Solving the International Student Retention Puzzle: Barriers to International Student Success

Clayton Smith, Ed.D.
Vice-Provost, Students & International
University of Windsor
A FEW STUDENT VOICES
Language

• For me, sometimes, when I speak in English I need to think. I need to mix sentences in my mind...to see if the grammar is correct, the correct sentences, past tense or future tense. That’s why I am a bit slow in speaking...and in classes, sometimes, I feel I want to express my ideas or give suggestions to the instructor but I couldn’t because I need to think and see if this is the correct way of saying it. [Amelia]
Culture

- Well, the main problem when I came here was that I found myself in an absolutely different system of education and the funny thing is that everybody expected that I know everything already. [Bjorn]
Educational Expectations

• The way and style of teaching and corresponding with instructors [here] is very different because we tend to be spoon-fed back home. [Reiko]
Solving the International Student Retention Puzzle
With Appreciation

Tanya Demjanenko, M.Ed.
Research Assistant
First...a Story
A BIT ABOUT OUR CONTEXT
University of Windsor

- Comprehensive university
- 9 Faculties
- 16,000 students
- 10% international students
- A border city (Canada/US)

2 of our top 5 priorities include enhancing the student experience and internationalization
International Students: 2007-2011

- **UG**
- **Grad**
- **Total**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>UG</th>
<th>Grad</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>1357</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>1728</td>
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<td>1310</td>
<td>407</td>
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<td>1182</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>1598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1115</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>1603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1120</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>1674</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Geographic Origin of International Students, Fall 2011

- South Asia: 30%
- Africa: 16%
- Americas: 6%
- Asia: 30%
- Middle East: 11%
- Europe: 6%
- Oceania: 1%
1st to 2nd Year International Student Retention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Retention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>76.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>70.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>71.7</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>80.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>69.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>70.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>72.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>74.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>76.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>81.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A New Challenge: Open Ontario

The Ontario provincial government will “aggressively promote Ontario postsecondary institutions abroad, and **increase international enrollment by 50 per cent** while maintaining spaces for Ontario students.”

-Government of Ontario, 2010
“To remain competitive, however, Ontario must distinguish itself from the growing number of players in the internationalization sphere, not only by providing a high quality educational experience, but also by building a reputation as the most supportive environment for international students in the world.”

-Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2011

“Even the most effective recruiting strategy will only yield limited gains if visiting students do not experience a high-quality, welcoming and engaging student experience at our universities.”

-Ontario Committee on Student Affairs, 2012
“A higher proportion of Canada’s GDP derives from trade than that of any other country, so employers value international experiences.”

-James Knight, 2012
President and CEO,
Association of Canadian Community Colleges
International students in Canada struggle with finding accommodations, cultural and racial sensitivities, immigration and institutional presence outside Canada and in assimilating with their Canadian peers.

-Institute for Competitiveness & Prosperity, 2010
Our Purpose

• To identify the factors that contribute to attrition of international students at the University of Windsor to determine what might be done to improve the success and persistence of international students academically, through support initiatives and in our student recruitment program.
Literature Findings
Rising Numbers

• Number of international students rising, especially at American institutions.
  – UG enrolments up by 5%; increased since 9/11 by 32%
  – Grad enrolments up 3% last year and 5% this year

• By 2025, global demand for international education is predicted to grow from 1.9 million to 7.2 million students (OECD, 2006).

• Recruitment of international students has become a priority for a large number of institutions and governments.
The Benefits

• Adds to the multiculturalism and diversity.
• Reinforces a global perspective.
• Cost-benefit advantage to the institution and the destination country.
  – Adds $14.5 billion to the US economy
  – Adds $6.5 billion to the Canadian economy
...and it will be higher in 2011!
Institutional Challenges

**Academic:**
- Language difficulties
- Culture-related learning differences
- Academic support issues

**Non-Academic:**
- Cultural differences
- Isolation
- Relating to and identifying with campus community
- Social issues
- Finances
Academic Support in 1\textsuperscript{st} Year

• Successful international students were found to be more engaged with activities positively correlated with GPA such as library and computer use, reading unassigned material, hours in academic work, use of scientific method and experimentation.

-Parikh (2008)
Need to Understand Racism

• Significant impact on GPA during the first semester – thus the need to address it in a first year experience course.

• A variable over eight semesters – thus the need for addressing it in a broader way in the curriculum.

-Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988

Internationalization of the curriculum functions to retain international students
Not Experienced Racism (CBIE, 2009)

I have not experienced any form of racism or discrimination as an international student in Canada.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Agreement</th>
<th>Universities (n=5,511)</th>
<th>Colleges (n=414)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/no response</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nearly one-third experienced racism or discrimination.
# Rating of Faculty (CBIE, 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>University (n=5,511)</th>
<th>College (n=414)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have been treated fairly in class by my instructors.*</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of my instructors are reasonably accessible outside of class to help students.</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some of my instructors have taken a personal interest in my academic progress.*</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructors show sensitivity to racial issues.</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Differences between university and college students are statistically significant.
Faculty Voice

Faculty perceptions of academically detrimental behaviours:

- Not participating in class
- Not asking for clarification
- Sitting only with international students
- Studying only with international students
- Breach of ethical standards of scholarship

Source: Adapted from Tompson & Tompson (1996)
Student Voice

Top reasons given for leaving a university:

- Not making friends and interacting with domestic students
- Food on campus
- International student office
- Academic assistance
- Cultural and social activities
- Housing
- Incorrect information prior to arrival
- Availability of courses and flexibility in scheduling within degree plans
- Other reasons such as availability of resources and research opportunities and social and academic adaptation within a new environment

Source: Adapted from Tas (2004)
Other Factors

Top reasons given for leaving a university:

- Self confidence
- Availability of a support group or support person
- Ability to focus on long-range goals
- Development of behaviour management/coping strategies
- Knowledge in an acquired field
- Community service experiences
- Leadership experiences
- Realistic self-appraisal

Source: Adapted from Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988; Hazard, 1997; Andrade, 2009
Other Factors - Gender

Top reasons given for leaving a university:

- Female international students report more stress and anxiety.
- Female international students perceived greater problems than did males with regard to academic advising, health services, and English proficiency.
- Female international students tend to experience more problems socially, emotionally, and culturally than males.
- American ideals of cultural homogeneity made Chinese females feel disempowered in class.

Source: Adapted from Kwon, 2009; Hazard, 2011
Few Studies

• The literature on the success and retention of international students is not nearly as extensive as it is for domestic students.
• Some good studies that are specific to nationals from specific countries.
• The shortage of information leaves institutions to rely on best practices in student success and retention, and tailor those practices for international students.
Some Possible Solutions

• Enhancement interventions (e.g., orientations, day-long workshops)
• Individual counselling to meet the needs of international students
• Establishing minimum English language proficiency criteria
• Establishing an exchange program
• Monitoring international students’ progress through the academic program
Some Possible Solutions (Cont’d)

• Establishing a mentoring program for 1-1 support
• Developing culturally-appropriate approach to meet the unique needs of ESL students within the classroom
• Developing strategies of cooperation and coordination among offices accessed by international students
Some Possible Solutions (Cont’d)

• Helping international students with community involvement, interaction with faculty members and domestic students

• Increasing sensitivity toward cultural differences within departments

• Helping international students understand racism in the community

• Providing international students with pre-arrival information to decrease the 1st semester learning curve


## Student Recommendations (CBIE, 2009)

If you were asked to advise officials at your college or university about possible changes in policy towards international students, what would you recommend?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information</th>
<th>University (n=5,511)</th>
<th>College (n=414)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide better support services for international students</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement orientation/buddy system/integration programs for international students</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistance with arranging accommodations</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide assistance with registration/ability to register early</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Student Recommendations (CBIE, 2009)

If you were asked to advise officials at your college or university about possible changes in policy towards international students, what would you recommend?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial</th>
<th>University (n=5,511)</th>
<th>College (n=414)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower tuition fees for international students</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide additional financial aid/scholarships/bursaries for international students</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to paid internship/co-op programs</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide international students with assistance finding employment/more job opportunities</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The issue of international retention at the postsecondary level remains a complex matter and is dependent upon the interplay of numerous variables.

-Mallinckrodt & Sedlacek, 1987
Efforts of improvement to increase the retention rate should involve a paradigm shift in how university administration conceptualized the efforts exerted in the work to retain each international student. Conceptually, administrators should focus their thinking away from retention rate and toward retention risk factors.

-Conrad & Morris, 2010
A Model of International Student Success and Retention

- Social
- Linguistic
- Economic
- Cultural
- Academic
- Familial
- Environmental

International Student
Methodology – Full Year Study (2010-11)

• Pre-Study environmental scan
• Pilot study
• Focus groups
• Service provider interviews
• Faculty interviews
• On-line survey: students
• On-line survey: faculty
• On-line survey: service providers
Study Participants

• Recruited from sample populations at the University of Windsor:
  – International students
  – International student groups
  – Service providers to international students
  – Faculty who instruct international students
# International Students

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<td>Focus Group A</td>
<td>Focus Group A</td>
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<td>Focus Group B</td>
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<td>Focus Group A</td>
<td>Student Group Interviews</td>
<td>Focus Group A</td>
<td>Results to Participants</td>
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<td>Focus Group C</td>
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<td>Focus Group D</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Student Group Interviews</td>
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# Service Providers

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Interviews Survey</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Interviews Survey</td>
<td>Results to Participants</td>
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</table>
# Faculty

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<tr>
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<td>-</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Interviews Survey</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Interviews Survey</td>
<td>Results to Participants</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Pilot Study

Areas of Concern

- Attendance
- Academics
- Finances
- Misinformation
- Racism & discrimination
- Missed connections
- Other plans
- Cultural adjustment
- Psychological issues
Themes - Faculty

• Language
• Culture
• Racism and discrimination
“...there appears to be a lack of ethics demonstrated by the University in accepting students into academic programs for which they are ill-equipped to survive from a basis English perspective. Is this the case of the University ‘selling its soul’ for financial gain? The University pays insufficient attention to student quality at the time of admission.”

-Faculty member
“Most of them have a huge [cultural] shock. They’re not used to the learning style-the way most people report, the way they express their opinion. They learn by making mistakes, which is not necessary. It’s up to the University to close this gap.”

-Faculty Member
“Students experience **discrimination** when renting accommodation, when looking for prayer spots, when forming heterogeneous groups – it’s a fact of life in Windsor.”

-Faculty Member
Themes – Service Providers

- Language
- Culture
- Racism and discrimination
“Speaking in person can help some people to feel more comfortable”

-Service Provider

“Taking them personally to area they are asking about.”

-Service Provider

“Ask them if they understand information I have given if not try and use different words or directions as needed.”

-Service Provider
“...particularly when registering for courses, applying for insurance etc. The racism students speak about is not always overt but rather being shunted from one department to another, going to an office with forms to be completed only to find that they are somehow creating a great imposition for a staff member, and so on.”

-Service Provider
Themes – Students

• Culture
• Frustration, Disorientation & Confusion
• Facilities & Services
• Racism & Discrimination
“I went into that room and I saw just the closet and the bed. I thought, where is the bathroom and the kitchen? I was so shocked that I opened the doors from the closet to see what is in there. The first moment I couldn’t handle it because being a Muslim that way you have to perform. You have to pray five times a day and wash before every prayer and wash in public washrooms. It just made me very upset.”

-Student
“...some stuff they are interested in obviously don’t interest me. So, I understand they are not my type and I’m not going to be there type. And I’m not going to discriminate or anything. I know they live differently...Their way of thinking is different than our way of thinking. Maybe that’s why we can’t connect.”

-Student
Differing Perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Service Providers</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism &amp; Discrimination</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration, Disorientation &amp; Confusion</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities &amp; Services</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...but agreement on Language and Culture
Increased retention of international students depends upon the culture of the university, which must influence the experiences of international students at the level of integration with domestic students, with faculty and with the larger community. It is the responsibility of the university to meet the independent needs of both faculty and international students and assist each stakeholder toward increased success and retention.

-Smith & Demjanenko, 2011
Closing the Gap

• Retention as another word for “home away from home”
• The need for formal and informal support
• Building a sense of community
• Racism draws a distinction between experiences in which international students thrive or survive the student experience
• Campus-wide approach
Some things to think on if we are to create an excellent beginning for international students!
Topics

• Language
• Culture
• Different educational systems
• Racism and discrimination
• Facilities and services
• Frustration, Disorientation & Confusion
• Sense of community
• Gender issues
What barriers are most challenging on your campus?

....for the afternoon
Questions & Comments

Clayton Smith
Vice-Provost, Students & International
University of Windsor
csmith@uwindsor.ca
Discussion Questions

• How are these barriers being met at the campus-level?
• What good educational practices are in use throughout Canada?
• How are we doing?
Themes from Gladwell’s video

- When it comes to measuring what people want or need we only get the data for the question asked and if it is the wrong question we miss a lot of important stuff.
- We assume a lot about what people want, we look for universals, and this is not only an error but a great disservice because so much new emerges when we allow ourselves to think differently.
- We need to better appreciate that in most cases we need to add many new options to our current offerings.
- We have learned to think that packaging is the ticket (e.g., Grey Poupon) but it is really about offering more and new options.
- Ultimately we need to shift our thinking towards a greater understanding of, and respect for, human variability vs. some universal truths.
Reactions?

“To remain competitive, however, Ontario must distinguish itself from the growing number of players in the internationalization sphere, not only by providing a high quality educational experience, but also by building a reputation as the most supportive environment for international students in the world.”

-Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2011
Resources - Canadian

- Solving the International Student Retention Puzzle, Smith, 2012.
- Bringing education in Canada to the world, bringing the world to Canada: An international education marketing action plan for provinces and territories, Council of the Federation Secretariat, 2011.
- SEM in Canada: Promoting Student and Institutional Success in Canadian Colleges and Universities, Gottheil & Smith, 2011.
Some areas to focus on during the Summit
Evening Reception

• 5:00 - 7:00 p.m. Welcome Reception, Top of Vancouver Restaurant (555 West Hastings Street)

http://www.topofvancouver.com/gallery.html