Enhancing the Culture of Global Academic Excellence at Northeastern University

Report to the Provost’s Senior Leadership Team
ReDI Cohort Challenge 2015-2016

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Executive summary:
This report outlines recommendations for enhancing global diversity at Northeastern University by improving the culture of global academic excellence. Despite the fact that international students are almost 30% of the total student population, their experiences within the University are often focused on issues of legal compliance, rather than on ways to alleviate social and academic isolation. To address this, we propose strengthening and transforming the International Student and Scholars Institute (ISSI) from an office focused primarily on legal compliance and the initial welcoming of international students, to one focused on enhancing the academic experience of international students and scholars throughout their stay at Northeastern and in Boston.
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Project goal:

Our project goal is to enhance Northeastern’s culture of global academic excellence by leveraging the increasing global diversity of its student and faculty populations. The core of our proposal is to advocate for the enhancement of the International Student and Scholar Institute (ISSI) in the hopes of better integrating it within the university’s exemplary and ambitious Global Experience portfolio. We have chosen to focus on ISSI because it is usually the first office that international students and scholars have to visit to process their immigration paperwork and thus it seems natural that it becomes a one-stop-shop for not only legal procedures but also integration within the university.

Narrative of Challenge:

Northeastern defines itself as “a global, experiential, research university built on a tradition of engagement with the world, creating a distinctive approach to education and research.” NU has several offices and programs that focus on external global activities, including Study Abroad, Global Co-op, and Global Network for online and hybrid programs for regional and international campuses. In addition there are also satellite campuses across the globe, Dialogues of Civilizations travel course and seminars, as well international seminars and symposia offered by various departments, programs, institutes and centers. This list speaks to the very high number of international activities facilitated by Northeastern. Yet, information about all of these activities is dispersed across Northeastern’s website. The effect of which is to mask and undermine the truly diverse nature of Northeastern’s global endeavours.

Relatedly, although Northeastern describes itself in its mission statement as “global,” our research revealed challenges to the accuracy of this representation, especially in regards to the experiences of international students and scholars. By championing the academic excellence of all of our students—both domestic and international—the university will facilitate greater interaction amongst its diverse population of students and scholars.

As has been widely witnessed and documented, there has been a marked change in the composition of the student and faculty bodies at Northeastern University over the last two decades. One of those changes has been a university that is much more highly international in its population and scope. Currently, the international population of Northeastern is 30%—making it the 7th highest for universities in the United States and this increase in the number of foreign students happened suddenly as foreign students quadrupled in only ten years. Such diversity is a certainty a strength.

However, the current campus culture and supports for international students and scholars are not as effective as they could be. According to the International Students Barometer survey (ISBS), the social satisfaction of Northeastern University international students on “Making friends from this country (US)” was 2.78 out of a likert scale of 5 (as a comparison, scores for the University of Birmingham in the UK were at 4.1/5). Similar scores appeared under “Making friends from other countries” (2.98/5). Remarkable as these statistics are, the issues are not just social.

Notably, some of the challenges that faculty encounter with international students go beyond language proficiency. There are cultural adjustments required for success within the various cultures of American university-level classrooms and the diverse academic expectations of a Global university. There are also misunderstandings on appropriate behavior, plagiarism and discrimination. Isolation, another challenge, is also an important issue. This is not only a challenge for some international students, but also for some visiting international scholars as well, who often receive little direct institutional support from Northeastern and regularly feel overlooked by the university community. Yet, these challenges are not
intractable. In fact they offer opportunities to ensure that the university’s structure and operations matches its international scope.

The challenges that international students and scholars currently face have been handled by individual faculty and by the ISSI in singular fashion and on a case-by-case basis. However, as the number and diversity of international students increases, problems may also rise. Additionally, to persist in overlooking these crucial issues may lead to the diminution of Northeastern’s global reputation and create the image of a university not welcoming or nurturing to foreign students, and which exploits them as a source of revenue. At worst, there might be a gradual or even abrupt drop in international student enrollment, retention rate, and/or graduation rate. Acting now will mitigate future problems, and ensure a culture of global academic excellence in the long run.

Proposals:

We suggest three avenues for improving the current state of global academic excellence at Northeastern University aimed at enhancing and transforming the International Student and Scholars Institute. Our recommendations for improving ISSI are the following:

1. Create a Faculty Advisory Board that can help enhance the focus of ISSI beyond compliance to include cultural proficiency for all students. Faculty on the advisory board will be identified in each college that have an international scope to their teaching and /or research agendas, or express an interest in these areas. Members would assist ISSI and its director with programming. This faculty involvement will require both incentives and support for faculty to get involved with students and scholars and enable relationships among different groups inside the classroom.

2. Hire a New Director for ISSI with experience in creating a global cultural and not just ensuring legal compliance. Given that ISSI is currently searching for a new Director we suggest that the new director have the appropriate background in order to facilitate new focus on academic excellence, as well as compliance. Among the director’s important goals would be the revision of the ISSI website to include links to all campus activities, programs, offices, and organizations engaging with international and global topics.

3. Enhance the academic experiences of international students and visiting scholars by facilitating more substantive and robust interactions with domestic students and faculty. First, for students this may include moving beyond social interaction to include substantive academic interactions in the form of activities such as mentoring, study, and writing groups. Second, for visiting scholars this may include more social activities such as mentoring and interdisciplinary meet-and-greet groups with faculty and graduate students. Third, for faculty this may mean facilitating engagements amongst students and scholars from different backgrounds in other dynamic interactions to achieve global excellences.

Expected Benefits:

The proposed changes are expected to have numerous benefits to the University.

For the university, the benefits might include improved rankings on International surveys such as the International Student Barometer and the Global Employability Index; an enhanced reputation among domestic and global employers as students have gained the ability to understand and adapt to different attitudes and mindsets of people from a variety of backgrounds; increased community engagement and stewardship as the Northeastern community gains experience in adapting to people from a variety of backgrounds, not only cultural but also ethnic and income; and increased revenue (tuition fees,
donations, grant funding, etc.) as more students apply to the university and become proud and willing donors as they become alumni after a good experience during their studies at Northeastern.

For students, the benefits might include increased global employability as they are able to operate in a globally diverse environment; improved global citizenship as they are able to understand and act upon global challenges that they will encounter in the future; and enhanced appreciation and understanding of global diversity and the reduction of tensions and misunderstandings among students while they are at Northeastern University.

For scholars and faculty, the benefits might include richer academic interactions and research accomplishments; more connections with international researchers/educators; and higher caliber students as the university develops a reputation as a place in which all students —domestic and international—can achieve their full potential.

**Expected Costs:**

For ISSI, any increased costs could be shared across the university since its work would be more effectively spread further across the university.

For faculty, incentives such as stipends, additions to faculty development funds and course releases are often necessary to ensure effective participation. These funds would probably come from ISSI or from the various colleges and programs included in the Global Network.

**Conclusions:**

We hope our proposal to enhance the academic profile of the International Students and Scholars Institute (ISSI) will be considered during the development of the forthcoming University’s Long-Range Strategic Plan, “Academic Plan 2025”. Such changes as we propose are in line with Northeastern’s stated desire to continuously evolve to meet the needs of succeeding generations of students. As we know, “in today’s changing educational and economic landscape, global understanding is critical to success. […] Students expect greater choice, flexibility, and challenge, and they demand degree programs that prepare them for a lifetime of learning.”