
Exploring the Challenges of English Proficiency for International Student Integration on US Campuses

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the board, traditional revenue streams at American universities and colleges are under pressure and tuition dollars are no exception. In the past five years, funding for international student recruitment has increased by as much as 13% in the hopes of attracting talented, fee-paying students from abroad (ACE, 2012). These efforts compensate for weaker domestic recruitment, boost internationalization, and provide a range of positive benefits.

At the same time, English proficiency is playing an increasingly important role in international student recruitment and enrollment management. Approximately 38,000 international students enroll each year in intensive English programs at US universities and colleges, and the total number of all international students requiring remedial courses is on the rise. Administrators and faculty are adapting to the needs of these valuable students by developing a wide range of creative and sometimes controversial solutions. Failure to admit these students into degree programs can negatively impact both students and their families, as they may not have budgeted for the additional cost of English training. This also impacts the institution's bottom line – when students are placed in intensive English programs, up to four years of tuition may be at risk, if not lost altogether.

Academic readiness and the language skills of international students can shape the dynamic of an incoming class and significantly impact the overall classroom and campus experience. Solutions such as facilitating language buddy programs, offering English-language workshops, and even offering conditional admissions and concurrent enrollment options are a few of the myriad pathways to a degree program.

There is a sense in the higher education community that some of these solutions are being introduced at a hurried pace and without strategic plans that accurately assess the services and specialized attention required, especially when adding substantially greater numbers of international students to the student body. Institutions that miscalculate the necessary support services, in language and other areas, that enable international students to truly thrive academically and socially threaten their reputation overseas, including their potential to recruit international students. As one associate dean reports, "We are one of the top public institutions in the United States with thousands of undergraduate international students. As much as 50% of our students would benefit from intensive English language training yet we don't offer these remedial courses on campus."

In order to fill gaps in the information provided by top standardized language testing, more and

more institutions are exploring supplemental testing solutions. Schools such as the University of Denver now require filmed interviews for applicants from China as well as an English language test for all international students once they arrive on campus. If students don't place out of these assessment tests, they are required to enroll in an intensive English program.

When introduced strategically, new enrollment tracks for international students, supplemental testing, careful attention and support, and other innovative solutions for language learning can effectively balance both student and faculty expectations, as well as increase the chances of student success. Further, experience from the recent boom in comprehensive internationalization on US campuses provides new insights into effectively managing competing priorities, tightening budgets, and strategic enrollment management.

INTRODUCTION

In the past five years, international student enrollment in intensive English and undergraduate degree programs has surged with double-digit percent growth from top-sending countries such as China. US admissions offices are facing competing priorities and significant financial pressure as they plan their enrollment targets and carefully balance the needs of international students, faculty, and administrators.

Language proficiency and its impact on admissions and retention has become a central challenge with this growing number of international students. English proficiency is a key issue at the heart of the academic experience for domestic and international students, playing a large role in the overall social and academic success of international students, as well as impacting both faculty and the broader academic community.

“Even though I can speak English quite well compared to other Chinese students studying here, it is still difficult to make American friends or speak up in class. A lot of the times I simply don't understand the cultural references or the jokes.” – A Chinese Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at the University of Maryland

US universities have reported particular challenges with integrating Chinese students. This is often linked

to issues with English language proficiency and low incentives for students to reach beyond their comfort zones. However, the challenge is broader than the issues in China alone and is clearly linked to the increasing number of international undergraduates enrolling in US degree programs, which is beginning to stretch the capacity of existing solutions.

Dr. Joe Potts, Associate Dean at Purdue University, found that “some see a purely financial motivation for US institutions to bring in international students. How many a university can handle comes down to the institution's willingness to ensure their students succeed both academically and socially.” His conclusion, which is shared by other administrators, is that the entire campus needs to be on board to make the learning environment comfortable for international students – from engaging with faculty and administrators to discussing concerns with campus police.

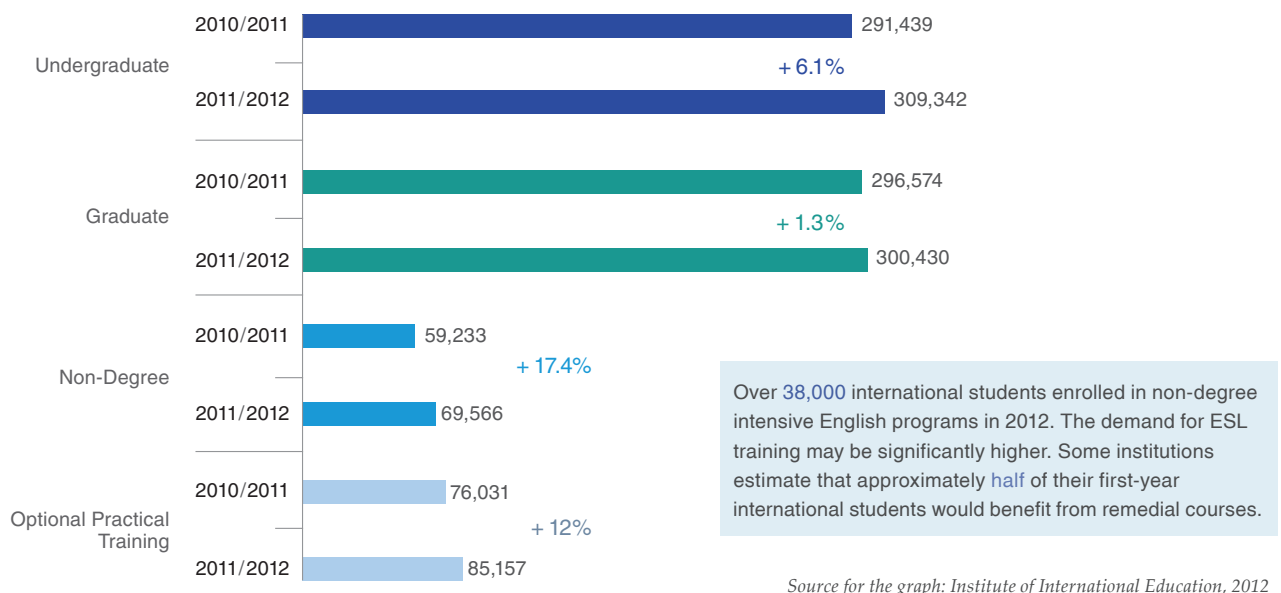
Current reality – numbers of international students growing more quickly than needed support services

Universities in the US are investing more time and money than ever before into recruiting international students. In 2011, 48% of doctoral institutions, 39% of master's institutions, and 41% of baccalaureate institutions reported having a strategic international student recruitment plan. Of those with geographic targets, Asia was the primary focus (ACE, 2012).

Nearly 310,000 international undergraduate and 300,000 international graduate students are now enrolled in the United States according to the Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange (see Figure 1). For the first time since 2001, undergraduate international students outnumbered graduate international students. The shift was bolstered by double-digit percentage increases among the top 25 countries of origin, the top five of which were: China +23%, Saudi Arabia +50%, Iran +24%, Venezuela +14%, and Spain +14% (Open Doors, 2012).

International student enrollment in intensive English programs at colleges and universities also grew substantially (+20%) and reached a record high of nearly 39,000 students in 2012, roughly 5% of all international students in the country. Despite this low percentage, English proficiency is recognized as a central issue in enrollment management.

Figure 1. International Students by Academic Level



According to the American Council on Education’s 2012 study of internationalization, investments in student recruitment had increased, yet there was no concurrent boost for support services for international students or in activities that facilitate interaction and mutual learning with American peers. This seems to lie at the heart of the growing problem of integration.

HOW LANGUAGE SKILLS IMPACT CULTURAL AND ACADEMIC INTEGRATION

In a survey of 450 international students, Dr. Elisabeth Gareis from the City University of New York found that: “Through friendships, international students have stronger language skills, better academic performance, lower levels of stress and better overall adjustment to a new culture” (Gareis, 2012). The study also explored how insufficient language skills limit social integration. Nearly 40% of the survey respondents had no close American friends and would have liked more meaningful interaction with people from the United States.

Roughly half of the international students who expressed dissatisfaction blamed internal factors, such as shyness or poor English-language ability. Among East Asian students, that percentage was much higher, around 78% (see Figure 2). Participants from English-speaking countries reported having three or more close American friends, while students from China and other East Asian countries had no close American friends. In other words, even students themselves see a lack of English language ability as a detriment to their experience on campus.

As noted, concerns about academic integration are directly linked to higher levels of dissatisfaction on campus. As the number of international students increases, higher levels of dissatisfaction may impact retention and future enrollments.

However, both academic preparation and student engagement on campus are related to a range of positive outcomes for international students, including persistence, higher achievement, and overall satisfaction (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). In an enrollment survey conducted by IIE, US admissions representatives reported they were increasing the number of ESL classes and offering new workshops on

academic, social, and cultural issues (IIE, 2012). Many of these new introductory programs were designed to better integrate Chinese students.

However, a Korean student currently studying at MiraCosta Community College felt that orientation programs and language courses alone were not enough: “I realized that studying in the language school was not enough to help me learn English. I wasn’t learning fast enough so I had to find another way. The way I found the most useful was by talking to people through chat software like MSN, or meeting people online who wanted to do a language exchange.”

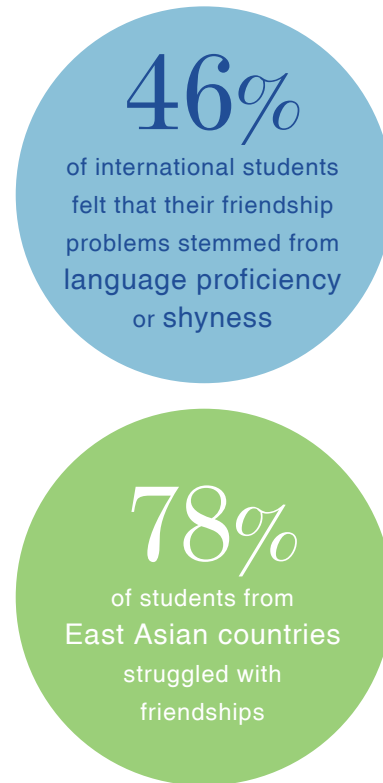
Language challenges to social integration

A typical international student response to not being able to make friends and keep up with coursework is to segregate themselves from the American community and to study and hang out with friends who are of the same ethnic origin as themselves. Mackenzie Han, a Korean sophomore at Edmonds Community College, reflected: “My English level is ok – but truthfully, the program I’m in is quite hard. I usually ask my Korean friends who speak fluent English to help me with translating. Even if I had the minimum grade to enter directly into the degree program, I couldn’t make it. Sometimes the technical terms are quite difficult for me, or if the professor is mumbling or talking quickly I don’t understand what he is saying at all.”

Many international students at UCLA have a hard time letting anyone, even counselors, know what’s going on academically, let alone socially (Lin, 2012). In an article entitled “Stressed-Out International Students Get Help”, the counseling center at UCLA reported that from 2009 to 2010, about 14% (5,241) of domestic students sought services at their student counseling center, while only 10% of international students (288) did the same. This could be due to cultural barriers, as well as language difficulty, however. Yoo at MiraCosta agreed that, “Usually Asian people are not confident about their English level so they don’t talk to American students. This is bad. I think the school should have some kind of counseling service or create opportunities or activities for international students to talk to American students in order to build their confidence.” International students feel more integrated and comfortable when they make

friends with both American and international students. Universities are exploring cost-efficient solutions to help build a more coherent learning community.

Figure 2. Intercultural Friendships: Effects of Home and Host Region



Source: Gareis, 2012; Fischer, 2012

CAMPUS INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Alea Morelock Cot, Assistant Vice President at the University of New Orleans, determined that, “even if our international students pass an English language test to get in, they still need additional support. They also may need to be taught how to produce argumentative and critical thinking essays.” Efforts to support international students and facilitate shared

learning opportunities with domestic peers can have powerful effects on students who are experiencing American college culture for the first time.

While the challenges associated with integrating international students can loom large – particularly in a time of budget cuts – there are a variety of ways that US institutions are actively tackling both the social and academic aspects of linguistic proficiency. Examples of the types of tools and services that are currently used to support students and promote English proficiency include:

- **Orientation:** freshman year can be particularly tough academically and socially, even for native English speakers. Across all institutional types, orientation to the institution and/or US classroom culture was the most common support service offered to international students (ACE, 2012). These orientation programs nearly always focus on academics and campus life and there is a sense that they could be more proactive on the social front.
- **Peer-to-peer language exchange/buddy programs:** orientation programs can be a great way to kick-start relationships and strengthen the campus community; however, students may lose momentum by the end of their first semester and find it harder to meet with their English-speaking friends. Universities are playing a proactive role by facilitating buddy programs and social activities for international and domestic students throughout the academic year. The entire campus community benefits from stronger ties across and within diverse groups.
- **Pre-arrival learning:** some universities have begun exploring pre-arrival learning tools and online language systems. These virtual communities offer great potential and are often underutilized, although it is worthwhile to host a small focus group or to poll international students to find out what language tools and resources they would or do find most helpful.
- **Social media:** while new domestic students set up Facebook groups and choose roommates prior to arrival, their international counterparts may be unaware of how lively and important these online communities are (or may not have access to sites like Facebook, as is the case in mainland China). Letting international students know where and how they can engage with future classmates or setting up dedicated social networks that can be accessed in China are options that universities are exploring to get students “talking” in advance.
- **Career coaching and mentoring:** another peer-to-peer activity that can help build language skills

Campus highlight: faculty perceptions of teaching international students

Maureen Snow Andrade from Utah Valley University published a case study exploring the effects of English language proficiency on adjustment to university life (Andrade, 2009). The report is one of the few studies that explore faculty perceptions of teaching international students.

While the findings represent the experiences of a single institution (with roughly 50% of its total population of 2,400 being international students), the following results indicate that international students may face comparable academic and social challenges to those at other institutions:

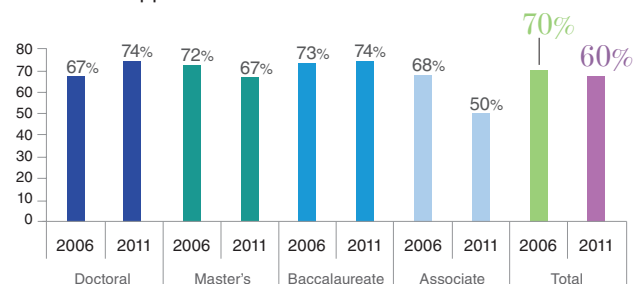
- Data from faculty focus groups indicate that they either “sometimes” or “most of the time” use teaching strategies to make course content more accessible to international students. Only “seldom” or “sometimes” do they select easier readings and materials or adjust course assignments to accommodate students.
- Some faculty reported that they extend time for exams, allow revisions of papers, and provide opportunities for make-up exams when international students do poorly. However, the study found that English proficiency weaknesses do not appear to negatively affect teaching and learning.
- The relation between English proficiency and intercultural learning indicated that a multicultural campus is beneficial to students for purposes of English language development and intercultural growth. Formalized intercultural education programs helped students (international and domestic) gain greater benefit from the diverse environment.
- For many students, English proficiency is the means to an end – obtaining a degree – rather than something to be pursued for its own value.

while improving social integration and academic performance is mentoring. Upperclassmen or second-year students from the US or another country work with new international students as part of a student ambassador or career mentoring initiative. The purpose of these groups can vary or focus on developing international career plans, networking in English, and/or developing leadership skills.

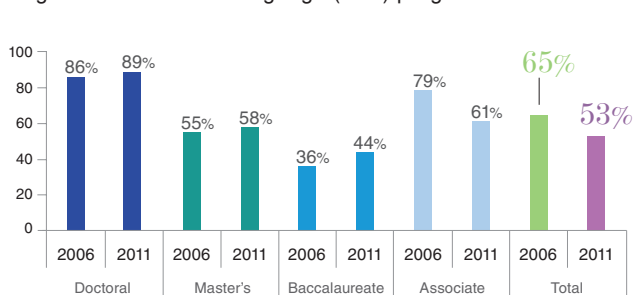
Clearly, there is a growing understanding of the type of investment in international students that may be needed to ensure their success, which in turn provides institutions with maximum benefit. The charts below, however, show that these services may not be growing quickly enough to meet the needs of significantly larger numbers of international students (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. US Institutions Offering Programs or Support Services to International Students

Academic support services



English as a Second Language (ESL) program



Source: Mapping Internationalization, 2012

Conditional admission and concurrent enrollment

The Chronicle of Higher Education reported in 2010 that no firm statistics exist for the number of international students who are offered conditional admission to American higher education institutions despite questions on whether their English-language skills truly meet entrance standards (Fischer, 2010). Since that time, the number of ESL programs at universities has increased, as well as the percentage of institutions with ESL programs. This is true in every sector of higher education institutions except associate institutions (ACE, 2012). Nevertheless, the percentage of associate institutions with ESL programs (61%) is still greater than that of other sectors, although enrollment may be more focused on domestic ESL audiences. Clearly, an increasing number of campuses are using intensive English programs as a mechanism to increase conditional admissions and recruit from a wider range of international students (Redden, 2013).

Visas are also a concern for students planning to enroll in an intensive English program. In 2013, Patricia Juza, Vice President for Advocacy for the American Association of Intensive English Programs, said that in some countries, "It has been easier for a student to get a visa if they have conditional admission to a degree program as opposed to an intensive English program" (Inside Higher Ed, 2012). New draft guidance on conditional admissions and pathway programs – which blend intensive English and academic coursework – is expected from the Department of Homeland Security early in 2013 (Redden, 2013).

Meanwhile, campuses such as the University of Kentucky are exploring options for concurrent enrollment in ESL courses. Susan Carvalho, the university's Associate Provost, mentioned that: "We offered some 'sheltered coursework' in the fall and hope to offer our first 'concurrent enrollment' option in January." Concurrent enrollment allows international students the possibility to enroll in degree programs while they take intensive English courses. This option helps admissions officials untangle a challenging situation where they cannot adequately predict the number of students that will enroll in the degree program or in intensive English prior to the students' arrival on campus. This has significant cost implications and is a complex barrier for enrollment managers trying to build a freshman class. Concurrent enrollment effectively resolves this challenge.

Supplementing test results

ETS, the administrator of the TOEFL exam – one of the most widely used English proficiency tests in the industry along with IELTS – acknowledges in a 2011 report that: “In fact, a person’s real or true ability can never be observed in a test” (ETS 2011). The report continues: “There are circumstances under which decision makers may want to examine the profile of scores for test takers, such as the demands of the curriculum or a need for additional language training.” Further, both TOEFL and IELTS offer score breakdowns, which give important depth to results and are often underutilized. Eileen Tyson, Executive Director of Global Client Relations at ETS, added: “You are throwing useful information away if you ignore the section scores.”

Some US institutions report that they are reviewing English language requirements and testing practices such as reviewing score breakdowns for more detailed analysis. However, more and more US campuses

are using or developing their own English language assessment tools to supplement TOEFL, IELTS, and other standardized tests.

Schools that are experimenting with conditional admissions may offer on-campus testing or simply issue an I-20 as “English proficiency is not required because training is provided on site, if necessary”. As mentioned, this practice has been challenged by the Department of Homeland Security, which has confirmed it will issue guidance on conditional admissions “soon”.

One US university representative who wished to remain anonymous reported that students “who have low or no TOEFL/IELTS scores are automatically given an in-house test upon arrival. I believe that the majority of our undergrads do take our on-campus test.” She also reported that: “We also have begun doing a photo check on the TOEFL of students who are placed into intensive English, which has resulted in four students being dismissed due to fraud.”

Campus highlight: The University of Denver (DU)
Introducing on-campus language assessments for all international students
Marjorie Smith, Associate Dean, Director, Int’l Admission at University of Denver

“Many universities have been challenged in the past 2-3 years with an increasing number of matriculants who, despite their test scores, are still struggling in the classroom. As a result, some universities have or are planning to have an additional English test during orientation that could place any non-native English speaker into additional ESL courses. Here are our experiences at DU over the past three enrollment cycles:”

- **Test reliability**

Issues around testing fraud and score reliability are challenges faced by enrollment managers across the United States. At DU, more international students are enrolling than ever before, which is exciting. We wanted to be sure that academic standards, such as the quality of classroom discussions, keep pace. Over the past two years, DU has implemented a range of enrollment solutions to tackle concerns about test fraud and academic preparedness.

- **Introducing testing supplements on campus**

To address issues of academic readiness, DU introduced a mandatory English-language exam in 2012 for *all* international students upon arrival. The pushback from prospective students was to be expected, which is why we promoted this requirement in our application materials. Overall, the requirement was an excellent filter and “serious” and motivated students still applied. In China, DU required an additional step to address test reliability concerns. We required all applicants from China to participate in CIEE’s Applicant Interview (CAI) program. This additional expense was a worthwhile step to ensure academic readiness. The required interviews gave the admissions team the ability to better predict which students would enroll as degree-seeking students or in the intensive English program.

- **Using score breakdowns from IELTS and ETS**

We found that 70 TOEFL or 5.5 IELTS were too low. Faculty were facing challenges in the classroom and struggling to maintain the academic pace and rigor required. We encourage other US enrollment managers to explore score breakdowns and the individual scoring bands to better understand individual competencies, not only the total score.

How Rosetta Stone Helps

As the number of international students in the US continues to increase, language support services are playing an increasingly important role in ensuring academic success and campus integration. The Rosetta Stone® TOTALe® PRO solution helps international students build confidence in their English-language abilities and prepare for classroom engagement. Rosetta Stone's web-based platform reinforces speaking, reading, writing, and listening, using a unique blend of core lessons and interactive social activities. In addition, TOTALe PRO offers students a safe, friendly learning environment so there is no fear of failure or embarrassment, as there is when speaking in public.

TOTALe PRO is comprised of three components: Rosetta Course®, Rosetta Studio®, and Rosetta World®. All three components give the student a new learning format that encourages the long-term development of their language abilities. **Rosetta Course** offers an immersive learning environment that allows students to develop language skills through a series of integrated lessons. **Rosetta Studio** allows students to engage in interactive conversations with a native English speaker and up to three other learners, helping build students' confidence and increasing their comfort level. Finally, **Rosetta World** is an online community where students can meet and socialize with other English learners from around the world. With Rosetta World, students also practice and reinforce their language skills through interactive games and activities.

Implementation methods

Rosetta Stone understands that no two campuses are the same, which is why the TOTALe PRO solution is flexible enough to support multiple implementation methods. Whether you want to provide a resource international students can leverage prior to departing for the US or to provide an interactive resource that can be blended into an intensive English program (IEP), we have a solution that can meet your needs.

Pre-arrival learning through online and mobile

One of the best ways to ensure that students arrive on campus prepared to contribute is to build and reinforce their English-language proficiency prior to their departure. Through Rosetta Stone TOTALe PRO, international students will have 24/7 access to the software both on their computer and mobile devices; therefore, students can practice and perfect their language abilities at any time, building the skills needed for academic success.

Blended as core curriculum

Once students arrive on campus and are enrolled in either an ESL or IEP program, TOTALe PRO may be used as a core component of the language learning content. By blending Rosetta Stone into the curriculum, students can learn core subject matter independently and English-language instructors can focus class time on live conversations, and personalized learning for their students.

Supplement learning

Rosetta Stone's TOTALe PRO program can also be used as a supplementary tool for intensive English programs or for students enrolled in degree programs who simply need some reinforcement. By using an interactive, activity-based program such as TOTALe PRO to supplement and reinforce English language skills, students will have a higher knowledge retention rate than that gained by classroom assignments alone. More importantly, students strengthen their oral proficiency, which can help promote student integration on campus and build student confidence so that they succeed inside and outside of the classroom.

Rosetta Stone is both a solution and a partner for English-language learning. To learn more about TOTALe PRO and how Rosetta Stone can help equip your international students with the language skills needed for academic integration and classroom success, visit www.RosettaStone.com/HigherEducation.

CONCLUSION

In the years to come, international students will require many additional services, including language training. On some campuses, the percentage of international students requiring remedial language support may be as high as 50% of first- and second-year cohorts. Low levels of English language proficiency can lead to higher levels of dissatisfaction on campus, both for domestic and international students. Social integration can lead to better academic performance, lower levels of stress, and better overall adjustment to a new culture.

The related trends and solutions explored in this paper describe the pressure to maintain or increase international student enrollment while maintaining academic standards. As universities and colleges increase their funding for international student recruitment, many will create new tracks and options for concurrent enrollment in order to meet their targets. Assessing English language skills and providing student support services will therefore play an increasingly important role in future recruitment efforts.

Language assessment tools such as TOEFL and IELTS offer deep insight into language ability through score breakdowns, but these results are challenged by cases of fraud and test reliability. More and more institutions are introducing on-campus testing and creative interview strategies to verify English language skills and academic preparedness. More tools are needed to help enrollment managers adequately predict the number of international degree-seeking students they can expect each academic year so that institutions can plan for the special services that these students may require to gain full admission – and ultimately succeed.

In January 2013, Moody's Investors Service reported that "years of depressed family incomes and net worth, as well as uncertain job prospects for many recent graduates and a slight decline in the number of high school graduates, are creating enrollment pressure and

weakened pricing power for colleges and universities" (Kiley, 2013). Arguing for increased spending on English language programs and services for international students may seem unrealistic, especially when every division of an institution is looking for cost savings and additional efficiencies. However, investments in language training promote international student success and allow US institutions to attract both sponsored and other international students who would not otherwise be able to enroll. An increasing number of US institutions rely on international students to support their financial sustainability. Likewise, the consequences of not supporting international students lead to higher levels of dissatisfaction on campus and put an institution's bottom line at risk.

Dr. Potts from Purdue University is one staunch supporter of these types of investments. "The institution ought to be facilitating and encouraging [this] type of integration while tailoring resources to the unique needs of their international students."

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