How Educational Media Can Benefit the International Student Population in the United States University Setting

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Abstract

This study investigated international students' access to the Internet, their use of web-based educational media, and the differences between those who utilized a website designed to decrease acculturative stress and those who did not. Results indicated that international students applying to universities in the United States have excellent access to the Internet, although in some areas it is still very expensive. Of the students who utilized the website designed for them, most found it was very helpful to their adjustment to life at the university. Many of those same students also reported that they used web-based educational media resources to help them decide which university to attend. Universities need to focus their attention on using web-based educational media to attract and assist their international student populations.

Keywords: *Educational media; International students; Internet; Web site*

Introduction

At the same time that universities are working harder to attract a diverse and international group of students to their institutions, the population of international students coming to the United States is slowing, and in many places, decreasing considerably. If universities want to attract an international student population, they need to use Internet-based Educational Media in order to attract a computer-savvy and increasingly informed international population. As the challenge to be awarded a student visa to the United States becomes more expensive, more labor intensive and more time-consuming, students may be lost to countries like Australia and Great Britain, who currently have less strict regulations. This study found that international students are using the Internet more and more often to get their information about attending schools overseas, and United States universities can capitalize on this by using Internet Educational Media sites that provide the kind of in-depth information potential students are looking to find. Further, this study found that the information can actually assist students in their adjustment to life in the United States, making their transition, and life here easier.

The International Student Population in the United States

According to the Open Doors Report of the Institute of International Education (IIE) after five years of steady growth, the number of international students attending colleges and universities in the United States in 2002-2003 showed only a slight increase over the previous year, up less than 1%, bringing the 2002-03 total to 586,323. In another survey by IIE of Intensive English Programs, they found a striking decrease in the international students who were enrolled in these programs in 2002. IEPs reported a total of 51,179 students, a decrease of 35% from the 78,521 students in 2001, and a 40% decrease over two years. According to Allan E. Goodman, President and CEO of the Institute of International Education, "International educational exchange has never been more important for the United States. Foreign students bring intellectual, economic and cultural benefits to our campuses and communities." Open Doors 2003 reports that international students bring about $12 billion dollars to the U.S. economy in money spent on tuition, living expenses, and related costs (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2004). Universities that want to stay committed to their international populations must recognize the modern challenges international students face and that Internet technology is the tool to meet those challenges.

Services for Students on the Internet

Just ten years ago, few post-secondary institutions in the United States used electronic technologies to offer student services. Today, many institutions, from community colleges to virtual universities, offer their services through some electronic means (Dillon & Cintron, 1997). The Internet, specifically, creates opportunities for students to pursue their dreams of a post-secondary university education without stepping away from their computers. It is now possible for students to compare their choices for colleges at collegenet.com, take virtual tours at campustours.com, fill out applications, take classes, and even access their school records, all online. In looking at various models of technology integration in the university environment, Kember (1995) found that most adults are pleased with the resources available through these advances. One question that universities need to ask as they modernize services, though, is whether these services meet the special needs of their international student population.

The Special Needs of International Students

International students experience the normal difficulties that students are challenged by as they transition to their new life in higher education. They also often experience adjustment and personal difficulties that are unique to their population (Crano & Crano, 1993; Sandhu, 1995). This is acculturative stress, and according to Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok (1987), it is a special form of stress that manifests itself in physical, social, and

psychological problems when people move across cultures.

Even though universities may have services designated for foreign students, these students are still experiencing stress, depression, frustration, and fear in campus life (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998). Many universities are implementing modern solutions to old problems, as they attempt to make student transition to campus smoother and easier. They are trying to meet the needs of their students in this area by disseminating information and making services more accessible through the Internet (Falk, Rehman, & Foster, 1999). In general, more and more university services are available through the Internet including application processing, information about student services, Etours that display the physical campus to potential students, and even financial aid services (Editor, 2000; Roane, 2000; Keizer, 1998). This fast-growing marketing and service-providing through Internet-based educational media is quickly changing the way that universities do business

One question that universities need to ask as they modernize services, though, is whether these services meet the special needs of their international student population. "Idiom Technologies notes that 43 percent of today's web users are non-English speaking; and over the next few years, Internet use is expected to grow by 79 percent in Asia; 123 percent in Latin America, and over 200 percent in Japan" (Tapper, 2000, p. 24). As many diverse populations increase their Internet usage, it is important for U.S. universities to acknowledge that their web audience is changing, and the services they offer online need to reflect this change. According to the Aberdeen Group, by 2005, "more than half of the people using the Internet will speak something other than English, within the next two years 66 percent of global e-commerce spending will occur outside of the United States, and 80 percent of business-to-business companies with an international presence will have to create a better position for the global marketplace" (Sheron, 2001). Universities must take heed also.

How a Website Can Make a Difference

The Global Survival Guide (the Guide) was a website developed to meet the needs of international students before they set foot on campus, with the goal of attracting international students and creating a smooth cultural transition that would ultimately benefit their academic and personal experience in the United States. The web site designed for this project (http://www.siu.edu/~world/gsg) was organized to help students with their first steps in a new culture and decrease the stress that goes along with living and studying in a different country, thereby positively impacting their learning experience.

The Guide offers the following information and services:

1. Coming to the USA — Information about immigration, visas, and planning a successful trip to the U.S.

2. Living in the City — Finding housing and other services students need in and near the city.

3. Studying at the University — All about the university, including academic, social, and life issues.

4. Personal issues — What are relationships like in the US? Who can students turn to when they have problems? What is culture shock?

5. Bulletin Board — so international students could ask students currently at the university any questions.

Implementation

The guide was created utilizing information gathered in a survey of current international students, current International Student Program personnel, and Student Services, asking what information is not available that they would like to see online, and how they would like it organized. After triangulating the survey information, the website was created using HomeSite and Photoshop. Although there are more advanced multimedia materials on many websites today, the survey had indicated that online access can be very expensive in some areas of the world, and students wanted a website more focused on content. The website:

1. does not take a long time to download.

2. is organized to minimize the number of clicks students would have to make between categories and hyperlinks to other sites that would take more time.

3. can easily be downloaded into a txt or zip file with one click.

After the implementation of the website, international students attending the International Student Orientation were surveyed as to their access to the Internet, how they utilized that information, and their opinions about the website created for their benefit.

Survey Results

Most of the total participant pool indicated that they had access to the Internet at home (74%) or at school (72%). Fewer participants had Internet access at work (48%) or at Cyber cafés (55%). Also, 23 (25%) of the participant pool (N=93) utilized the researcher-provided web site, while seventy (75%) did not. Of those participants who did not access the Guide, the majority (60%) indicated that they did not have time (38%) or that they did not know about it (22%).

Of the 23 international students who came to New International Student Orientation and who looked at the website, 21students indicated that they had found the web site useful, while only 1 did not find it useful and 1 did not answer. When asked if the information regarding university life helped them to adjust to life at the university, 20 students stated that they utilized the web site information, while only 2 said that they did

not. Third, the survey measured whether international students consider website material influential when making decisions about which university to attend. In answer to this question, 19 of the participants stated they used Internet material to help them make decisions about university choice. Six participants said that they did not use the web in their decision.

One of the reasons that population of the survey is so small is that the information regarding the new website was not marketed well or soon enough for new international students coming to campus. At the Orientation where many students first heard about the site, there was a lot of disappointment that they had not heard about it soon enough. This is definitely a key point. Strong marketing of new features and services online are a must, as the inadequate number of participants indicates. There were about 120 students at orientation, so only 20 knowing about the website was disappointing and telling.

These results are still a small, but positive indicator for the growing field of Internet-based information through educational media, and for international students in need of information. Internet information is being accessed, processed, and utilized by international students who are coming to the United States for study. In other words, universities can, and should, provide web-based acculturative information to their international students as the effects have been shown to be very positive.

Conclusions

In an atmosphere of decreasing numbers and slowing trends for international students in the United States, further research needs to determine the most effective way to present pre-acculturation information to international students, how to insure that the information meets their needs, and how to market that information to them. Universities need to review their educational media web sites with international students in mind. Universities that have or solicit international students for their programs can survey those students about their needs for pre-acculturation information and plan websites accordingly. As acculturation is an on-going process, and Internet access is generally available to the student population, research about foreign student website usage in the United States could provide direction for International Programs. These programs could target those areas where students feel there is a lack of information or services for their special needs on campus, even before they arrive, hopefully translating into a better learning experience here in the United States.

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