

More and Better Resources Needed for International Students

Ken Bonetti, Academic Advisor, Economics Department College of Arts and Sciences

Introduction (Abstract)

This white paper is intended to identify problems and challenges facing international students at the University of Colorado Boulder. Recommendations follow. This is by no means a comprehensive analysis. Due to time constraints, this discussion is primarily qualitative and anecdotal in nature. These observations are based on years of personal experience advising hundreds of international students, institutional knowledge, and numerous discussions over many years with University faculty and staff. Recognition that international students experience unique and difficult issues in their matriculation at the University is widespread among faculty and staff. A thorough quantitative analysis of institutional data is warranted to more specifically delineate problems and craft effective solutions. If the University wishes to better serve these students, it will follow-up this and other related discussions with thorough qualitative and quantitative analyses and subsequent provision of resources and programs intended to improve the overall experience and outcomes for this unique student population.

Problems

Insufficient English Language Skills: Many of us advise a significant number of international students, particularly students from Asia. It is a common observation among advisors that many of these students possess insufficient English language skills. Students with insufficient English language skills struggle in all of their courses, but particularly with the Arts and Sciences Core. Many students lack the grammatical skills and vocabulary to do well in language-intensive courses. Students devote an inordinate amount of time struggling through the reading and writing assignments, often to the detriment of other coursework. Even in their major coursework, some international students struggle with language issues that hinder their academic performance. Advisors observe these difficulties daily.

Difficulty Adapting to a New Environment: Some international students do not adapt well to University procedures, rules and expectations, including those enumerated in the Honor Code. In addition to unique challenges faced by international students, many find themselves lost amidst the myriad requirements, rules, administrative procedures and institutional deadlines.

Many do not integrate into the broader University community, not engaging socially or academically beyond their immediate cultural groups. Consequent to this and language difficulties, international students seem to experience a higher rate of academic difficulties. For example, according to the Fall 2016 Census, international students comprised 5.5 percent of all Arts and Sciences undergraduate students. However, according to information provided by the Academic Advising Center, as of Spring 2017, international students comprised 14 percent of Arts and Sciences freshmen on academic alert (those whose grade point averages are below 2.0 after their first terms. Though this comparison is not of identical cohorts, it seems clear among

advisors and those who work with at risk students that international students are overrepresented among students experiencing academic difficulty.

Honor Code Violations In many advisors' experiences, international students run afoul of the honor code at a higher rate than their domestic peers. Though student collaboration may be routine back home, such is generally not condoned at US universities, including CU Boulder. It seems plagiarism and appropriate citation are not well understood by many internationals.

Transfer Credit Another factor that disadvantages international students is the fact that transfer evaluations for coursework completed at universities in their home countries often do not give full credit to students' previous work. Specifically, Chinese students receive only two thirds of the credits they transfer from their home universities. That disconnect puts some students in the difficult position of having to enroll in coursework they already have mastered in order to fill specific requirements or demonstrate completion of requisites needed to advance in their programs of study. For example, in economics many students transfer a number of two- and 1.7-credit economics and mathematics courses. These 'low-credit' courses do not satisfy students' major requirements even though they may have mastered the material sufficiently to move on to the next level. Students are then forced to spend time and large sums of money essentially repeating coursework or take CLEP exams to avoid repeating coursework. This situation is very discouraging for those students and sets them back on their progress toward fulfilling their major requirements, using up valuable elective credit space and displacing other students in courses that are full and wait listed. There should be a better way of evaluating students' prior coursework and/or knowledge so that they can complete requirements and advance in their majors more efficiently and less expensively.

Recommendations

More Personalized, Better Resourced In-Person Assistance International students should be provided more in-person assistance with far less reliance on online tutorials. For example, the New Student Welcome (NSW) all-online tutorial and enrollment process is very difficult for many international students to navigate and understand from a remote location. We advise them via Zoom, email or a chat room, spending much of the time helping them to understand the mechanics of the registration process, rather than adequately probing their interests in order to help them craft appropriate schedules.

International students should receive the vast majority of their orientation on campus and over a longer time period than is needed by domestic students. That orientation should begin with an extensive summer bridge program aimed at bringing these new students into the University community, provide them with all the requisite information and assessments needed to maximize their opportunities to succeed in University. New Student Welcome registration advising should be one-on-one and in-person with advisors well trained or experienced in working with international students. Plainly stated, the all-online orientation provided by NSW is wholly inadequate to the needs of international students.

Individual advising should be provided in close cooperation with ISSS by dedicated staff trained in dealing with international students and demonstrating a significant level of cultural literacy. International students should be required to meet regularly with their advisors (twice a semester) to ensure they are on track and to catch problems early on. An early warning system should be in place to catch students facing difficulties before their problems get out of hand.

All international students should be enrolled in first-year seminars, with domestic students, to help them establish relationships with students outside their cultural groups and integrate into the university community. Seminars should help them effectively navigate the University, understand University rules and protocols, access academic and personal development resources, participate in extra-curricular activities and take advantage of academic opportunities.

On Campus Language Evaluation and Remedial English Workshops Students' language skills should be evaluated immediately upon arrival on campus. Those demonstrating deficiencies should be required to enroll in language enhancement courses during their first year. The University should award elective credit for those courses as an incentive for these students to attend and put in the requisite effort. Convincing students to voluntarily attend non-credit language workshops is difficult at best and usually unsuccessful. Without credit, these students feel language courses are an extra burden and impede their progress toward completion of their degrees. Given, the extremely high international tuition rate and an imperative to finish "on time" these students operate from a short-term semester-to-semester perspective, even when it is not in their long-term interests to do so.

More Extensive Better Resources for At-Risk Students When international students find themselves in academic and personal difficulty, they should be provided comprehensive dedicated academic and student service resources to meet their unique and complex needs. For example, when international students experience academic difficulty they rely on resources that are largely designed for domestic students. Yet their problems often are considerably different than those faced by domestic students, involving language, acculturation and emotional issues that arise from being far from home and immersed in a culture very different from their own. International students also need to have easy access to counselling to deal with personal issues unique to them by virtue of their international status and the internalized expectations they bring from their home countries as well as their lack of familiarity with American customs, traditions and expectations. More intensive education about US higher education protocols and a clear understanding of academic do's and don'ts would help students adjust to an unfamiliar academic environment.

Transfer Credit It would be of significant benefit to our international students if more careful evaluation is given to these students' competency in subject areas for which they have received

credits from their home institutions. Every effort should be provided to ensure that these students do not duplicate their efforts simply because credit totals or individual course content does not match specific CU Boulder offerings. For example, there is no reason an economics major should repeat economic theory, mathematics or statistics when he or she has already mastered the content. A process should be instituted that enables international students to demonstrate completion of appropriate content or possession of requisite knowledge that satisfies specific requirements or constitutes adequate preparation for courses that entail prerequisite coursework.

Academic Coaching Many international students can benefit from academic coaching by staff persons experienced in dealing with their unique challenges and needs. An effective early alert system buttressed by a strong and adequately funded coaching staff would go a long way to improving outcomes for these students. The University can take the cue from the Academic Advising Center academic coaching resource. Though relatively new and small in size the AAC coaching outcomes have been quite good. More data is likely needed, but the initial results are very encouraging. In fact, the Engineering College observed the results in A & S and decided to start their own coaching unit. Expansion of academic coaching for international student should become a University priority.

More ESL Written Communication Courses The single most important skill for any student is writing. Although CU provides high quality ESL sections of the written communications courses, there are not nearly enough slots to accommodate international students who can benefit from those, particularly during their first-year experience. More upper division ESL composition courses should be available to international students as well.

Conclusion

Due in part to a lack of adequate support and inadequate resources dedicated to international students, a disproportionate share of these students underperforms throughout their enrollment. Many are on probation or under academic suspension. Suspended international students struggle to regain good standing with inadequate access to courses, particularly in their majors, and without the comprehensive assistance they need. It is sad to watch students spend massive amounts of money on tuition and fees only to receive mediocre results or fail to complete their degrees.

In general, resources for international students at CU Boulder appear to be inappropriate, ad hoc and inadequately funded. Since the University is intent on increasing the enrollment of international students and charging them high rates of tuition, much more funding should be allocated for international student orientation, remedial English language support that gives them credit toward their degrees, dedicated resources including advisors, coaches, counsellors and improved institutional support to meet their unique needs. A better funded, consistent and comprehensive approach can help international students better adapt and integrate into the university community. The result will be higher rates of success, higher levels of achievement and better outcomes for the University as a whole.