort, would you consider this program to be a success?
- What should the next steps be for this university? How could the university improve their program?
- How else could the international office address the language and academic barriers experienced by these students?
- What concerns might potential partner universities have about these programs? What actions could be taken to mitigate these concerns?
- How can international offices make exchange programs sustainable?
- What strategies could an international office use to increase access to international mobility for disadvantaged students and create inclusive programs? What groups might those be and how would the strategies differ?
- Are the challenges described in this case specific to Latin American universities?