

# **Rising to the Challenge of Serving International Students in Campus Recreation**

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## **Abstract**

Higher education is becoming more global, with diverse student populations entering colleges and universities throughout the nation. Some of these diverse student populations include English Language learners, Hispanic students, African American students, and international students. One of these diverse student populations, international students, now account for a large percentage of students on any campus. Due to the growing influx and population of international students in higher education, there is a need for research in services and opportunities provided to international students in campus recreation departments of colleges and universities. Are campus recreation departments culturally responsive to all groups of students? For example, what types of services and opportunities are provided to international students in campus recreation departments? An analysis and investigation into campus recreation and the international student experience is critical to determine how to best serve international students, one of fastest and largest growing higher education subgroups in United States. This research will investigate campus recreation services and opportunities provided to international students and in addition, include language and cultural barriers that international students face in colleges and universities.

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Institutional research is often focused on enrollment, retention, and academic information at universities; however, numerous auxiliary service departments offer important services to students outside the classroom that enrich their college experience. One area that warrants more attention is how to serve the needs of a growing multicultural student population. This research review will investigate the services provided to international students in campus recreation programs in higher education.

### **Institutional Overview**

The percentage of college students who identify themselves as some race other than white is continuously growing. Diversity is on the minds of university leaders as our country's immigrant population grows. One university president stated the primary goal in the institution's Guiding Principles as follows: "to foster a culture of inclusion which attracts to our university highly qualified students, faculty and staff who represent the diversity of the region we serve" (Texas A&M University-Commerce, 2011-2012, para. 4).

Auxiliary and student support services provide opportunities for students to engage with each other and interact with university employees. In 2009, the National Survey on Student Engagement found that of 722 students polled, 62% have frequent serious discussions with students of a different race. While 14% reported spending an excess of 15 hours each week participating in co-curricular activities, 44% reported spending no time participating in co-curricular activities.

### **Benefits of Recreational Programs**

Research has found that participation in programs offered by university recreation programs assist with student recruitment, enhances the quality of student life, increases retention and grade point average, helps students reduce stress, promotes wellness and health, offers opportunities for student development, and helps achieve student satisfaction with the holistic academic experience (Shonk, Carr, & De Michele, 2010). Further research is necessary to explore the effect that one such auxiliary department, Campus Recreation, has on these numbers and explores opportunities for growth in diversity through participation in programs and student employment.

### **Participation**

Campus Recreation departments are typically founded on the principles of providing recreational learning opportunities outside the classroom that are fun and inclusive. Programs offered through Campus Recreation provide students with opportunities to recreate and socialize in a casual atmosphere, but the objectives of such an entity on a college campus supersede leisure activities. Through participation in intramural sports, students develop communication and team building skills. Educational lessons, clinics, and lecture series offer relevant, research-based information that foster lifelong pursuits of health and fitness. Often the largest employer of

students on campus, campus recreation facilities and programs offer student staff development opportunities and a host of transferrable skills. Many students attain certifications in CPR, fitness instruction, personal training, rock climbing belay, and other areas that make them more marketable in the workforce.

### **Structure of Campus Recreation**

Campus Recreation departments are generally divided into two sections: facilities and programming. Facilities oversee all business operations, and are responsible for maintaining the equipment, outdoor fields, providing member services, and handling facility reservations. The programming section offers events and opportunities for students to recreate, including structuring intramural sports, offering group fitness classes, providing outdoor leadership and trip services, and planning special events.

### **Celebrating Diversity in Campus Recreation**

Attention to the needs and interests of our large international students population has always been a challenge, but higher education has made some remarkable strides in the past several years. For example, Texas A&M-Commerce, Campus Recreation department, hosts a variety of special events throughout the academic year, partnering with various student groups to highlight different cultural traditions. Chinese New Year, Holi Fest, and Salsa Night are a few of these events that offer an interactive setting for students to learn about Chinese, Indian, and Hispanic traditions, sample ethnic food, and participate in cultural celebrations.

### **Employment**

While many aspects of campus diversification have been successful in the past decades, one area that still lags behind is diversification of the faculty and staff on many college campuses. Hernandez (2000) reports that students are more likely to relate to and build relationships with faculty and staff that share their ethnic background. Diversification of university employees will lead to minority student success. According to one professor at George Washington University, “diverse faculty [and staff] can have students challenge the assumptions that students grew up with and we can help them with questioning those assumptions in their quest for growing intellectually” (O’Connor, 2010, para.4).

In Campus Recreation departments across the nation, the professional staff includes a minimal of international employees. Higher education must reverse this trend by employing a more diverse, international, and global staff.

## Barriers to Employment

**Barrier #1: Beating the odds.** Due to federal regulations, international students are not eligible for work-study programs which offer on-campus employment to many students. Many departments do not have the funding for student workers and rely exclusively on work-study grants. Funding for Campus Recreation comes mainly from Student Service Fees and Recreation Center Fees, which provide the budgets for student wages and programming areas. With funding available based on enrollment, Campus Recreation is one of the few departments on campus that has the ability to hire students without consideration for work-study status. As a result, many international students apply for positions at Recreation Centers across the nation. These applications are combined with hundreds of employment applications received each year. One professional staffer estimated that for every ten applications he receives, only one or two students actually gain employment.

**Barrier #2: Language.** As an auxiliary department that serves patrons who are students as well as community members, working at a Recreation Center involves providing a great deal of customer service. Many international students have not had a chance to excel in their written and verbal communication, which is disadvantageous in gaining employment. Kivel (2004) writes that in general, when English is not the primary language, minorities may face “comparable barriers to finding out about meetings, attending events, becoming part of the leadership of an organization, or simply participating as a member when interpretation is not provided”. While all enrolled students must pass competency exams in English, these are often written tests that do not measure verbal fluency.

Professional staff members of recreation centers share stories of receiving students’ employment applications that are incorrectly filled out, resumes with numerous spelling errors, and unprofessional e-mails inquiring about job opportunities. Regardless of the ethnic origin of the applicant, these errors are seen as a serious lack of the skills needed to be successful in a customer service setting and such applicants are rarely considered.

**Barrier #3: Lack of necessary skills and qualifications.** Many scholars of institutional research agree that lack of diversity practices in employment has long been associated with the idea that the prospective employees lack the knowledge or skills necessary to persist and are thus responsible for their own failure (Hernandez, 2000). By structuring research on this assumption, scholars have inadvertently marginalized the underrepresented populations even more. However, that which is perceived as a lack of study skills or intelligence can often be attributed to a more superficial knowledge deficit involving basic teachable skills.

The National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) is the professional organization for campus recreation programs and centers throughout the country. Since the organization is not international, the majority of its members are American-born students and professionals. Each professional job in Campus Recreation requires a professional skill set that is learned through practice, usually as an undergraduate student employee of a recreation center or a Graduate Assistant.

Many of the student jobs in programming areas require specific skill sets or certifications. When possible, some of these trainings are offered to large groups of students, but hiring in many of the programming areas is continuous and only a handful of new student employees are

gained each semester. It is costly and time consuming to offer intensive training sessions (many of which take two to five days, involve hefty registration fees, and require that students pass certification exams) to a small number of students .

**Barrier # 4: Cultural differences.** Finally, cultural differences present a challenge to hiring international students. Often times, campus employers have some trepidation about hiring international students that stem from a lack of knowledge for cultural norms. For example, whereas one culture may teach children to respectfully avoid eye contact with persons in power, Americans view this behavior as evasive and impolite. One culture may encourage very open lines of communication, in which contacting prospective employers several times for interviews and to follow up on submitted applications is considered proactive behavior, whereas another culture might find this conduct bothersome and indicative of a prospective employee's inability to follow directions.

Cultural differences must be taken into consideration when working with international students, and while it is unlikely that employers will be able to learn about every culture extensively, taking the time to learn about basic communication customs and employment practices largely represented in the international student community will help on-campus employers tremendously.

### Conclusion

It is apparent that there is a lack of diversity in Campus Recreation programs. Higher education must take a proactive approach in making their institution more "international friendly." Steps should be taken to ensure that international students can overcome language and cultural difference barriers.

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