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# Overcoming international student matriculation challenges

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## Introduction

College tuition costs have increased more than two-fold, and the Educational Data Initiative anticipates an annual cost of $36,436 and a compound annual growth rate increase of 2% per year moving forward (Hanson et al., 2023). U.S. college enrollment has expanded from 3.97 million in 1965 to 14.09 million in 2024 and is expected to increase to nearly 15 million by 2031 (Korhonen, 2023). Some teenagers posit that college is not worth the investment, as over 1/3$^{rd}$ of undergraduates who complete college take jobs that do not require a degree (Allred, 2019).

Regardless of the cost, and according to the Journal of International Students, non-U.S. students are an attractive revenue source (Cantwell, 2015). However, due to geopolitics and immigration policies, the number of non-American students has declined in the past few years (Li et al., 2024). Smaller colleges will be negatively affected (Stowe et al., 2016). This change in student demographics impacts not only the finances of U.S. colleges but also the organizational culture and leadership strategies of the administration.

Global University is one such example. At one point, over one-third of its students were from outside the U.S., but 90% were still waiting to return to America to attend physically. This paper aims to analyze this university's challenges and then develop and discuss a comprehensive strategy as recommendations to Global University's leadership team (Burrell, 2024).

## Background

Colleges generate revenue primarily from five sources: tuition / fees, philanthropy, endowment returns, athletics, and research grants. Tuition and fees only account for 1/5$^{th}$ of what some public universities earn (Kronk, 2019). However, the problem is further compounded by the fact that many universities need to discount their tuition to make it affordable for many U.S.

students (Stoppel, 2023). Additionally, tuition often does not account for the overall cost of attendance (Ruggless, 2023).

To make college more affordable, according to the Journal of Student Financial Aid (Fuller, 2014), most undergraduate funding comprises grants, scholarships, and loans. However, as many non-American students are ineligible to receive financial aid from the U.S. Department of Education, they typically pay higher net tuition than their American brethren (Fuller, 2014). Also, according to Chen (2021), the U.S. has a comparative advantage in education worldwide, so is an attractive location for international students. In that same paper, the author states that revenue from international students was approximately 5% of total tuition 20 years ago. Now, depending on the school's location or whether it is public or private, it could account for as much as 30% (Chen, 2021).

In this same regard, for decades, colleges and universities have strategically woven both tuition fees and the notably higher charges levied on international students into the fabric of their annual financial planning (Chen, 2021). The landscape of student recruitment at colleges has changed, notably with a surge in Japanese students attending U.S. colleges 20 years ago. This trend has since seen a significant decline. Then, students from other countries, such as China, came. The trend seems to evolve from People's Republic toward India, Vietnam, and other African nations (Schwartz, 2023).

U.S. immigration policy has also changed considerably in the past three to five years, particularly during the transition from the Trump Administration to President Biden's. According to the Pew Research Center, one of President Biden's more extensive proposals involves immigration and, in some cases, will reverse (or change) Trump Era Policies (Krogstat et al., 2022). Many of these policies directly affect the ability of prospective students to receive F1

student visas (Chen et al., 2023). Additionally, before Covid, there was a 27% refusal rate for international students (Chen et al., 2023).

## Problem Statement

As most university academic programs repeat themselves yearly, faculty and administrative staffing is relatively stable. For example, as one class graduates, a new cohort of students replaces it, ostensibly enrolling in similar classes. However, enrollment declines often negatively affect morale (Johnstone, 2002). More prominent, larger universities have the financial wherewithal to navigate fluctuating enrollments more quickly than smaller institutions (Martin, 2000). Martin describes having a pool of financial resources as akin to a portfolio investment problem. In any calendar year, some investments will perform well while others will do so poorly, but the composite return is what managers focus on the most. In a phrase, smaller universities need more financial resources on which to rely when enrollment shifts. Viewed through a financial lens, it is easier to determine the next strategic steps from a rate of return perspective, especially on the heels of a poor fiscal year.

Outside of finances, universities pride themselves on having a positive culture (Saleem et al., 2017). As a result, most people associate a university's ethos with student growth and development, intellectual pursuits, and political open-mindedness (Davids et al., 2019). However, the morale of faculty and staff is equally important. The impact of COVID-19 can still be felt by many university employees, coupled with lower pay, heavy workloads, and smaller raises than what could be earned in the private sector (Neuwirth et al., 2021).

Another source of financial stability comes from annual endowment spending. It is a recurring source of university funding (Baum et al., 2018). Traditionally, most university endowments spend 5% of their value annually (Green, 2009). If a university earns an excess of

this amount, the spending will not materially impact the overall portfolio's value. Nonetheless, even the most skilled money managers occasionally miss their targets due to poor investment decisions or a volatile stock market. According to a Harvard Business School case study, endowment performance bears no correlation to the required and ongoing investments in the physical plant or technology (Viceira et al., 2021). We learned, "Institutions have more liabilities, higher debt service, and increasing expense without the revenue or the cash reserves to back them up" (Denneen et al., 2012, p. 1).

Evaluating a university's annual performance is as much associated with traditional financial metrics as protecting a school's culture. Legally, most universities are not-for-profit entities. However, from a practical standpoint, the sheer size of the average student body, the amount of faculty needed to support them, and the facilities and infrastructure needs of a college or university make it quite different from that of a traditional nonprofit organization. Most nonprofit organizations do not rely on different annual 'tuition' revenue sources.

Smaller nonprofit organizations depend more heavily on operating profitably and/or philanthropy. Regardless of the source of revenue and from Strategic Finance, "Without financial resources, there is no mission" (Epstein et al., 2011, p. 28). Observing the way universities function for over 20 years (Stoller, 2024), on countless occasions, decisions have been made to support the school's mission or maintain student morale rather than to maximize pecuniary gain. The decision-making has been strikingly similar for the past 15 years in observing how a Massachusetts-based nonprofit healthcare organization operates.

Despite their nonprofit status, universities can still engage in old-fashioned marketing combined with cutting-edge social media outreach to attract future students (Sintani et al., 2021). Brush (2022) states that community-oriented videos and communication positively affect

decision-making. However, even in the age of "e" everything, where everyone is accessible via social media channels, student-to-student outreach is still the most effective way to connect with learners of any origin (Suresan et al., 2019). Additionally, in any academic year, faculty volunteer to complete prospective student outreach, often in different languages, and regularly meet with recently admitted undergraduate and graduate students before making a matriculation decision (Stoller, 2024).

## Leadership Theory: Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership "refers to leaders who seek to create ideas and new perspectives to create a new path of growth and prosperity in front of the organization" (Korejan et al., 2016, p. 454). Spence (2023) defines leaders as being focused on knowledge acquisition facilitation and a bridge between students and faculty. This leadership approach is not limited to either academia or educational institutions and is often utilized in private-sector organizations. The Darden School applied transformational leadership to SingleStop in a business school case study (Isabella, 2015). In part, Hidayat (2023) also refers to it as Organizational Commitment and, when done well, encourages a professional attitude company-wide.

In academic circles, the challenge of applying any of these leadership, organizational culture, or change management theories is the extent to which the current U.S. immigration policies are unilaterally responsible for the inability of Global University's non-American students to enter the country successfully. Or is the inability of the students to return to the U.S. indicative of a more significant problem regarding university leadership and/or its institutional strategy? Assuming it is the latter, the first portion of implementation is to complete a cultural survey (Monzani, 2021). The Boston University Questrom School of Business Dean and her senior leadership team have invested much time and political capital, not only querying the

faculty and staff about our opinions about the culture but also implementing new policies (and changing existing ones) based on the results of multiple surveys. The university then went one step further by launching an institutional-wide "Belonging and Culture Survey" in the spring of 2023 (Boston University, 2023). Many other educational leaders must also change their leadership approaches (Liou et al., 2017), reflecting the rapid demographic changes (Ja*ff*e-Walter, 2018).

Using this same transformation leadership model, the next step is to lead by example, followed by valuing individual employees, challenging one's team, and being fully transparent (Grin, 2018). To the Questrom School of Business' credit, senior leadership queried faculty and staff in person and held live feedback sessions describing the survey results. What was particularly remarkable was having faculty and staff be in the same breakout rooms concurrently.

Global University should pursue a similar tack of putting all able-bodied heads together. Ferguson recently wrote about the merits of combining both populations—i.e., faculty and staff—as it relates to student self-efficacy using a Grounded Theory approach (Ferguson, 2021). Last year, Berkeley Economic Review, citing the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, reported that the seasonally adjusted employee quit rate rose to 3%, the highest it has ever been (Zhang, 2023). A focus on culture is quintessential to retaining good employees (Jahya et al., 2020).

Another critical aspect of transformational leadership is transparency (Jiang, 2023). Transparency is not solely relegated to the adage of 'actions speak louder than words' but rather one of authenticity. Be yourself. This was born in their survey results of over 700 people and also discussed in a new book by Bill George entitled True North (George, 2010). In a separate podcast accompanying the book, George, Medtronic's former chairman and CEO, said the leadership pendulum has shifted from charisma to approachability.

Global University must confront its issue with returning students transparently and retreat from the secrecy of mahogany-paneled conference rooms where leaders whisper about non-American students' challenges in the U.S. The goal should be to host open forums, actively engage in dialogue, and promptly respond to emails and phone calls, embracing a culture of openness and accountability (Geelan, 2015). Additionally, proactive student engagement is particularly relevant to Global University's roots, given the long history of its multicultural environment (King, 2022).

## Organizational Culture Theory: Schein's Organizational Culture Model

Schein's Organizational Culture Model indicates three different layers to organizational culture: Artifacts and Behaviors, Espoused Values, and Underlying Beliefs (Schein, 1984). Indirectly applying this model, four years later, in 1988, Professor William Tierney published in the Journal of Higher Education that the most effective administrators instinctively know what actions they can take within the confines of their respective institutions (Tierney, 1988). Scott McKenna, in his 1998 dissertation entitled "The Application of a Corporate Cultural Change Model to an Institution Of Higher Education," had an interesting comment when he opined that state legislators and their constituents are asking higher universities and colleges to operate more competitively, fiscally responsibly and be more student responsive. Tierney (2008) expanded the study and later commented in a full-length book that shared governance is a concept particularly unique to higher education organizations but not as a one-size-fits-all strategy (Lacatus, 2012).

As indicated previously, when enrollment begins to decline, university morale is often negatively impacted (Johnstone, 2002). What makes the application of Schein's model more interesting in this case is that the cultural artifacts, espoused values, and underlying beliefs are usually anticipated to originate from the organization itself. Applying the impact of *external*

immigration policy changes is likely outside the original model's scope or any of the follow-on research cited above. When McKenna wrote that state legislators wanted universities to operate in a particular manner, this was more with the sentiment of guidance than required participation.

In the present day, the same cultural artifacts referenced by Johnstone have been affected in the case of Global University. They adapt in the best manner, although in almost uncharted territory. The problem has become even more acute based on the stark contrast between the past and the present: going from over 1/3rd of a healthily diverse university population to a situation now where 90% of students who have earned the right to be students there are unable to enter the United States let alone return to campus.

Beyond the words being spoken, transformational leadership theory recommends that top executives or administrators be transparent and lead with authenticity. By comparison, Schein's model focuses on values and beliefs. This epitomizes the phrase 'actions speak louder than words.' However, the onus is on university leadership to avoid operating impetuously (Whelehan, 2020). Before attempting to connect with its students using live stream technology such as Zoom, thereby signaling to people half a world away—who desperately want to resume their studies—that the university truly cares, leadership should determine the magnitude of the so-called problem.

From the students' perspective, many recognize that U.S. immigration policies have put them in a difficult position and that Global University is not directly responsible for anything that has transpired (Gándara et al., 2018). This outcome would require a much different implementation approach than might be necessary if most students are operating in a frenzied manner (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2020), such as becoming depressed or posting on social media in a venomous fashion. Assuming the students are calm and from a global identity standpoint (i.e., as

suggested below in the Practical Problem-Solving Recommendations section), Global University can implement some short-term solutions to plant their flag internationally more effectively and, even more practically, maintain a meaningful relationship with their international students. Ideally, students can come to the US to study (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998), but regardless of the location, U.S. educational training has high utility worldwide (Zhou, 2015). Additionally, overseas studying better improves global problem-solving and processing (Li et al., 2020), and many positively change their personalities as they learn to adapt to the local culture (Wada, 2014).

## Change Management Theory: Kotter's Eight-Step Model

The essence of Kotter's Eight-Step Model is to follow a tightly prescribed sequence of steps to effectively *deliver* organizational change: Urgency, Coalitions, Vision, Value Communication, Obstacle Removal, Short-term Wins, Change Building, and Anchoring. Applying these in higher education might be slightly more challenging, as most universities have hierarchal structures and a siloed mentality (Odiaga, 2021). Many people are merely motivated by the ability to engage and offer their opinions, as described in this two-year-old piece (Kang et al., 2022). Given the connection between international students and U.S. immigration policies, it is ironic to read how this theory is also being applied and adopted in Vietnamese private university learning environments (Thanh, 2022).

Viewed through an academic lens, it is essential to take a cue from Belliard and Dyjack (2009), who highlighted the importance of knowing one's culture before implementing this at Global University. Unthinkingly executing this model in almost a robotic fashion will potentially do more harm than good, as all aspects might not apply to the organization or certainly not in the unique position it finds itself in now (Alfaro Solano et al., 2019). For example, Urgency, Value

Communication, and Obstacle Removal are apparent aspects that must be thoroughly discussed and implemented (Kerrigan, 2021).

These aspects of Kotter's model seem more appropriate for longer-term organizational change. Unless immigration policies become permanent such that neither Congress nor the U.S. Supreme Court can overturn them and the controlling party in the White House continues its approach over the next four years, one need not worry about building coalitions or engaging in change, that will be the least of anyone's problems (Anderson, 2013).

As it relates to Global University, a significant aspect of their situation is almost a crisis mentality rather than a complete overhaul of the organization itself (Scott, 2018). For example, according to Professor Kotter's (2007) original Harvard Business Review article, a 75% threshold is necessary to create a Sense of Urgency. Given the potential loss in revenue from 90% of your students being unable to return to the U.S., it is unclear if 75% of the faculty and staff could agree on anything strategically, as they would be more inclined to figure out how to stop any possible financial hemorrhaging, determine if furloughs are necessary, and what programs might need to either be consolidated or temporarily suspended (Baranik et al., 2019). Ideally, it would be preferable to avoid furloughing anyone and have the university absorb any short-term financial losses by temporarily increasing the endowment spending rate to keep different teams fully preserved (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020).

## Practical Problem-Solving Recommendations

These are some problem-solving recommendations for Global University:

a) Enlist Alumni Support: Graduates offer a unique vantage point through which younger students considering that same institution can receive direct personal reflections on what made a graduate's time on campus unique and memorable (Clark et al., 2015). Nothing is

more effective in sales than word-of-mouth marketing (Barber, 2009). A report from Ireland comments that “reflective thinking, moral reasoning, and lifelong learning align with the institution’s key performance indicators” (Gallo, 2017, p. 92). Although universities routinely change their specializations and programs to attract different faculty, positively affect their rankings, or increase their students' caliber, rarely does their mission or vision appreciably change (Sauntson et al., 2010). Because such interactions allow for a two-way discussion, they are far more helpful than material on the university’s website or in popular publications like the Fiske or U.S. News and World Report guides (Bunzel, 2007).

b) Change Recruitment Strategies: Global University should change its student recruitment approaches. U.S. demographics change approximately every decade (Fischer et al., 2006). For example, according to the Census Bureau data, by 2030, all baby boomers will be over 60+ years of age and five years after that, adults will outnumber children for the first time in U.S. history (Vespa et al., 2018). Universities typically focus on the opposing end of the bell curve, the fat tails, yet their priorities are subject to regular adjustment. According to Inside Higher Ed, around 20% of Washington University’s 8,000 undergraduates are limited-income or first-generation students (Mowreader, 2023). ‘Bistro University’ (with its real name masked) created a Diversity Fellow Program to recruit faculty and students more effectively (Coopwood, 2018). These are just two examples of areas that universities have been focusing on to increase the diversity of their student body and expand intellectual rigor on campus. Not surprisingly, and beyond student recruitment, this has paved the way for a plethora of new academic majors /

minors, centers, and publication opportunities (Gibbs, 2023). A set of new priorities will, of course, emerge in the coming years, too.

New recruiting will likely require more aggressive financial aid support (Taylor et al., 2020). In sum, Global University will have to balance its new cohort of domestic students versus the overall profitability impact of possibly needing to provide more extensive financial support (Kotze et al., 2020). In 2019, Harvard University was fortunate to receive a $10 million grant for rural students, but not all universities are so lucky (Kerstetter, 2019).

c) Open Satellite Campuses: Should the exclusive immigration situation continue for a more extended period, another option could be opening satellite programs or even entire (temporary) campuses. This falls under the colloquial heading of 'if you cannot beat them, join them' (Rossi et al., 2020). Depending on the outcome of the 2024 election, immigration policies will likely become more inclusive or exclusive. If these policies become more inclusive, with a corresponding détente in geopolitics, university administrators should likely see a new wave of international applicants and matriculants (Nguyen et al., 2017). In the interim, a short-term solution might involve faculty traveling to regional international hubs to hold classes and augmenting the delivery with technologies like Zoom to provide distance learning.

Beyond generating revenue for the home university, according to Gardiner and Wat (2016), satellite programs or campuses often benefit the community and make graduates more attractive to local employers. Of course, more prominent universities will benefit from name recognition than smaller ones (Rothblatt, 2008). However, apropos to the recommendations above, regardless of the scope of implementation, this might be a

unique opportunity to engage with local alumni creatively. Additionally, if the alumnus / alumna is well-connected in a city, country, or region, he/she/they might be instrumental in future local student recruitment. Such satellite expansion need not be restricted to international locations, as evidenced by Illinois (Dickson et al., 2016).

d) Expand Program Offerings: A fourth option that Global University might consider is expanding its program offerings. Many universities have recently begun offering online MBAs, flexible residential learning options for working students, and/or one-year specialty master's programs. In 2023, referencing GMAC, Bristol wrote that 20% of graduate students considered enrolling in a shorter program than a full-time or evening MBA. If the challenges Global University faces more specifically relate to its undergraduate population, perhaps retooling its graduate offerings will be more successful.

    Graduate programs also have the advantage of providing a longer duration for Optional Practical Training (OPT) once a student graduates, especially for those in the STEM fields (Chen et al., 2023). Online degrees also offer an alternative measure to increase revenue and profits (Scaringella, 2022).

e) Strategic Planning: The fifth and final recommendation should be viewed through a strategic planning lens. The inability of students to enter the United States may be fully connected to U.S. immigration policies (Quinn et al., 2017). Further, assuming that these immigration policies are an isolated incident, no additional action might be necessary save reaching out to a local, state, or federal government representative or university-employed (or private) lobbyists to ameliorate the situation. In the same vein of

transparency, Boston University publishes its lobby guidelines publicly on its website (Boston University, 2024).

Examine enrollment numbers and other aspects of the university to see if there are any strategic planning miscues is recommended. For example, if this study uncovers systemic problems, two possible courses of action exist. On one end of the spectrum, although somewhat draconian, are personnel changes at various upper echelons of the university. The Chronicle of Higher Education reports that college presidents' average tenure has shrunk again and currently sits at less than six years (Jesse, 2023). In the corporate world, tenure is similar, albeit more directly correlated with profitability. 39% of S&P 500 CEOs serve between one to five years, and just under 30% between five and 10 (Jerotich, 2023). Provosts serve, on average, for three years (Kline, 2018) and admissions officers for even less time (Kingsbury, 2017).

Assuming core problems are uncovered, but from the opposite perspective, a more detailed university review would be required. This could be completed internally through a faculty and staff committee or an outside consulting firm (Iqbal et al., 2022). Regardless of the committee's composition, using a VRIO model is recommended, much as Heischmidt and Gordon (2020) applied these concepts to international study abroad programs through a recently published paper. To comprehensively complete and apply VRIO, it is essential to leverage the value, rarity, imitability, and organizational merits of Global University.

Outside of the problem-solving recommendations, there are also seven possible questions to be discussed and addressed:

a. Has the reduction in international students been a declining trend for several years, or is this particular admissions cycle an aberration—connected or not with the fact that 90% of its international students are currently unable to enter the country (Burrell, 2024)?
b. How does Global University compare with its peer institutions in its existing international student population or the inability of so many students at those institutions to (re) enter the U.S.?
c. Have the rankings for the University appreciably declined in the past few years?
d. Are students consistently turning down Global University in favor of similar competing schools?
e. Has there been a widespread departure of faculty from the same department or academic unit?
f. Have job placement statistics materially changed for domestic or international students?
g. Have there been any accreditation issues?

Taking everything into account, the final step in the overall planning process is expanding the VRIO analysis. This combines practical problem-solving recommendations with leadership, organizational culture, and change management theories. Cleavenger (2013) put it best in one of the final paragraphs of his study, indicating that change will happen over a long period and require direct and indirect interactions to convert employees into vested partners. It will likely not be a smooth transition. Nevertheless, do keep in mind that anything is possible. As documented in a now-famous initiative, the author described how Northeastern University

executed one of the best rankings turnarounds in higher education, moving up 42 spots in over eight years and ultimately breaking into the top 100 two years later (Gowen et al., 2021).

Of course, the most pressing issue for Global University now is the immigration policy debate and its direct implications (Burrell, 2024). Whereas well-envisioned and implemented strategic planning can effect meaningful change to be fully implemented and successful, companies, organizations, and individuals are often at the behest of their domestic government and its relations with other countries across the globe (Puck et al., 2013). Unfortunately, Sino-U.S. relations are a reasonably current example. Domestically, China is trying to revive its economy through several government and social measures. On January 1, 2016, it eliminated its one-child policy. Less than five years later, the government incentivized couples to give birth to more children (Siqi, 2023). That is a domestic policy, however. The international side of China's equation involves an aptly entitled report, "How the U.S.-China Trade War Affected the Rest of the World" (Gorman, 2022).

The chicken and egg debate notwithstanding, China's end result is dramatically negative and affects economic and political policies worldwide. The U.S. immigration policy debate could be viewed through a similar lens. Although immigration is by definition an international issue, domestically, most regard it as an question that's being myopically legislated through White House policies, congressional debate, and presidential Executive Orders. No one wants to experience educational xenophobia as motivations are negatively affected (Mok et al., 2024).

## Areas for Future Research

Areas for future research might include a study of U.S. immigration policy. Gubernskaya et al. (2017) wrote about how immigration policy affects the family unit (Pierce et al., 2018) and

discussed former President Trump's policies and possible future impacts. This issue will continue to be debated up until the 2024 election.

A second area of future research is university crisis management. Due to the Israeli / Palestinian conflict, university presidents and the campus at large are experiencing pressures related to free speech, academic freedom, and religious protections. Rollo addressed this differently (2020), while Moerschell discussed alignment challenges (2020).

A third area is enhanced faculty training for international students. Cultural competence fluency is essential (Nieto et al., 2010), as is understanding and respecting issues of identity (Bond, 2019). The more insight and knowledge faculty can absorb, the better the classroom and educational experience will be for all students worldwide.

To conclude this paper; there are two pertinent factors to highlight. First, international students added $45 billion to the U.S. economy in 2018 (Newton, 2024). The second, according to the Journal of Public Economics, is that once they graduate, and should these students remain in the U.S., the local supply of skilled workers increases by 0.23%, with most finding their first job within the state hosting their alma mater (Beine et al., 2023). This further positively boosts the U.S. economy and may allow students involuntarily forced to leave home to build a better future (Arar, 2020). In conclusion, an annual, sustained and robust matriculation of international students who become graduates and can stay in the U.S. yields comprehensive benefits across the board.

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