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# **VOLUNTEER WORK AND SOCIALIZING ACTIVITIES: IMPACT ON CAMPUS INTERNATIONALIZATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The social and cultural adjustment challenges facing international students have always attracted the attention of university and college administrators (Pinheiro, 2001; Reedstrom, 2005; Zhao, Kuh &, Carini, 2005). As colleges try to make up for the loss in international recruitment in the post 9/11 phase, various volunteer efforts are encouraged to welcome, orient, and integrate international students into the American life and society (Wit, 2002). While serving their original purpose of asserting the friendliness and the welcoming gestures of host institutions to international students, these volunteer efforts aim indirectly to increase international enrollment and campus internationalization. Recognizing the possible potentials of these efforts and their expected impact on recruitment, retention, and success of international students at a Mid-Western public research university, this study examined the role of a range of volunteer efforts in engaging, recruiting, and retaining international students on an American higher education setting. Traditional qualitative techniques like interviews, document reviews, and observations were utilized in the data collection. Three themes emerged around collaboration between volunteers and the university including: university support for volunteer activities, obstacles to volunteer work, and the influence of volunteer activities on international students. Findings shed lights on ways to maximize benefits of volunteer work engaging and easing the adjustment challenges of international students and its impact on campus internationalization. Findings also showed that these efforts and activities, though partially recognized, might face challenges that hinder the achievement of their desired outcomes.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

International enrollment and retention at American higher education institutions witnessed a dramatic drop in the post 9/11 phase due to various political and security reasons (Institute of International Education, 2007). Recently, campus internationalization and international recruitment have been in the attention focus of American colleges. As colleges are trying to make up for the loss in international recruitment, various volunteer efforts are encouraged to welcome, orient, and integrate international students into the American life and society (Wit, 2002). While serving their original purpose of asserting the friendliness and the welcoming gestures of host institutions to international students, these activities aim indirectly to increase international enrollment. However, these efforts and activities, though partially recognized, might face challenges that hinder the achievement of their desired outcomes.

Recognizing the possible potentials of these efforts and their expected impact on recruitment, retention, and success of international students at Riverside State University (RSU), this study examined the role of a range of volunteer efforts in engaging, recruiting, and retaining international students on a higher education setting. This study aimed to find answers to the following research questions: 1) how much support volunteers get from RSU, 2) what the obstacles are facing volunteer efforts, and 3) how volunteer efforts would change the patterns of international enrollment and retention at RSU.

## PERSPECTIVE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

College life includes all policies, practices, and attitudes that affect a college campus. These aspects encompass both curricular and non-curricular practices, ranging from a general mission statement of a college to the personal attitudes of faculty and students. The cumulative impact of all these factors comprises the environment of a college (Astin, 1992). The United States has a significant record as the number one destination of international students and scholars (Open Doors, 2009). The presence of international students at American universities offers a variety of advantages. They bring different ideas and perspectives to classrooms. They deliver an international experience to the American students who might not be able to travel abroad for an international exposure. Moreover, it is a commonly held belief these students often represent the finest of their home countries. However, international students continue to face social challenges. Therefore, higher education institutions continuously strive to help these students overcome the social adjustment challenges including: cultural, social, religious, and political challenges (Hayes & Lin, 1994).

Pinheiro (2001) qualitatively explored how international students perceived their learning experiences on American campuses to be both positive and negative. The positive and preferred experiences were characterized by the themes of engagement and connectedness, while negative experiences were characterized by disengagement and disconnectedness. Zhao et al. (2005) studied the differences and possible similarities between American and international students on campus involvement. The study asserted the positive relationship between the percentage of international students and their integration into campus life. Presenting a case study of internationalization efforts at a two-year college, Reedstrom (2005) explored the ways in which internationalization grew and changed over time. The study also revealed how the will of a college community was able to make internationalization an integral part of a college's culture. Because of the small numbers of international students present on campuses and the variety of programs they join, most of the studies exploring international students' engagement and integration into American universities usually took the qualitative approach. Various studies used Schein's (2004) construct levels of culture to measure college internationalization.

## METHODS

Instrumental to this qualitative study were field observations of events and document reviews. However, the primary data sources were open-ended interviews with college

administrators, volunteer coordinators and international students. Three sampling strategies ensured the objectivity of research findings, the intensity strategy, the snowball strategy, and information rich case. After obtaining an Institutional Review Board research approval, an *apriory* code list was used to guide observations of various activities integrating international students into campus life. The review of official university documents as newsletters, memos, and meeting minutes of the International Programs Advisory Committee revealed more themes. Synthesizing the information collected with the theoretical background helped in developing protocols of ten structured interviews. An emergent code list was used to develop a matrix of themes to analyze the data. Themes in the matrix included: benefits for the college community, communication barriers, support needed from the college, and support offered from volunteers.

## FINDINGS

Several volunteer activities take place at RSU with different goals including: building relationships between international students and American students; educating the students at public schools about the foreign countries through recruiting international students as speakers; establishing communication dialogues among international students; and engaging spouses of international students in a very casual setting. Three themes that emerged around the process of collaboration between volunteers and the university included: RSU support for volunteer activities, obstacles to volunteer work, and influence of volunteer work on international students.

### RSU Support

The amount of support provided to volunteer activities varied per activity and sometimes per event depending on the coordinators' assessment of the nature of the activities, the communication between the coordinators and university administration, and the numbers of participants. Some enjoyed the freedom to organize their sessions and meetings without worrying about supplies, refreshments, or catering and simply saved their power to programming and designing activities. Others preferred not to ask the RSU for any support to avoid the pressure to conform to university policies restricting certain activities and topics of the discussion.

### Obstacles

Volunteer coordinators faced physical and social obstacles. The physical obstacles included venue, logistics, supplies, and transportation. The social obstacles included scheduling, staffing, diverse needs of international students, linguistic barriers, and cultural barriers. None of the coordinators reported any physical obstacles as a real challenge. Coordinators highlighted the linguistic barrier where international students would cluster with other students from their countries and speak in their native language instead of using English. Coordinators managed to overcome this through pairing international students with American students or other students who do not speak the same native language. Scheduling activities in a suitable time that fits in

the schedule of international and American students was another difficulty. Consistency of such activities was an issue that students brought up in cases of the absence of the coordinator.

### Influence on Recruitment

Volunteer activities had a direct influence on campus internationalization. They also served as a continuous deliberate effort to engage, orient, and help international students on campus. These activities also provided them with the college survival skills necessary for the accomplishment of their goals. In their recruitment campaigns for international students, administrators at RSU always use these activities which have been shown in fliers and newsletters. Moreover, another method of recruitment which proved effective was the “word of mouth” spread by international students to their friends, relatives, and colleagues in their home countries. Administrators looked at the increase of international recruitment as a result of a group of factors with varying degrees of influence and counted volunteer activities as one of these.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In essence, this study captured and illustrated the values, roles, and relationships that emerged from implementing volunteer work to help international students and its influences on international recruitment. Volunteer efforts at RSU needed more organization and goal-oriented planning from the part of the university. Coordinators exerted efforts in easing the challenges of international students in their new host culture providing more campus involvement and engagement. These activities may be partially credited for the increase in international enrolment rates. Colleges and universities do not usually support these activities (Reedstrom, 2005). However, the positive influence of these activities on the increase of international enrollment cannot be denied (Knights, 2004). Through providing a welcoming environment for international students, these activities may supersede their primary goal of accommodation to a more cost effective goal of increasing the retention rates of these students. Therefore, more coordination from the part of the university might increase the success rate of these activities and increase international students’ retention rates. Findings asserted the value of volunteer efforts and highlighted needed measures and considerations for practitioners working for the goals of recruiting, supporting, and retaining international students. Future research may endeavor to reach a larger sample size through a multi campus quantitative approach.

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