Internationalization in Higher Education: A Case Study of the University of Kansas Academic Accelerator Program

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Abstract

The importance of multiculturalism on university campuses has led to an increased reliance on partnering with third-party private education companies for recruiting students from around the globe. As set forth in its "Bold Aspirations" strategic plan, the University of Kansas (KU) has generated the KU Academic Accelerator Program (KUAAP) in partnership with Shore light Education Company. This paper highlights the importance of internationalization, compares the University of Kansas to its peer institutions, sheds light on KU's efforts to internationalize the University's campus through KUAAP, and finally provides concrete recommendations regarding amendments to the Shore light contract in the interest of KUAAP's continued success.

Keywords: Internationalization, Higher Education, Recruitment, Diversity, Research University, Education Company.

Introduction

Recruiting international students to institutions of higher education has been an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in the United States. International students bring a variety of academic, social, cultural, political, and economic benefits to American universities. This paper highlights the efforts of the University of Kansas (KU) to increase enrollment by students from outside the United States in order to secure its status as an international research university. The University Chancellor, Bernadette Gray-Little, in her statement about diversity states that the university attracts and retains outstanding students to enrich intellectual and human diversity (University of Kansas, 2015). With the support of Chancellor Gray-Little, KU has developed several strategies to aid the university further and nurture the growth of its mission: "to educate leaders, build healthy communities, and make discoveries that change the world" at its main campus and the Medical Center (University of Kansas, 2015). For example, in its Bold Aspirations strategic plan, KU articulates six broad goals and 22 strategies with the aim of internationalizing its student population and thereby solidifying its position as a top-tier public international research university. Bold Aspirations shapes budget priorities in accordance with its goals and strategies.

As articulated in Bold Aspirations, multicultural and intellectual diversity is a core value of KU's strategic plan for the academic years 2012 through 2017 (University of Kansas, 2015). One of the six educational goals outlined is the development of a new undergraduate core curriculum which promotes respect for human diversity, cultural understanding, and global awareness (University of Kansas, 2015). In addition to redesigning the undergraduate curriculum, KU has also taken concrete steps to diversify its student population, such as the launch of the KU Academic Accelerator Program (KUAAP). This program serves as a means of internationalizing the university by actively recruiting students from outside of the United States. The University of Kansas is one of many top-tier higher education institutions striving to diversify its student population in order to gain a competitive advantage. Given the critical role, that diversity has assumed in the American academic landscape, it is worth exploring approaches taken by peer institutions and how KU compares in its quest for internationalization.

The Role of Diversity in Higher Education

Diversity has recently been recognized as an important variable that contributes to the quality of higher education institutions.

Generally speaking, in a university setting, internationalization "has become an indicator for quality in higher education" (De Wit, 2011, p. 39), which is why recruiting international students, is an inevitable pathway to internationalize institutions of higher education. As KU states in its strategic plan:

Diversity and excellence go hand in hand. A diverse and inclusive environment strengthens KU's ability to excel. Diversity enriches our ability to find innovative solutions to complex problems and to create new knowledge. It provides our students with valuable experiences that will help them prosper after graduation in an increasingly global and multicultural world. Through diversity, we gain the opportunity to broaden our worldview, as well as to build a community of learning and fairness marked by mutual respect.(University of Kansas, 2015)

This plan illustrates that KU is eager to become a diverse and supportive environment for people from all over the world. For example, KU established an Office of Diversity & Equity in 2011 to prioritize the diversity of the university population and to enhance learning and working environments as an international research university (University of Kansas, 2015). The office includes faculty members, staff, and students, as well as coordinates efforts among various entities on campus, including the Emily Taylor Center for Women & Gender Equity, the Langston Hughes Visiting Professorship, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, the Multicultural Scholars Program, and other diversity networks (University of Kansas Office of Diversity & Equity, 2015).

In addition to the previously mentioned organizations, KU has two supplementary programs for undergraduates and graduates to enhance their academic experiences by exposing them to a variety of multicultural contexts. There is the Global Awareness Program (GAP) for undergraduate students, approximately 2,670 of whom have completed the program since its inception in 2004 (University of Kansas, 2015). The other program, the Center for Global and International Studies (CGIS), was established in 2009 and is home to the Global and International Studies major as well as a number of other regionally focused programs of study. As of the 2015 to 2016 academic year, over 170 undergraduates had chosen majors housed within CGIS, and an additional 30 undergraduates had chosen the Center's minor course of study. In the same year, CGIS had more than 50 graduate students enrolled in its master's program (University of Kansas, 2015). All of the aforementioned programs of study aim to eliminate the barriers between students of different cultures.

KU also has cross-disciplinary programs, organizations, and departments to support diversity. For example, it has International Recruitment and Undergraduate Admissions (IRUA), International Programs, the Office of Study Abroad, the Applied English Center (AEC), and it is also working on creating more organizations, such as the recently-formed association for international students in the School of Education, KU International Students in Education (KUISE).The internationalization of higher education has benefits both on-campus and off-campus (Ho Lin, & Yang, 2015). Examples of on-campus benefits include diversifying the campus by recruiting students from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and broadening students' perspectives by exposing them to ideas from around the globe. Examples of off-campus benefits include supporting local businesses in the communities in which they live, bridging cultural and religious gaps, and socializing students with their peers from different economic backgrounds.

The Importance of Internationalization

Internationalization has been a growing trend in the higher education community over the last several decades. As early as the 1970s, higher education institutions began to implement internationalization initiatives. Internationalization of higher education is defined as "the process of integrating an international dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of an institution of higher education" (Knight, 2008). However, the term "internationalization" itself did not come into use until the 1980s (Brandenburg & DeWit, 2011). By the 1990s, Japan – the flagship for internationalization efforts in Asia – had begun its most successful initiative, "100,000 by 2000." Funded by the Japanese government, the project aimed to recruit 100,000 students from abroad by the year 2000 (Ho, et al., 2015). These kinds of initiatives began to grow in popularity around the world through the first decade of the 21st century. Since the turn of the century, universities have placed a considerable amount of focus on offline internationalization methods such as recruiting international students, exchange student programs, and studying abroad. However, they would be well served to turn their attention to online strategies such as international collaboration projects and publishing in electronic journals, which are just as effective, and in some cases, more cost efficient.

Regardless of the strategy used, internationalization of higher education not only enriches the experience of students, but it also enhances the schools and surrounding communities where internationalization is implemented, as well as the communities from which the foreign students come.

International Enrollment Trends in Higher Education

Similar to many other institutions of higher education, funding shortages at the state and federal levels are driving the University of Kansas' fierce campaign to recruit and retain undergraduate students in an effort to compensate for this additional financial strain. While Kansas residents have long been the bread and butter of KU's enrollment, out-of-state students who pay higher tuition rates are attractive recruiting material in an era of financial uncertainty. In addition to the recruitment of domestic students, the University of Kansas has recently implemented new programs to attract students from overseas in an effort to compete with its more diverse peer institutions. In the fall of 2014, the total enrollment of international students at KU's Lawrence and Edwards campuses was only 9.28% of the student population, both undergraduate and graduate, representing 101 countries (University of Kansas, 2014).

Although international students have a substantial presence on campus, when comparing the University of Kansas to its peer institutions, we find that it is less internationalized than its cohorts. For example, in the same academic year, international students comprised approximately 23.5% of the total enrollment of students at Indiana University-Bloomington, representing 125 different countries (Indiana University Bloomington, 2015). Meanwhile, Michigan State University and the University of Oregon boasted 15.3% and 13% enrollment of international students, representing 130 and 97 different countries, respectively (Michigan State University, 2015; Michigan State University, 2014; A. Al-Rawe, personal communication, Nov. 2, 2015; University of Oregon, 2014).

Despite these impressive statistics, not every one of KU's institutional peers can claim these high international enrollment rates. For example, the international student population at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill comprises approximately 6% of the total student enrollment (University of North Carolina, 2014a). Similarly, approximately 9% of the student population of the University of Virginia is comprised of international students (University of Virginia, 2014a). While KU is not in last place in terms of internationalization, it still lags far behind the benchmarks set by its peers.

Table 1: Comparative Enrollment Chart

Schools	Total Enrollment of Undergraduate International Students	Total Enrollment of Graduate International Students	Total Enrollment of International Students	Percentage
University of Kansas	1,229	1,054	2,283	9.28%
Indiana University-Bloomington	5,282	3,775	9,080	23.5%
Michigan State University	4,991	2,176	7,645	15.3%
The University of Oregon	2,725	407	3,135	13%
University of Buffalo	1,879	3,181	5,060	17%
University of Missouri	905	1,340	2,879	8%
University of Nebraska-Lincoln	1,515	970	2,845	13.4%
The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill	423	1,018	1,676	6%
University of Virginia	838	1,102	1,940	9%
University of Iowa	2,490	1,515	4,360	14%
University of Colorado-Boulder	1,272	914	2,267	8%
University of Florida	357	3,496	6,148	12.3%

Note: All of the enrollment information above is for the 2014-2015 academic year.

As the Table 1 above illustrates, KU has fewer international undergraduate and graduate students than the majority of it peer institutions. If KU wishes to retain its position at the forefront of academia, the university must prioritize the internationalization of its student body, particularly the undergraduate population. Given the great strides made by comparable universities in the diversification of their student bodies, the University of Kansas must accelerate its process of internationalization in order to maintain its status among the nation's top-tier universities.

Moving Toward Internationalization

Recognizing the urgent need to increase its international student population, the University of Kansas established the KU Academic Accelerator Program (KUAAP) with the aim of increasing the university's international enrollment rate from 8% to 16% (Shepherd, 2014). In an effort to efficiently achieve this objective, the University of Kansas has partnered with Shore light, a private education consulting firm (Shepherd, 2014). Prior to this partnership, KU did not have any mechanisms in place with the intention of expanding international student recruitment (Donovan, 2015). The following pages explore the methods used by Shore light to achieve the objectives set forth by KU.

In the 2013 to 2014 academic year, KU had only 1,281 undergraduate and 965 graduate international students, comprising 5.24% and 3.95% of the total enrollment, respectively (University of Kansas, 2015). In other words, the ratio of domestic undergraduate students to international undergraduate students is just over 13:1, while the ratio of domestic graduate students to international graduate students is nearly 5:1.

Summary of KU Enrollment in the 2014-2015 Academic Year

Student Classification	Undergraduate	Graduate
Domestic	17,463	4,726
International	1,281	965
Domestic Percentage	71.47%	19.34%
International Percentage	5.24%	3.95%

Strategies to Internationalize Higher Education

Internationalization strategies differ depending on the goals of the implementing higher education institution. However, we have identified certain trends in the methodologies used by universities that have successfully internationalized. Most of these universities have implemented strategies through both official and unofficial channels (Hanover Research, 2010). Examples of official channels include study abroad programs, strengthening cooperation with overseas university projects, establishing international education centers, integrating international knowledge into the curriculum, enhancing publications in international journals, partnering with private firms international recruiting agents, and traveling overseas for the purpose of international student fairs as well as online institutional marketing (Ho et al., 2015; Horie, 2002; Qiang, 2003; De Haan, 2013; University of Kansas, 2015; Hanover Research, 2010; Knight, 2011; Wadhwa & Jha, 2014; McDonnell & Boyle, 2012). In addition to the wide range of official channels used by higher education institutions, there are a number of effective unofficial channels as well. For example, alumni volunteers are perfect agents for higher education institutions because they are able to share culturally relevant, first-hand experience with prospective students in their home country.

KUAAP's Approach

Having recruiters and agents in developing countries that send students abroad is one of the best strategies to internationalize higher education (Hanover Research, 2010). The mechanism of action through which KUAAP operates is the presence of overseas offices whose purpose is to liaise with local recruitment agencies. KUAAP recruits students through Shore light's network of 45 global staff that are located in approximately 20 countries across the world including Mexico, Brazil, Nigeria, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), India, Vietnam, China, and others. In each of these regional offices, the Shore light teams work with local agencies, high schools, and sponsor groups to connect and identify prospective students. While the KUAAP offers a number of activities in connection with internationalization strategies, the vice president of Shore light Education company has identified the following as having the most potential to influence recruiting international undergraduate students:

Local Agencies

Shorelight recruiters in foreign countries work with local agencies in the country where they live. For example, Shorelight has several offices in China to recruit Chinese students, and these offices work with Chinese agencies to advertise the benefits and advantages of studying at KU in a way that is culturally and contextually relevant for college-ready Chinese youth.

High Schools

The local agencies visit high schools, meet with principals, talk to students about the AAP program, and discuss the high quality of education at KU. The recruiters then encourage high school students nearing graduation to submit their application for admission to KU. Shore light provides ongoing support to the prospective students throughout the admissions process, and after they are admitted, through the enrollment and orientation process.

Sponsor Groups

Shore light also engages companies and private schools. For instance, KUAAP recruited 18 students from the United Arab Emirates who had been admitted into a scholarship program sponsored by an oil company prior to the company signing a contract with KUAAP for their scholarship recipients to study petroleum engineering at KU.

Local International Students

Shore light Education takes advantage of international students who are currently attending the University of Kansas to recruit for the AAP, based on their country affiliations. KUAAP has offices at the Dole Development Human Center on the KU campus where local international students meet with the marketing director to guide these international students and encourage international students to recruit from their home countries. These international student recruiters work for a percentage taken from the tuition of prospective students. As the Graduate Studies' Dean at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign notes, international students are the "best marketers" because they talk to officials when they return about what they experienced at their institutions (Hanover Research, 2010).

Impact on Internationalization

One of the main goals of KUAAP is to increase the percentage of international students at the University of Kansas from approximately 8% to 16% of the total international enrollment. We can assess the impact of KUAAP when we calculate the number of undergraduate international students in the fall of 2013 and compare it to the following semester when the program started in the fall of 2014. In the fall of 2014, 57 students began the KUAAP program, and there are now over 200 student's enrolled (University of Kansas, 2015). The retention rate is greater than 90%, indicating the success of the program. However, in order to predict the future success of KUAAP, we need more data regarding the demographics of the students enrolled, the cost of program implementation, and more information about the program activities on and off campus.

Recommendations

After reviewing relevant literature on internationalization, conducting extensive research on KUAAP, and meeting with several international students who were recruited to attend KU, the following recommendations for a successful and effective internationalization program should be adopted:

- The University should amend its contract with Shore light to include translation of its flyers from English to the native languages of its prospective students. Many of the KUAAP students are unable to read English prior to their arrival. By providing recruitment material in the languages of the program participants, KUAAP will ensure that students clearly understand their rights and the program's expectations as program participants.
- The contract documents between the University of Kansas and Shore light Education should be made available to the public. Researchers need data to be made available to them in order to accurately assess the outcomes of the program and measure the extent to which KUAAP achieved its objectives.
- Finally, the details of the contract budget should be made public. This will allow researchers to not only measure the programmatic success of KUAAP, but also evaluate the cost effectiveness and financial sustainability of the contract.

Conclusion

As the aforementioned statistics indicate, the University of Kansas has lagged behind many of its peer institutions, such as Indiana University-Bloomington and Michigan State University, in terms of internationalization. By implementing KUAAP, KU has taken critical action to internationalize its campus. There is, however, room for improvement.

If KU wishes to continue its success on the path to internationalization, the university must take concrete steps such as the translation of its recruitment materials and the publication of performance and financial data from its contract with Shore light Education to allow researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of the program and its role in the future of the university.

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