



Understanding the Career Development Needs of International Students

BY ELIF BALIN, SATOMI YAJI CHUDASAMA, AND ELIZABETH KNAPP

As the number of international students continues to grow and higher education becomes more globalized, career counselors and specialists must understand the unique career development needs and challenges of this student population. The authors highlight some of the findings and implications from two surveys conducted by the NCDA International Student Work Group and discuss strategies to partner effectively with international students in the U.S.

International students have been diversifying and enriching institutions of higher education in the United States for many years, and this past year was no different. According to the Student Exchange and Visitor Program (SEVIS, 2014) over 900,000 international students are enrolled at U.S. campuses and a large percentage desire to live and find employment in the U.S. upon graduation. The need for specialized career services will only continue to grow with the increasing number of international students.

In 2012, the conception of a committee dedicated to this cause took shape at the NCDA's Annual Conference. The goal was to facilitate awareness and share in the creation and compilation of specialty resources. The group developed two major surveys:

1. A survey to assess and identify needs and challenges of career development professionals as they assist international students at their higher education institutions.
2. A survey to explore the career development needs, interests, and challenges of international students in higher education.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT WORK GROUP SURVEY

The results of the first survey suggest that career development professionals should seek more resources to increase and enhance knowledge of international students' career development (e.g., visas, employment, cultural transition) and create collaborative efforts across their campuses to support the population, corresponding with the feedback from the second survey with international students. Only 13.6% of the student respondents felt that career services staff were very knowledgeable about their needs.

In the second survey, 1,422 international students from 106 countries participated and shared their insights on their job search and career services. The results showed that 80% of student respondents desired to find employment within the U.S. upon graduation and nearly the same percentage indicated that

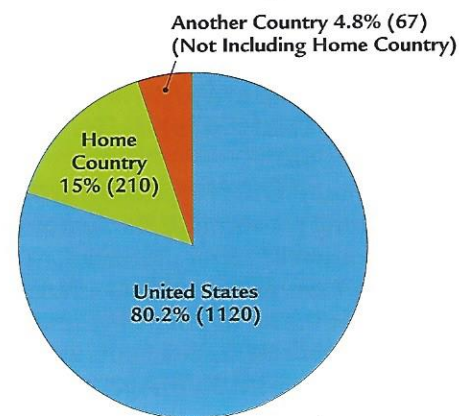
visa status was one of the major challenges faced when conducting a job search. Additionally, 85% of student respondents had no knowledge to limited knowledge about career services prior to coming to the U.S., and more than 50% had not visited career services in the U.S. Those numbers alone lay the groundwork for the creation of more proactive programming in career services.

Among several implications, a significant one is the need to reach out to international students in a timely manner and to inform them about career services. Other implications include the value of enhancing networking resources and strategies, improving communication skills (e.g., using online tutorials and videos), and developing specialized programs to help this population market their unique qualities to employers. Examples of specialized programs and services include, mentorship programs, peer support systems and alumni groups that can help provide guidance and share positive experiences.

These connections would also help international students learn about and adapt to work culture and trends in the U.S. More than 17% of students that responded to the survey recognized that cultural differences impacted their career search, so it is important to further explore these differences and help students navigate them during their education and job search process.

Where International Students Hope to Find Employment Post Graduation

NCDA International Student Work Group, 2014



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A critical result from the survey was that just under 6% of student respondents felt very knowledgeable about job seeking in the U.S. and more than a third had limited to no knowledge of the process for obtaining Curricular Practical Training (CPT) or Optional Practical Training (OPT), which are the primary work authorization options in the U.S. The students indicated the need to acquire more knowledge about work authorization as well as information on a general job search. Many of these needs can be met through collaborative efforts between campus offices and departments and one-on-one or group counseling appointments to discuss the overall process with students.

It is also imperative to educate our international students on being able to confidently portray the strengths and specific skill sets that they can bring to an organization. Bringing diversity in education and experiences, as well as the potential for adaptability and mobility, can prove to be advantageous.

EMPLOYER RELATIONS

Employers are another key component to consider when thinking about the career development needs of international students. What employers consider to be important is not quite universal. For example, employers in some countries value extracurricular activities less, and academic performance (e.g., GPA) more, compared to those in the U.S. according to the survey respondents. While international students do not have to change who they are and their cultural heritage, it is important and helpful for them to adopt an understanding of and skills for U.S. employment norms and expectations if they are to enter the world of work in the U.S.

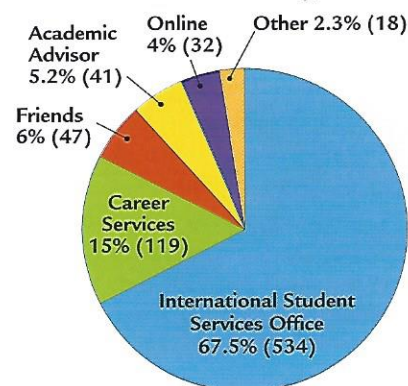
IMPLICATIONS

Career service professionals should promote connections between employers and students through on-campus and virtual events. It is also essential that professionals highlight potential cultural differences that may be encountered during the recruitment process.

Educating employers on work authorization and promoting the increasing value of a globalized workforce is another critical strategy in developing a holistic approach to hiring international students. And, when it becomes necessary to make a backup plan, career services professionals should also know how to explore trends in global job markets to support international students competently in job search around the world, or to prepare for reentry in their home country.

Where International Students Learn About Work Authorization Options

NCDA International Student Work Group, 2014



Working with international students is a significant form of globalization in the career counseling field that has the potential to make a huge impact on higher education institutions and the individual lives of international students. Career services professionals must continue to educate themselves on the best ways to support these students. It starts with a few great ideas, and one step forward.

For more information about the surveys and resources developed by the NCDA International Student Work Group, please visit http://ncda.org/aws/NCDA/asset_manager/get_file/64588.

Recommendations for Career Services

- Recommend proactive exploration of majors and career paths, and highlight opportunities and challenges with students (e.g., requirement of major-career connection for work authorization).
- Inform employers about the work authorization options (e.g., CPT, OPT) and process.
- Reinforce early networking and the enhancement of communication skills.
- Encourage students to develop mentorships, peer support systems and student/alumni groups to enhance their network.
- Facilitate the navigation of cultural differences and the impact on career development through the creation of special programs, resources and culturally competent career counseling.

REFERENCES

A complete list of references are available upon request from the authors.

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