

By Karen Doss Bowman

Recruiting with Pathway Programs

How Third-Party Providers and Homegrown Programs Can Boost International Student Enrollment

OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES, U.S. colleges and universities have tried to keep pace with the forces of globalization through initiatives designed to enhance students' cross-cultural understanding and willingness to embrace diversity. A common strategy in this effort has been to increase the population of international students on campus to promote the exchange of diverse ideas, perspectives, and cultural influences.

Pathway programs offer additional opportunities and channels to broaden the pool of prospective international students by allowing institutions to conditionally admit students who fall short of meeting English language proficiency standards, but otherwise satisfy academic requirements. These programs enable students to enroll in intensive English programs (IEPs) while taking credit-bearing classes designed to help them acclimate to U.S. higher education standards and expectations. Upon successful completion of the pathway program, students are admitted to the institution.

"We don't want language to be the barrier that keeps academically capable students from the opportunity to study with us and earn a degree," says Julie Haun, director of the Intensive English Language Program at Portland State University (PSU). "A good pathway program does much more than [just] teach English skills. It also teaches students how to engage within the university academic culture."

Pathway Program Origins

There are two basic models of pathway programs. In the first, an institution partners with a private third-party company to develop new international student pipelines, leveraging the vendor's recruitment and marketing expertise. Third-party partnerships first emerged in Australia in the mid-1990s, according to the 2017 NAFSA report, *Landscape of Third-Party Pathway Partnerships in the United States*, by Rahul Choudaha. They became popular in the United Kingdom in the mid-2000s, and soon followed in the United States.

The second type of pathway program is homegrown and originates within an institution. These programs capitalize on the knowledge, skills, and resources already in place throughout the campus community,

and they allow the institution to more fully control the enrollment process.

While the United States remains the top destination for international students, other countries are gaining an increased market share. Pathway programs—whether run by a third party or administered by the campus community—can give institutions a competitive edge when it comes to recruiting.

Third-Party Pathway Vendors

Partnering with a third-party pathway vendor offers an avenue for quick expansion into new recruiting markets. At Florida Atlantic University (FAU), for example, a renewed focus on campuswide globalization, and the goal of enrolling more international students, was the impetus for launching an alliance with Australia-based Navitas in 2015, says Mihaela Metianu, executive director of FAU's Center for Global Engagement.

Because of its location, FAU has historically attracted students from Latin America and the Caribbean. Working with Navitas, however, has allowed the university to reach new groups of students through a different type of investment. The number of students enrolled in the pathway program has increased from about 550 in the fall of 2014 to 865 in the fall of 2018.

"Navitas felt like the right partner [to help us] start growing our international student recruitment from areas where normally we wouldn't attract students, without having to invest and create a whole new department and new staffing to recruit worldwide," says Metianu, who was instrumental in onboarding the Navitas at FAU pathway program. "[As a result,] we do see more diversity in country of origin."

Students enrolled in Navitas at FAU take courses in small cohorts, receiving personalized attention

and extra support from professors. The students may matriculate to regular university courses in the second year if they meet the program's academic and language requirements. The additional structured support services facilitate pathway students' academic and cultural transition.

Despite its benefits, one downside of partnering with an outside vendor is the potential loss of control over recruiting practices. Metianu says FAU stays on track with recruiting practices by working together to confirm the content of recruitment materials, for example, and by meeting periodically to ensure everyone is in agreement about admissions criteria. Ultimately, the university has final say on which students are admitted to the pathway program.

"If you go with a third-party vendor that will represent your university, then you have to constantly communicate about your academic standards, make sure their publications properly represent the university, and make sure the students [they work with] are properly informed and get the same advice that any other student would get," Metianu says. "We have regular communications [with the Navitas staff] to make sure we address any of those concerns that come up."

Homegrown Pathway Programs

Many universities create their own pathway programs by leveraging the strengths of already existing IEPs and English as a second language (ESL) programs. University-governed pathway programs have the flexibility to customize the curriculum to meet academic and enrollment institutional priorities.

The International English Center (IEC) at the University of Colorado-Boulder became one of the first IEPs in the state in 1975. Accredited by the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation, the center launched the ESL Academic Bridge Program in spring 2014. The year-round program enrolls about 100 students every 8 weeks, and students typically finish within 6 months to a year.

In addition to English language classes, students take orientation-style courses focused on topics such as academic integrity, campus support resources, university life, and U.S. life and culture. Bridge students also have the opportunity to attend lectures on a variety of disciplines and meet with academic advisers. Together, these steps allow students to get on track with the



Florida Atlantic University partners with a third-party pathway vendor to increase its international student enrollment numbers.

courses they need to take, build a schedule, and keep an eye toward completion of a degree program.

IEC Director Patricia Juza credits the close communication, curricular collaboration, and quality programming between the IEC and the university as a strong factor in facilitating the recruitment of a larger, more diverse, and highly qualified pool of international students.

"The university has invested in having its own international admissions recruiters who go all over the world and get face-to-face time with prospective students and parents," Juza says. "That's really key for brand recognition, but also in terms of credibility, trust, the sense of welcomeness, and getting the word out about our academic reputation. When a university is willing to invest [this way], you're going to see robust enrollment—not only for directly admitted students, but also for the bridge program."

The Center for English as a Second Language at the University of Arizona has managed a similar pathway program called University Track since 2012. Amber Tetreau, the center's associate director of admissions, immigration and student services, contends that University Track has contributed to student success.

"We have analyzed enrolled students' GPAs, and students tend to have a higher overall GPA after successfully completing the University Track Program in comparison with direct-enrolled students," Tetreau says. "Their English language skills are often better, and students have typically found their community on campus."

On the Horizon for Pathways

The landscape of international admissions is competitive, and pathway programs have a role to play in the future of international student enrollment. To stay ahead of the curve, Juza recommends looking closely at the pool of international students already studying at U.S. high schools—particularly those attending independent boarding schools.

“I think this is one of the biggest areas of growth in the United States,” Juza says. “Their needs are so unique—they’re not quite the same as domestic students, and yet they’re not the same as students coming directly from another country. We’ve got a couple of these students, and we’ve had to adjust some of our advising techniques and some of our messaging [to meet their needs]. Given the numbers across the country, I think other institutions are starting to see an uptick.”

Haun, at PSU, recommends looking at the other end of the spectrum and developing more pathway programs for graduate students. PSU does not have a formal pathway program for graduate students at this

Next Steps for Building a Pathway Program

For institutions considering creating a pathway program or entering into a contract with a third-party provider, here are some tips:

1. Define how the program will meet the institution’s mission and strategic goals and build around that vision.
2. Collaborate with key stakeholders across campus, including departmental chairs and staff from international student admissions, international student and scholar services, and academic affairs to make sure the program meets the institution’s academic standards.
3. Make sure the program requirements and standards meet guidelines set by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP). Consider immigration and financial implications.
4. Carefully vet prospective third-party providers. Partner only with a company that shares the institution’s global engagement and academic values.
5. Meet face-to-face on a regular basis, even after launching a program.



The University of Colorado-Boulder has seen significant success with its homegrown ESL Academic Bridge Program, launched in 2014.

point, but Haun and her staff have worked with various academic departments to provide extra language support for students with impressive academic or professional backgrounds in the hope of eventually admitting them to graduate-focused pathway programs.

“The graduate side is more complicated, but I also think that’s a place where the international market is going,” Haun says. “That is a more complicated process because typically grad studies are much more decentralized, but I think that people shouldn’t ignore that as another possible area to go with pathway programming.”

“These programs provide such a good foundation for the students—both undergraduate and graduate students,” Haun says. “They’ll just have a better and stronger platform to head off into the independence of their university experience by starting with a pathway program.” ■

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NAFSA RESOURCES

“Pathway Programs: Key Considerations and Strategies” e-Learning Seminar: bit.ly/2FYnemM

Landscape of Third-Party Partnerships in the United States: bit.ly/2Tlg4gg

“Bridge and Pathway Programs” chapter, *Managing a Successful International Admissions Office:* bit.ly/2NviBl7