

TIGER Way Task Force Subcommittee Report – International Students

Preface

During the last four decades, the majority of US higher education institutions have embraced “internationalization” as a strategic initiative to become competitive and successful in the 21st century. As a result of this strategy, US colleges and universities have invested resources in international recruitment, in cultivating an inclusive, welcoming and supportive climate for international student populations and in developing an internationally-enriched learning environment for students, faculty and staff. The outcome of these investments has been a 7% increase since 2014 in the number of international students in the US, which has now reached close to a million. International students represent 5 percent of the total student population in US higher education and they contribute \$36 billion to the US economy through their tuition and fees. 75% of international students in the US are funded from sources outside the US, including personal and family funds and funds from home country governments and universities. The state of Maryland is ranked 18th in terms of international student population, and hosts over 18,000 international students who contribute over \$576,000,000 to institutes of higher learning in the state. The University of Maryland - College Park, Johns Hopkins University, Montgomery College, the University of Maryland - Baltimore County, and Morgan State University are the top ranking host institutions in Maryland. (*IIE Open Doors Report 2015-2016*).

Despite the 7% rise in the number of international students at the national level, a February 2017 study by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) indicated that 40% of surveyed US institutions reported a decline in international undergraduate applications for fall 2017 and 31% reported a decline in international graduate applications. Other studies highlight factors that can have a negative impact on international recruitment such as:

- changing perceptions of the US as an educational destination among prospective students, parents, governments and sponsoring organizations
- national policies by Canada, Australia, China, UK, Germany and France on international students and funding
- changes in major government scholarship schemes such as that of Saudi Arabia
- increased US visa denials in major student markets such as Pakistan and Middle Eastern countries
- economic crisis, natural and human disasters, and security situations in some regions

AACRAO provides guidelines for US institutions to assist them in handling the challenge of international recruitment in the current global climate and in the development of a culture of integration of international students on campus and in wider communities. These guidelines include diversifying recruitment strategies, understanding the unique concerns and needs of individuals of a certain country or culture, connecting more effectively with prospective students and applicants to gain their trust, adopting rapid admissions and visa documents processing, addressing concerns regarding discrimination, safety, and travel as well as career placement and skills-building for careers in the US and abroad. (*AACRAO Survey February 2017*).

A Key Challenge to International Enrollment at Towson University: Lack of a Comprehensive Strategic International Enrollment and Marketing Plan

In the past five years, Towson University's (TU) international student enrollment in undergraduate and graduate programs as well as at the English Language Center (ELC), where students do not earn credits, has declined from a total of 613 in the fall of 2012 to 448 in the fall of 2016. Of those 448 in fall 2016, 50% are pursuing a Bachelor's degree, 22% are enrolled in Master's programs, 10% in Doctoral programs, 10% in the ELC, and 8% are studying on exchange programs. By college, 48% are in FCSM, 23% in CBE, and the remaining 36% are spread among programs at other colleges and the ELC. (*ISSO/TU annual report 2016-2017*).

In the highly competitive international recruitment market, many US institutions have launched comprehensive international recruitment campaigns and plans, hired new staff with expertise in the top student markets and overseas higher education systems, invested significant funds in international travel and marketing materials, engaged the university community in international recruitment and retention, and hired an "international integration specialist" to coordinate comprehensive services for diverse international student populations. These efforts by other US institutions suggest a need for a comprehensive strategic international enrollment and marketing plan as well as an international student integration plan, so that TU may also increase international enrollment and retention from existing and emerging student market countries. The International Sub-Committee of the TIGER Way Task Force outlines its recommendations for improving international student recruitment, admissions, and integration/retention below.

Recommendations - Enhancing International Recruitment, Admissions, and Integration/Retention

I. Recruitment

Current efforts to increase international student enrollment are fractured due to the lack of international marketing, recruitment, and enrollment plans that would provide clear direction toward agreed-upon targets. TU is virtually unknown in most international student markets where name recognition, rankings, and personal connections are paramount. Customized approaches to diverse international student markets are essential to successful marketing campaigns. The limited budget and staff dedicated to international student recruitment hamper diverse initiatives to expand TU's visibility and outreach efforts. Significant monetary resources have not been invested in international recruitment initiatives (including staffing and marketing materials), which has made TU international recruitment less competitive and limited to certain markets. Moreover, TU has not developed a structure or financial incentives to engage domestic and international faculty in international recruitment and international partnerships.

The following are recommendations that would lead to a concerted and integrated blueprint for increasing the enrollment of international students.

- A. Develop a **TU International Marketing Plan** in order to launch competitive marketing and branding in prioritized markets. A cornerstone of this plan would be the dedication of resources to the following initiatives:

- 1.) Increase participation at International recruitment fairs and conferences.
- 2.) Produce high quality/high design marketing materials
- 3.) Develop social media campaigns
- 4.) Create an International Student Information landing page on TU website
- 5.) Develop incentives for faculty and alumni to recruit students from their heritage countries in collaboration with the future Faculty Development Center.

B. Designate an International Enrollment Advisory Committee to develop the **International Enrollment/Recruitment Plan**. This integrated plan would address the following:

a. **International Recruitment Staffing.** In the last four years, in the absence of a long-term international recruiter, recruitment efforts were severely impeded and it will take time and resources to rebuild momentum. A team of dedicated personnel is needed to foster trust among prospective students and applicants through outreach, follow-up, and extensive communications. To set up such a team would necessitate the following actions:

- 6.) Hire an Associate Director of International Recruitment position fully supported with state funds
- 7.) Employ one or two Graduate Assistants.
- 8.) Employ two or three student workers.

b. **Financial incentives for prospective international students.** TU's current practice of awarding merit scholarships of \$8,000 each to qualified international undergraduate students needs to be re-examined being that the amount has remained constant even though out-of-state tuition has increased. Likewise, the limited number of Graduate Assistantships available deters international students from applying to TU graduate programs. Finally, no discounts on tuition are offered to cohorts of students.

- 9.) Increase the number and amount of International Merit Scholarships for undergraduate students through examining and modifying the selection criteria.
- 10.) Increase the number and amount of Graduate Assistantships available to international students.
- 11.) Offer reduced tuition rates to large cohorts of academic articulations contingent upon USM approval.

The earmarking of a percentage of the income generated by non-resident tuition may be one scheme for funding this additional assistance.

c. **Academic articulations and new academic programs.** At present, the academic articulations for international students coming from either their home countries or from other institutes of higher learning (primarily community colleges) for either undergraduate or graduate study are limited. Enhancing and publicizing these articulations will draw more students to our programs. Likewise, academic pathway programs within the university are lacking, especially regarding the English Language Center (ELC) which would be a natural pipeline for degree-seeking international students. Finally, TU is limited in its undergraduate and graduate academic program offerings that appeal to international students, who generally seek specialized degrees in the fields of leadership, business, education, and the sciences.

- 12.) Allocate a travel budget for faculty in order to explore and develop academic partnerships.
- 13.) Offer release time for faculty to conduct curricular mapping of international partners' degrees.
- 14.) Hire a staff member in admissions to support faculty who work on academic articulations.
- 15.) Strengthen the structure of the ELC as a pipeline of international students for both undergraduate and graduate programs.
- 16.) Create new academic programs in conjunction with the International Recruitment Office based on national trends on international students' enrollment and prioritized majors.

II. Admissions.

Because of the specific needs of international students, the application process for them is more labor-intensive and time-sensitive than it is for domestic students. The trust of the prospective students and their parents must be nurtured through ongoing communication and their need for guidance through the F-1 visa process requires staff with a particular expertise. Any lag time or lapse in communication could lead to prospective students turning their sights to other institutions. International admissions policies, processes and practices are not competitive and in some cases not aligned with best practices of competitors.

The following are recommendations to modify international admissions' policies and processes:

- 17.) Review and refine international admissions policies and processes to align them with best practices.
- 18.) Streamline communications and services to prospective students, applicants, admitted students, parents, and agencies.
- 19.) Hire and train a staff member to evaluate foreign transcripts for international undergraduate and graduate applicants rather than requiring the applicants to have their transcripts evaluated by an external agency, such as World Education Services (WES).
- 20.) Open applications for international students applying for the spring semester in June rather than in August in order to compete with other institutions that follow this practice.
- 21.) Allow international undergraduate applicants to defer admission for one year without requiring that they pay an additional \$45 application fee.
- 22.) Design an Academic Bridge Program allowing international graduate school applicants with 3-year Bachelor's degrees provisional entrance into graduate programs while necessary coursework is completed.

III. Integration/Retention

Following some of the best practices, TU's Office of International Student and Scholar Services (ISSO) has already enhanced the support services offered to international students as evidenced by the following:

- An active International Student Association (ISA) working collaboratively with the ISSO for programs.
- Collaborative GA position with HRL to support the "global village"-domestic and international students living and learning.
- Sponsored Student Program to offer specialized retention services to sponsored students.
- Academic Advising support services for First Year Experience program (to be launched in fall 2017).
- Specialized programs to cater to the needs of female students from the Middle East.
- New International Student Orientation.
- Upgraded website, workshops and materials on immigration advising, and international students' rights in the United States.
- International Initiatives staff and student workers equipped with global/cultural competencies (including languages and cultural sensitivity) to offer support services to international students on campus.
- Development of Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) to assess the efficacy of future programs that will integrate international students with domestic students.

The International Student and Scholars Services has staff with expertise in immigration advising and support services. However, there is no designated staff to offer social integration support to all new and current students who undergo greater adjustments in a new academic environment in a different culture. There are also gaps in the services provided to international students in various units on campus. For these reasons, we propose that an **International Student Integration Plan** be developed **to create an inclusive and welcoming campus** for international students. The following recommendations would form the backbone of the plan:

- 23.) Dedicate a full-time staff member to work on the integration of international students into campus life.
- 24.) Allocate funds to develop programs and opportunities to promote interactions between domestic and international students.
- 25.) Provide cultural sensitivity training to key staff and faculty on campus.
- 26.) Expand on-campus and off-campus housing options and placement assistance.
- 27.) Ensure ready access and high-quality experience at the Health and Counseling Centers.

- 28.) Design customized programs for international students through the projected world-class, lifelong Career Center.
- 29.) Enhance tutoring, writing, and other academic support services for international students.
- 30.) Launch a professional development program for international graduate students aligned with best practices to prepare them for academic success.
- 31.) Make student support services available to the ELC students who transition to academic programs after successful completion of their English for academic preparation program at ELC.

Conclusion

Despite many national and international challenges, it is projected that the number of international students pursuing education abroad will grow from 4.2 million in 2017 to close to 7 million by 2024. Thus, there will be ample opportunities for higher education institutions in the US to attract these students to their campuses. TU is well-positioned to launch and support a comprehensive international recruitment and marketing campaign because of the strength of its academics, its location in the Mid-Atlantic region where there is a significant international presence, and its English Language Center. Future additions to campus, such as the projected world-class, lifelong Career Center, featuring customized career-building and career-placement services, will also attract international undergraduate and graduate students.

New efforts launched by the International Initiatives Office can be strengthened to achieve the Tiger Way Task Force's recommendations related to international students. If TU invests financial and human resources in these initiatives, it can emerge as one of the preferred host institutions for international students. Such investments will be instrumental in boosting strategic international recruitment and marketing efforts in prioritized markets. The review of policies and procedures, as well as their alignment with the best practices, can be accomplished to ensure quality services to prospective students. ISSO's multiple initiatives can also be expanded with the presence of a full-time designated staff member charged with the integration of international students from over 80 countries into the university and will also serve as a resource for faculty and staff on academic and socio-cultural needs of international students at TU. Integrated international students will play a key role in providing domestic students with opportunities to enhance their global and cultural competencies. Based on the positive experiences at TU, the current international students will become strong ambassadors for the university as alumni in different regions of the world.

“International students value the quality and diversity and strong reputation of US Institutions and recognize that these institutions will give them opportunities that can help them not only in their education but also in their careers. Students from other nations also teach a lot about the world we share. The more we can open doors to other cultures for our students, the better off our country and our world will be.” (IIE Report 2015-2016).