

Paddling in Muddy Waters: The Role of P3s for International Student Enrollment and English Language Program Management

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Setting

International student enrollment has become an essential priority of higher education institutions in the United States for both internationalization and financial viability of institutions. At times, English language programming can be provided to students to support their academic success on campus. These two functions (recruitment and English language programming) require staffing and management. An increasing number of public universities have turned to private companies to provide such services, thus establishing private-public partnerships (P3s) for service delivery.

This case is set at a public research university in the U.S., which enrolls approximately 20,000 students. Of this total enrollment, approximately 800 are international students, predominantly in graduate programs. The University is embedded in the local community, with approximately 40% of the city's population enrolled at the institution, and a majority of its residents employed on campus.

The Office of Admissions oversees recruitment activities and admissions processes for domestic and international students at the undergraduate level, while recruitment and admissions for graduate students are managed by the Office of Graduate Studies and individual departments. Across all levels, marketing is focused on domestic students, and the university has never had a succinct, well-articulated plan for outreach to international students.

The University also operates the English Language and Culture Center (ELCC), offering a variety of short- and long-term English language and U.S. culture programs including university preparation, short term study abroad, and certificate programs. ELCC also contracts with U.S. federal agencies, international organizations, and foreign universities to develop customized programs, cultural visits, and trainings. The ELCC operates as a distinct unit, with its own recruitment, admissions, immigration, advising, and academic staff, including faculty who teach both English language and disciplinary courses in subject areas such as business, sociology, and history.

Case

The University has identified internationalization as a key focus in its strategic plan, with a target to increase international student enrollment to 15% of overall enrollments over the next five years. Increasing international student enrollment is intended to contribute to revenue and provide cross-cultural experiences for domestic students. The university has recognized that the current international student recruitment and admission infrastructure is not adequate to reach this goal. Further, as state appropriations continue to decline, it is difficult to allocate more resources for hiring, staffing, and training to offices that interact with prospective international students. Thus, the institution is seeking a solution that promises maximum return on limited resources.

In an effort to improve efficiency of recruitment and English language programming, the Provost recently announced that the institution will engage in a public-private partnership (P3) with a corporate international education service provider. In a message to the campus community, the Provost stated that the partnership will enable the university to leverage market intelligence, sector expertise and a wide network of recruitment agents to boost international enrollments. The partnership aims to increase the University's global presence and enhance its English Language programs. The Provost further assured units that senior leadership has thoroughly vetted the international education company and is confident that the partnership will be a positive addition to the campus.

Under this partnership, a joint venture will be established and assume responsibilities for international student recruitment and admissions for both English language and undergraduate programs. The current English Language Center and its programs will be rebranded under the management structure of the joint venture. In addition to traditional ESL and short-term study programs, the joint venture will offer pre-academic pathway programs for prospective students that combines English Language with college preparation classes to serve as a pipeline to university enrollment. In short, the university can now bring more students to campus, even if their current English language capabilities do not meet academic entry requirements. Services (provided on a fee-based model) will provide such preparation.

The joint venture will lease property from the university and construct a \$60 million mixed-use, state of the art “international center” that combines classrooms, student residence, administrative office space, and dining facilities, serving predominantly students in the new English language programs, but also open to the campus at large as a space for domestic and international students to interact. This new ‘campus within a campus’ will provide a space for new international students to make use of university facilities while undertaking preparation for university admission.

Campus and community reaction to this news has been mixed. On the one hand, there are concerns around changes to campus resulting from the joint venture, including a shift in campus culture and job security for current admissions office and English language program staff, and erosion of the public education mission of the institution. On the other, there is excitement around the benefits of increased international student enrollment that is expected to bring diversity to campus and offer local students and community members the opportunity to engage in a multicultural environment.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Who are the stakeholders impacted by the establishment of the joint venture? How might they be impacted (both negatively and positively) and why?
- How can university leadership ensure transparency and address concerns that the P3 is not in the best interest of the university?
- What differences in organizational cultures might exist between the university and the private sector partner? How might this manifest in the joint venture?
- If the Provost were to put together a task force to successfully implement the joint venture, who should be included and why? What decisions and tasks should the taskforce engage?
- What regulatory, accreditation, and compliance issues may need to be taken into consideration for each of the following: a) the admissions process; b) English Language program administration; c) immigration compliance; d) facilities operations (e.g. the new international center, residence hall, and dining facility).
- What are the potential impacts of a significant increase in the international student population on campus? In the surrounding community? How can these be addressed?
- What are the academic benefits and drawbacks for enrollment of students who gain admission through successful completion of pathway programs?