

INTERNATIONAL MBA STUDENTS – TOWERING THROUGH BUSINESS EXPERIENCE

Elham Tashakor
Ashland University
etashako@ashland.edu

Khushwant K.S. Pittenger
Ashland University
kpitten@ashland.edu

Karen Hagans
Ashland University
khagans@ashland.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on ways to enrich the educational experiences of international students in the USA. Challenges facing international students are identified. Through the perspective of an international student at Ashland University, a small liberal arts university in the Midwest, various innovative techniques for providing professional experiences to international business students are presented. These techniques were used by the student to add an experiential element to her MBA studies in the USA. The goal of the paper is to encourage similar creativity on other campuses to enhance the educational experiences of all international students.

ROLE OF REAL WORLD EXPERIENCE IN BUSINESS EDUCATION

The importance of having an internship experience for a student to find a job after college is undeniable. Newly graduated students with work experience are more attractive to employers. Internships also connect real-world experience with learned theories in college.

As a result, it is becoming more common for students to have internship experiences before graduation. It is, however, more challenging for international students to find internship opportunities. Some may argue, without such real-world experience, the quality of education received by international students is not equivalent to that of domestic students. This paper focuses on techniques used by one school to close the gap.

DATA ON INTERNATIONAL MBA (IMBA) STUDENTS IN THE USA

Globalization attracts international students to study abroad, and the United States is one of the top destinations to study (Sin & Kim, 2018). Table 1 indicates the number of International Students in 2017/2018 in United States. Of these, 196,054 of them are in Business and Management programs. The highest number of students are from China, with 363,341 students, and after China, India with 196,271 students has the second highest position (Institute of International Education website accessed on Oct. 1, 2019).

TABLE 1-
Total International Students in USA (Institute of International Education)

2017/2018	Enrolled	OPT	Total
	891,330	203,462	1,094,792

CHALLENGES FACING INTERNATIONAL MBA STUDENTS FOR GETTING EXPOSURE TO EXPERIENCE IN THE REAL WORLD

The quality and value of getting a degree in United States attracts many international students to pack all they might need into two bags and leave their home country. Life as a student in a foreign country, however, is not easy. One of the key challenges

can be the language barrier, since English is usually their second language. A good level of English comprehension would help them to get involved socially, understand the culture, and have better academic achievements (Almurideef, 2016).

In addition to language, other challenges for international students include lack of confidence, cultural differences, employer bias, lack of available resources, homesickness, and perceptions about work visas. International students also bring a variety of cultures, which can be helpful or a burden for their new life chapter in the United States. A research study indicates that international students are different in the everyday informational needs than domestic students. They face more informational challenges such as accommodation, transportation, health, career, expenses, shopping, fun activities, news, events, travel, and college-related information (Sin & Kim, 2018).

The importance of the campus community for interacting with international students to assist them in overcoming all the challenges is undeniable. Academic faculty members are very influential in helping students get close to their career and academic goals by teaching, supervision, and mentoring. To have a better interaction between faculty and international students, the programs should be less ethnocentric since it is hard for international students to maintain the program if it is not (Arthur, 2017). For the success of international students, having international students' services to support and welcome them is crucial as well (Almurideef, 2016).

INNOVATION TECHNIQUES TRIED BY OTHER COLLEGES

To assist students with the gap of international and domestic students, some scholars have suggested Active/Constructive Learning. Active Learning would assist students to get involved with class content and experience interaction with domestic students by group tasks (Kerridge & Simpson, 2019). Another research study reported the main challenges facing Chinese students are language barriers and culture differences. Presence of social support on campus would reduce the cultural differences. This study indicated that mixing international and domestic students in different supporting social events, activities, and classrooms could decrease the culture shock and language barrier (Lértora, Sullivan & Croffie, 2017).

Most of the graduate students are experiencing the lack of readiness for career during their study. The universities could provide career resources and support for students to help them to succeed in their future career endeavors. The University of Kentucky has initiated a new course called Preparing Future Professionals (PFP). The purpose of this course is to reduce the gap between college training and career needs. Students in this course get prepared for their career/research outside of the college, and also they can develop some skills that are important to have in the job market (N-Burgdolf & Vanderford, 2017).

CASE STUDY – INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT ASHLAND UNIVERSITY

Currently, 320 international students are studying at Ashland University in a variety of majors and degrees. Also, 85 international students are on approved Optional Practical Training (OPT). The greatest numbers of these international students are in the MBA program. The MBA program was introduced to Ashland University in 1978. Since then, more than 5,000 students have found their way through the MBA program. The university is offering a variety of MBA programs, ranging from traditional, intense one-year, Online and Hybrid MBA programs with 11 specializations in three locations. Currently, there are 515 students at the MBA program, and 96 of them are international students with specializations ranging from Accounting to Supply Chain Management.

TECHNIQUES WE TRIED

Ashland University tried different approaches to assist International MBA students to overcome challenges discussed earlier in the paper, especially related to finding internships or meaningful work experiences.

i. Innovation Grant (50 hours program)

International MBA students (IMBA) have severe challenges breaking into the US employment market. Due to this fact, Ashland University decided to launch a pilot internship program for IMBA students. An Innovation Grant gave IMBA students an opportunity to work for up to 50 hours with a US company. Students were paid by the university. The Innovation Grant was designed to match the student talent and education with the needs of the university corporate partners for short-term, focused projects. This program gave IMBA students the opportunity to enhance their marketability for future employment. The goal was to make it as a hands-on experience along with their MBA program focused on real-world US projects. Business faculty members and the career coach for MBA students worked with the office of corporate partnership to identify employers who could be interested in hiring IMBAs for specific projects.

To help IMBAs for the opportunity, the students eligible for Curricular Practical Training (CPT) were asked to submit their resumes to the MBA career coach. The selected resumes were sent to selected employers through this process. For IMBAs, we found projects with three employers.

Four students were selected to work with the three selected employers. I started to work with a small coffee roasting company last summer. I introduced different tools for Business Analytics to assess data in their business. A part of my role was SEO (Search Engine Optimization), so by assessing different keywords and approaches, their website and Social Media views increased.

My other projects include Market Research and Customer Behavior. *Table 2* indicates the role description of three International MBA students who were selected for the Innovation Grant program as they described it in their post-experience survey.

**TABLE 2-
IMBAs Role Description**

	Specialization	Role Description
Student 1	Business Analytics	<p>Creating new and innovative ideas for the company's social media platform.</p> <p>Responsible for creating and managing any databases related to social media.</p> <p>Marketing of the company's mission, vision, events and program outlines on social media</p>
Student 2	Supply Chain Management / Management Information System	<p>To research new potential sources for green coffee that fit requirements provided by a coffee company.</p> <p>To research and establish a logistical path to get green coffee from the respective farmers in Mexico to the USA.</p> <p>Establish relationships with new coffee suppliers in India.</p>
Student 3	Business Analytics	<p>Assist with the launch of SourceBrandSolutions.com by conducting a detailed SWOT analysis.</p> <p>Conduct research on marketing agencies of all sizes at the city, state and regional level.</p> <p>Analyze and make recommendations about the specialties Source Brand Solutions should offer to create a niche in the market without overlapping in services.</p>

According to post survey, all four students including myself found that this experience improved their marketability for future employment, and three of them thought the experience contributed significantly to their education in the MBA program.

Another survey has been taken from employers to evaluate their feedback about the Innovation Grant program. According to the survey results, two of the employers suggested to extend the grant beyond 50 hours. According to the post survey, *Table 3* describes the value that has been added to employers' organizations through IMBAs.

**TABLE 3
The Value Added to the Organizations**

Employer 1	The analysis was enlightening because we now have a better understanding of the services our competitors offer. We are using the analysis during Q3 to call upon these competitors to pitch white labeling services.
Employer 2	Gave us better insight into our specific market, improved our social media footprint and introduced us to new strategies and tools we can use to continue to increase our business profile.
Employer 3	Gave me a greater understanding of how social media would help our clinic.

In the 50 hours of internship, I learned to use different tools like Google Analytics, which is free and easy to use for small companies to make data-driven decisions. Working at the company gave me the opportunity to get knowledge about the impact of digital marketing on a business. Also, working in a coffee-based environment helps me to have a better understanding of the coffee industry, including supply, import, and export.

In *Table 4*, you can find what else other students have learned from the program.

Table 4
What Have Students Learned Through Innovation Grant

Student 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ My involvement with free clinic of X is one of the most important works I have done because they help provide free medical care to the residents of X County. ➤ There is so much opportunity and potential to grow. They create a serene and welcoming atmosphere for everyone. They create a culture that makes it difficult to leave work. ➤ Working at Free Clinic of X County has helped me to have a great communication skill with patients, management and employees. Now I have a great empathy towards people, knowing how to treat patient with respect and kindness even when they are acting mean or rude.
Student 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Gained extensive insight in coffee processing, logistics, people and their culture. ➤ Knowledge in green coffee procurement across the North American region and major producing countries also attributes that could affect the stability of supply and demand. ➤ Logistics and operations involved in procurement across the US border.
Student 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Proper Time Management. ➤ Learning to Work and function as a team member. ➤ An introduction to Digital and Media Advertising.

ii. External grant funded programs

Ashland University designed three Occupational Life Calling courses supported by grant funding. The purpose of these courses is to give students the opportunity to find their purpose, passion, and chosen career.

Life Calling I focuses on students who are in the process of selecting a major and planning for the future. It is highly likely that undecided students in Occupational Life Calling I end up selecting a major by the end of the course. Life Calling II is designed to give students an understanding of career and experiential options related to their anticipated career field. Life Calling III assists students with identifying and using their talents and skills in pursuit of their life calling following graduation.

I work as a Life Calling intern with the instructor of Occupational Life Calling courses and career coach of the university. My projects include analyzing data and retention trends, conducting research, assisting with content creation like web, print media, videos, and pre/post assessments. The career coach assists me to undertake projects that are related to my field of study, which is Business Analytics. I began working on Occupational Life Calling data to analyze different aspects, such as the relationship between the number of students that took these courses with their major and status, indicating with graphs and tables, and running an analytical test to find out how effective these courses are for undecided students.

The Occupational Life Calling instructor is also an expert career coach who helps students with their resumes, cover letters, and interview process. Since I've started working in the Occupational Life Calling office, I've improved my resume and job-seeking information. I believe being in this environment and having on-site experience is beneficial.

To assist international graduate students that end up living in unfurnished houses, the career coach and a team of faculty members in the College of Business launched a program called More-Than-I-Need. This program helps international students get everyday household items. Faculty and community members that have more than they need are able to donate those to international students. My role is to find a match between items that students need and donors who are willing to donate those items. I also coordinate pickup and delivery time.

Working in the Life Calling office provides me the opportunity to be involved in a variety of tasks that align with my field of study, meet faculty members, obtain hands-on experience, and become acquainted with the work environment.

iii. Partnership across campus

There are different kinds of partnerships across campus that offer international students involvement opportunities. One of my experiences is with the campus church. The church offers a weeklong academy to high school students teaching theology. I assisted to evaluate a pre/post religious life test to measure student growth in theological knowledge. It is a grant-funded program. The program was in the summer of 2019. I have been entrusted to complete the project analysis and provide supporting documentation for the report under a faculty member. It gave me a significant understanding of how to conduct a project analysis from beginning to end.

LESSONS LEARNED

We learned that implementation of even simple ideas can be challenging. For example, designing and securing the innovation grant was the easier part. Its implementation was much harder. Not as many employers showed interest in hiring international students as we had expected, even when the university was paying the students. It required a great deal of individual networking by the career coach and faculty advisor. Also, not all projects were equally rewarding to the participants. While the students considered each project educational, it was not same in scope or intensity. Having a greater pool of projects for students to choose from would have been better but time constraints and reluctance of employers did not make that possible.

While I was fortunate to be well-networked with the career coach, not all international students form such close relationships with someone on their campus to have doors opened for them. It would be better if there were systems setup to connect international students with grant-funded opportunities. A system similar to placing work-study students could be deployed rather than just using informal networks, student reputation, word of mouth or grapevine, as has been the case on our campus.

CONCLUSION

These techniques showcase that work experience opportunities can be created for international students through creativity. Business world projects as short as 50 hours can help international students feel more marketable. These still can be utilized on campus in externally funded projects, since international students don't qualify for federal work-study funds.

I hope this paper shows how any school can enhance the education and work experience of its international students.

REFERENCES

- Almurideef, R. (2016). The challenges that international students face when integrating into higher education in the United States. *Theses and Dissertations*. 2336. Retrieved from <https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd/2336>
- Arthur, N. (2017). Supporting international students through straightening their social resources. *Studies in Higher Education*. 42 (5), 887-894.
- Kerridge, C. & Simpson, C. (2019). Narrowing the attainment gap between domestic and international students: Use of a simulation and experiential learning in mixed-cohort strategic management teaching. *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*. 46, 108.
- Lértora, I., Sullivan, J. & Croffie, A. (2017). They are here, now what do we do? Recommendations for supporting international student transitions. *VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Article 6*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2kxGwr2>
- N-Burgdolf, H. & Vanderford, N. (2017). Preparing future professionals: A career development course focused on enhancing workforce readiness. *Nat Biotechnol*. 34 (1), 111-113.
- Sin, S.J., & Kim, K.S. (2018). How are we the same and different: Information needs and barriers of domestic and international students. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*. 44, 712-723.
- Institute of International Education (IIE), <https://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Enrollment> (accessed on October 1, 2019)