

“It’s a Good Problem to Have”: Supporting a Surprise Influx of International Students during Orientation and Beyond

Jessica Schrader

Education Abroad Manager, Robert Morris University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

Email: schrader@rmu.edu

Tags

International Enrollment Management; International Student and Scholar Services; Program Design; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

Willow Park University (WPU) is a medium-sized institution in the northeastern United States that enrolls approximately 5,000 undergraduate students and 1,500 graduate students. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were around 650 F-1 international students at WPU, or about 10% of WPU’s student body. Since the pandemic, however, international enrollment has dropped to about 300 students total. The vast majority of F-1 students are in undergraduate programs. WPU has two offices that work with incoming international students: Admissions, which handles applications, academic questions, and course registration, and the International Student Services Office (ISSO), which is responsible for orientation and immigration concerns. ISSO must create a record in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), a U.S. government database, and issue an I-20 (Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status) document for each accepted international student.

Case

In order to combat lower enrollment since the pandemic, the WPU Admissions Office begins a new partnership with a recruitment agent in India. As a result of the successful partnership, many more international students apply to WPU than in past terms, even prior to the pandemic. Knowing that many of the students will not choose

CSIE cases are offered as professional development for readers and are not meant to focus on specific individuals or organizations. Names and other identifying details within the cases have been changed. In some instances, cases may have been amalgamated.

Article reuse guidelines: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

to attend WPU, the Admissions Office accepts far more international students than they ultimately expect to choose WPU. The ISSO becomes aware of this and anticipates more students needing I-20s than in the past.

By the end of June, over 2,000 international students have been admitted to WPU for the upcoming fall semester. Although some admitted students are in undergraduate programs, the majority of these students found WPU through the new agent and have been admitted to STEM graduate programs.

The large number of acceptances for international students creates a significant increase in work for the ISSO. Jordan, the primary advisor for incoming international students, struggles to keep up with the workload to issue I-20s for this group of students, let alone plan orientation activities for them. Sam, the advisor for continuing international students, helps Jordan when possible. By the beginning of August, Jordan and Sam have issued over 1,000 I-20s for the fall semester.

Several times throughout August, Jordan reaches out to all students with an I-20 to (1) ask them if they have received their visa, (2) remind them to pay their \$500 deposit to WPU after they receive their visa, and (3) send them the RSVP form for orientation. After a student has both provided proof of their F-1 visa and paid their WPU deposit, Alex, WPU's International Admissions Counselor, registers them for their first semester of classes. Alex also uses all of this information (visa, deposit, and orientation RSVP) as a way to estimate how many international students will join WPU for the fall semester and to help academic departments plan course schedules.

When orientation arrives at the end of August, Jordan and Sam are nervous about the accuracy of their numbers. They have reserved the largest space on campus, which has seats for 300 people. Of the more than 1,000 I-20s issued, they have had 275 international students RSVP that they will be coming. They should have enough space in the large classroom, but they reserve a smaller classroom nearby, just in case.

On the morning of orientation, there is an hour on the schedule for all of the students to sign in. For students who arrive early, there are snacks and ice breaker activities while they wait for programming to begin. However, the line to sign in quickly grows long enough to extend outside of the building. The first hour passes, and the line is still incredibly long. Students are getting frustrated with the wait, and Jordan leaves the sign-in area to give an update to the already signed-in students in the large classroom. While updating them, Jordan notices that some students are having difficulty finding open seats and prepares the spare classroom for overflow.

Sign in takes an hour longer than planned, but eventually finishes and orientation begins. Jordan and Sam present twice, switching between the large classroom and the overflow classroom. When they realize the overflow classroom would be needed, they ask the guest speakers from other campus offices if they would have the time to speak to both classrooms of students. Luckily, the speakers are all able to fit in the additional presentation. In total, 355 students show up: 80 more than had RSVP'd.

The next two days of orientation are just as hectic as the first day, even though the only activity scheduled is required individual appointments with WPU's ISSO advisors for SEVIS record updates and activation. Many students arrive outside of their appointment time slot, and there are too many new students—and too many arriving at the wrong time—for the student volunteers to manage the appointments. There are dozens of students waiting to see an advisor at any given time. Everyone is frustrated: the advisors, the new students, and the student volunteers.

Throughout orientation, three more issues arise:

1. Many of the unexpected students arrive with their \$500 deposit in cash and are not registered for classes. Most of them are in the same STEM-focused graduate department, so their academic department has to scramble to add in new in-person sections of courses. As a result, the students placed into these sections unfortunately end up taking classes almost entirely with other students from India.
2. Emails continue to pour in while everyone is busy with orientation activities. Some of these emails are from students who need to transfer their I-20 to WPU, but other emails are from students who entered the U.S. on a WPU I-20 and are requesting to transfer to a different university prior to the start of the semester. In total, Jordan and Sam transfer 180 of these students to different universities, the majority of them going to four schools. Two of the most popular schools require a transfer-in form be filled out for each student by an ISSO advisor, which adds to Jordan's and Sam's heavy workload.
3. An additional 70 students arrive prior to the end of the first week of classes, some of whom had their visa approved late and some of whom are undergraduates transferring to WPU from English language programs elsewhere in the U.S.

In total, there are 425 new international students at WPU this semester, which more than doubles the number of international students on campus. While the ISSO staff were very attuned to the negative consequences of the drastic increase, the common refrain amongst WPU faculty and staff is, "It's a good problem to have."

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How can the WPU ISSO and Admissions office better collaborate to support incoming international students in the future?
- What can the ISSO do now to prepare for supporting this group of international students throughout their time at WPU? What challenges will the WPU ISSO face with such a large cohort? Consider academic and cultural support, as well as milestones the students may reach around the same time.
- How might supporting this group of students look different if they were primarily undergraduate students, like the WPU international student population was prior to this semester? What about if there were a more even distribution of home countries represented?
- Are there any cultural considerations that may have impacted how this group of students approached orientation?
- What role does this agent play in this scenario? How can ISSO work with the agent to alleviate some of these challenges? What should the agent be communicating to the prospective and admitted students?
- How can international student advisors better support ISSO colleagues at other institutions when it comes to transferring SEVIS records, particularly during the busiest times of year? What are some good practices regarding transferring new student SEVIS records for both the Transfer In and the Transfer Out schools?