FEATURE: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

International Students and COVID-19: The Initial Response from the Penn State Libraries

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abstract: This article describes how the Penn State University Libraries have responded to the unique challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic presents to international student populations. Additionally, the authors discuss support and service programs for international students that may ease the disruptions expected in upcoming semesters. A collaborative approach is emphasized as the libraries work in coordination with stakeholders across the institution to address COVID-19 issues.

Introduction

As higher education institutions throughout the world have worked to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, one unique concern is the challenge presented by the disruption of international travel. Indeed, for many United States colleges and universities, the global initiatives offices were some of the first institutional units to feel the impact of COVID-19. These offices support students who had families in parts of the globe affected early by the virus and helped repatriate study abroad students from at-risk locations back to the United States.[1] Organizationally, these challenges were early indicators of the problems entire institutions would soon face. Universities and colleges had to quickly implement remote educational models as the pandemic spread to the United States. This shift to remote learning models has been a challenging experience for students and faculty; in addition, the unique cross-border aspects of international students' experiences have created increased, distinctive issues for this population.[2] Recognizing the unique stressors and challenges that international students face due to COVID-19, the Penn State University Libraries have worked with stakeholders across the institution to support, engage, and advocate for the university's international student populations, both current and incoming.

International Students at Penn State

As a large research university with a strong national and global academic reputation,[3] Penn State is a top U.S destination for international students. According to the Institute of International Education, the university ranks within the top 15 U.S. institutions for the enrollment of international students.[4] Penn State's campuses and programs enroll close to 10,000 students from over 140 countries other than the United States.[5] Additionally, the university hosts a small cohort of non-matriculated international ESL (English as a second language) students through its Intensive English Communication Program. The countries sending students to Penn State roughly follow U.S. trends,[6] with China, India, South Korea, Taiwan, and Saudi Arabia composing the top five countries of origin for international students.[7]

Over the past 10 years, the university's international student demographics have seen the same major shift that took place at the national level,[8] with the numbers of undergraduate students surpassing those of graduate students. This change is largely attributable to a substantial increase in enrollment from China (particularly at the under-graduate level), and Chinese students now far outnumber all other international student populations combined.[9] Another important recent development at Penn State is the distribution of the international population across the university's 24 campuses. While the flagship campus at University Park still hosts a large majority of the students from other countries, there has been a recent and rapid growth of international enrollment at other Penn State campuses, with Harrisburg, Abington, Erie, and Altoona enrolling the largest international populations outside of University Park.[10] The growth and inclusion of international student populations across the entire institution are vital parts of Penn State's global engagement goals.[11]

Penn State's Response to COVID-19

In spring 2020, the escalating spread of the COVID-19 pandemic forced Penn State University to quickly shift to fully online, remote modes of teaching and learning. Students were on spring break when the university announced that they should not return to campus after the break on March 16 due to COVID-19 precautions.[12] Initially, the university-wide remote learning period was planned for only three weeks; however, the university soon announced that it would extend through at least the end of the spring semester due to the severity of the pandemic.[13] Ultimately, remote learning continued through the summer sessions as well.[14]

For Penn State, a large and complex institution of higher education with close to 100,000 students across 23 physical campuses and an online World Campus, a rapid shift to a new mode of instruction was a major undertaking. The myriad of issues this change precipitated included equity of education, access to information, infrastructure development, and keeping students engaged with remote curricula. To address these challenges, Penn State's administration created and charged 12 task force teams with critical responsibilities related to COVID-19 response and planning. The first six teams focused on completing the spring semester, and the second six concentrated on planning for the summer and fall. In the rapid shift to remote learning, the university was fortunate to have a solid model for online instruction in its highly ranked World

Campus,[15] which caters to students who choose to learn fully online. Started in 1998 as a dedicated online campus, Penn State World Campus built upon the strong distance learning foundations of the university's correspondence courses and agricultural extension programs and became one of the top providers of online bachelor's degrees in the country.[16] Having worked extensively with the World Campus, the libraries' online learning coordinator (one of the authors of this article) was appointed to serve as the library representative within the COVID-19 task force. As such, she provided a critical conduit for communication between the large, university-wide COVID-19 task force groups and the faculty and staff in the Penn State Libraries, including those who focus on serving international populations.

International Students and the COVID-19 Pandemic

While some students had a way to move back home easily following the university's initial remote learning announcement, not all could do so. Many international students were concerned about their housing options or even whether they would be allowed back into on-campus housing if they lacked alternative living arrangements.[17] Further complicating the housing logistics for international students were the dramatic restrictions on international travel that prohibited some from returning to their home countries. International students who could not, or preferred not to, return home had to adjust to online learning while living on a campus with limited open facilities and few other students, faculty, or staff.[18]

International students who returned to their home country also faced unique challenges, such as difficulty accessing necessary resources and technologies and the challenge of attending real-time, synchronous courses from a different time zone. University guidelines strongly emphasized that classes should be held during scheduled class times for the remainder of the semester. While the synchronous meeting times may have helped local or domestic students maintain a sense of a normal class schedule, many international students who attended from abroad were disadvantaged by living in another time zone. For example, students from China who returned home that spring spent the remaining weeks of the semester managing a 12-hour time difference.

These unique cross-border experiences created distinctive stressors within the international student population.[19] The resulting anxieties were further compounded by related factors,[20] such as a rise in xenophobic and nationalistic rhetoric and uncertainty about international student status within the United States.[21] A clear example of these compounding stressors was the announcement in early July by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) that international students would be forced to leave the country or transfer to a school with in-person classes if their institution went to an online-only model in the fall of 2020.[22] While ICE later rescinded the decision,[23] international students still suffered from feelings of insecurity and uncertainty regarding their place in the United States. Further, the policy remained in effect for new international students who planned to come to the United States in the fall of 2020 to take an entirely online course of study. The negative impact of these stressors on the mental and emotional health of international student populations is demonstrated in the increasing focus on the topic with mental health researchers.[24]

COVID-19 Resources and Services for International Students

The coordination of support for international students at Penn State during the transition to remote learning was headed by the university's Office of Global Programs in University Park and the international offices at the other campuses. These offices were responsible for ensuring international students had safe and secure housing, communicating COVID-19 related information, supporting international students as they transitioned to remote learning, and addressing any additional concerns these learners had. The primary channels for this work were e-mail communications, online town hall meetings with university leadership,[25] a COVID-19 focused website for international students,[26] and individual advising.

Early in the transition to remote learning, Penn State's globally focused offices worked with the university's housing staff to ensure that international students could return to safe on-campus housing after spring break. They communicated logistical requirements and additional COVID-19 safeguards to returning international students. With the university's plan to reopen on-campus instruction, research, and programming for the fall 2020 semester,[27] some international students outside the United States may be prevented from coming to campus due to cross-border travel restrictions and delays in obtaining necessary visas and legal documentation. The barriers are particularly high for first-year students. To address these challenges, Penn State has developed novel in-country instructional options (in collaboration with education abroad providers) for some first-year international students.[28] The university offers these options in addition to the four educational models it has adopted for the fall semester to address COVID-19 concerns: face-to-face, in-person, online hybrid, remote synchronous, and remote asynchronous learning.

To help facilitate the transition to remote learning for international students during the spring semester, the Office of Global Programs distributed a flyer to teaching faculty to raise awareness about potential issues those students might face. The flyer addressed time difference complications, Internet access and quality issues, the availability of Web-based learning tools, immigration concerns, potential local quarantine requirements, discrimination, and the possibility that students might lack sufficient health care or other necessities. The COVID-19 web page for international students also provided resources and suggestions for handling potential concerns with remote learning.

As mentioned, in addition to the logistical challenges facing international students, compounding factors such as xenophobic rhetoric and troubling governmental policies stood at the forefront of international students' concerns.[29] In addressing these issues, the university worked to assure students from other countries that they were valued and welcomed members of the university community by directly addressing hostility against them and denouncing specific immigration policies in public statements.[30] Penn State also joined the amicus brief in support of a lawsuit by Harvard University and MIT to block the ICE decision on international students and remote-only learning. In addition, the university communicated directly with international students via e-mail, town hall meetings, and the Penn State president's personal blog.[31]

Penn State Libraries International Student Initiatives

The Penn State Libraries have worked over the past four years to closely align their global engagement initiatives with the university's larger global engagement plan and to quickly respond to developing international needs. The following sections describe efforts by the libraries to respond to COVID-19 and the issues facing international students through both library-specific projects as well as collaborative efforts.

The first of the libraries' responses to international students' COVID-19 concerns was the expansion of an international liaison librarian program that was originally established in 2016. Individual Penn State Libraries faculty and staff had long served international populations in an informal way, but in the fall of 2016, the libraries created a position for a global partnership and outreach librarian to coordinate efforts in engaging international students and providing services for them. Shortly after that position was established, an international student focus was added to two other librarian positions: One focuses on library instruction for international student populations at the University Park campus, and the other serves as international student liaison at the Harrisburg campus. By the end of 2019, five librarians had international student populations within their liaison portfolio. In response to the COVID-19 challenges faced by students from other countries, the libraries expanded the number of international student liaisons to include all campuses with an enrollment of 100 or more international students, bringing the total to nine librarians whose portfolios included international student outreach. These liaisons serve as the "face" of the libraries for international students as they develop programs and resources for this population, participate in international student orientations, teach instructional sessions for ESL classes, and connect students with other subject experts or resources.

The increased number of international student liaison librarians supports the second direct response to the challenges posed by COVID-19: a dedicated Personal Librarian Program for students from other countries. A pilot project developed by the libraries' engagement and equity librarian, this program will be available to two separate cohorts of international students on an opt-in basis for the fall 2020 semester. The main target group for the Personal Librarian Program is first-year international students, with an additional smaller cohort available for returning international students. Students will enroll in the program through Canvas, the university's learning management system. They can then set up remote one-on-one reference sessions with their personal librarian via LibCal, an appointment and event scheduling system, to get help with starting their research, finding resources, understanding copyright, and citing materials. Additionally, the personal librarians will inform students of updates to library resources, upcoming programs of interest, and other university resources that may be helpful to them. The Personal Librarian Program is part of a larger Personal Librarian Program Pilot Project focused on educational equity and will be supported initially by the international student liaison librarians. The program adds to the services already provided by the libraries (online chat, phone reference, and online and in-person instruction) and is intended to foster a welcoming and engaging atmosphere and to provide additional support for international student populations.

Another project developed by the international student liaison librarians, in collaboration with the Libraries Strategic Technologies Department, was the creation of a web page on the Penn State Libraries website specifically for international learners. While the project was not in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was accelerated as the pandemic increased the need for streamlined communications with international students. The international student liaison group worked together to produce web page content that provides a welcoming introduction to the U.S. academic library environment while avoiding a duplication of information found elsewhere within the website. Further, the group endeavored to produce content that would help students from various international backgrounds and ensure that the information was common to all Penn State Libraries locations and services.

To celebrate the presence of international students within the university community, Penn State is exploring an additional website project that would provide international populations with information about the libraries in the students' native languages. The project is a collaboration between the libraries' Global Engagement Initiatives and Libraries Strategic Technologies departments. The two groups are working to identify strategic parts of the libraries website for translation into the languages most used by international populations at the university, including Chinese, Spanish, and Arabic. The project hopes to leverage the language expertise of colleagues in the Cataloging and Metadata Services Department, humanities liaison librarians, and international partners. The translation project was initiated in response to the tremendous amount of positive feedback the libraries received after displaying digital signage with the word "welcome" in various languages around the libraries.

One goal of the Penn State Libraries during the pandemic has been to continue mission-critical library services, such as reference, instruction, and resources, to all users, including international ones. Like most academic libraries, Penn State already provides comprehensive virtual reference services to online users, and international students can communicate with librarians to address their reference needs by connecting over videoconferencing, e-mail, and the Ask-A-Librarian (AAL) chat service. Further, most Penn State Libraries units have continued to teach library instruction sessions during the scheduled class times by using videoconferencing software and online course management systems. Many students who have not been able to attend classes in real time can view recordings of the library lesson later, which has been useful to international students facing difficult time differences.

One last mission-critical service is providing access to electronic resources for all Penn State faculty, staff, and students. The University Libraries created a Remote Resources site that provides links to e-book resources, e-textbooks, databases, digital collections, e-reserves, and library guides as well as a temporary and expanded access site to help all Penn State users locate and navigate temporary resources made available by publishers and vendors. Penn State users anywhere in the world can consult these sites and the online resources to which they link. Further, to help mitigate access issues experienced by some international students, such as blocked content, librarians have assisted teaching faculty in locating and providing alternative course materials through library subscriptions or open educational resources (OER).

Collaborative International Student Initiatives

The Penn State Libraries have strong collaborative relationships with stakeholders across the university, which are often drawn upon to design meaningful projects and programs in international student outreach, support, and engagement initiatives. The libraries have developed projects focused on international students in partnership with the central Office of Global Programs, regional international student services offices, international student organizations, and relevant academic and service units. In so doing, the libraries have gained a greater understanding of international student needs and expanded their channels of communication, thus increasing their efficacy. As Penn State University is geographically dispersed across 24 campuses, it is only through the efforts of university employees across all campuses and locations that meaningful library services and resources for international student populations have been developed.

An illustration of the collaborative approach to international student engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic is the co-sponsorship of programming and outreach initiatives. In addition to simply amplifying each other's voices for programs or resources through social media and providing access to relevant e-mail lists and orientation activities, these partnerships allow the libraries to offer programming assistance to institution-level initiatives. For example, to support international student engagement, retention, and recruitment efforts during the COVID-19 remote learning period, the Office of Global Programs developed a weekly online "Global Hangouts," a virtual discussion space to encourage students from other countries to remain engaged with the university. "Global Hangouts," which ran throughout the summer, included discussions, activities, and performances to draw in international and globally minded students. The libraries provided the programming for one of the weekly sessions, a discussion focused on international films. This offering allowed the libraries to engage with international populations, promote the libraries' international leisure viewing collection, and to collect additional recommendations for future materials purchasing.

Another example of a collaborative project focused on services and engagement for international populations is a libraries-led International Student Oral History project. The project originated with staff in the Penn State Libraries' Eberly Family Special Collections Library and became a collaboration with the university's International Student Council (ISC), a representative body for students from all regions of the world. The main goal of the project is to recognize and celebrate the unique contribution of international students to the university. The ISC helped to promote the project through its communication channels and aided project managers in recruitment efforts. Additionally, the project managers provided the International Student Council leadership with resources for preserving their organizational history through records and archival services. This project was initiated before the COVID-19 outbreak, but in the wake of the pandemic, the project team recognized its importance in contributing to a feeling of inclusion for international students.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has had a broad impact on higher education's international student populations. Academic institutions have been, and will continue to be, required to respond to

these pandemic-related challenges through persistent innovation and collaboration. While the universities have done much to mitigate the difficulties these shifts in educational models impose on all students, faculty, and staff, international students face unique stressors and challenges in this new reality. During this extraordinary situation, the Penn State University Libraries have worked with students and colleagues across the institution to support this student population through additional resources and services, inclusive engagement opportunities, and collaborative programming. The Penn State Libraries, and Penn State as an institution, acknowledge that these efforts are only a starting point, and have committed to exploring ways to further support international students at Penn State in achieving their academic goals.

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