



International Affairs

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO
COLORADO SPRINGS

Like many American colleges, the University of West Florida has seen marked growth in recent years in its international-student enrollment.

But it was a different trend that alarmed Rachel Errington, director of the university’s Office of International Students. The number of foreign students leaving the public institution, on Florida’s Gulf Coast, without earning a degree was also on the rise. In 2008, West Florida’s retention rate for international students was 95 percent. Three years later, it was 83 percent.

What, Ms. Errington wondered, was going on?

She’s not the only one asking. On Wednesday, Nafsa: Association of International Educators released the [findings](#) of a [nationwide survey](#) on international-student retention.

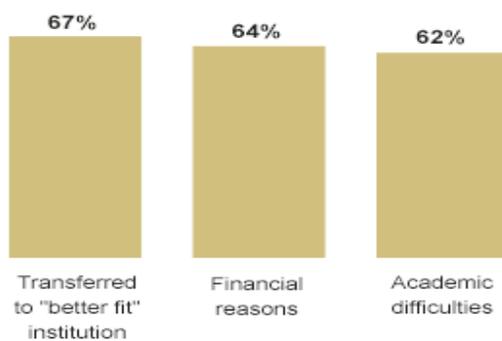
While earlier research has looked at the [retention](#) and [academic success](#) of foreign students on individual campuses or within university systems, the Nafsa study, made public at its annual meeting here, is the first to do so across many institutions. And the survey, conducted by World Education Services, a nonprofit organization that studies international-education trends, includes the perspectives of both international undergraduates and the college administrators who work with them.

It turns out the two groups view retention issues quite differently.

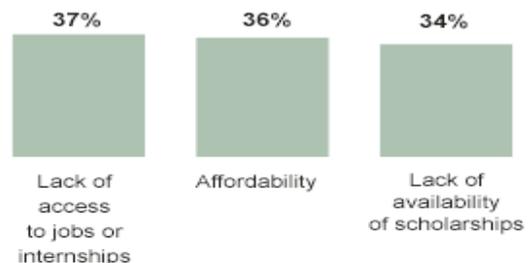
Perceptions About Retention

As more international students attend American colleges, concerns have grown about their sense of satisfaction and rates of retention. A new survey suggests a gap between why those students say they leave college before earning degrees and why educators think they do.

Top reasons institutions report for students' leaving before graduating



Issues with which international students report the greatest dissatisfaction



Source: Nafsa: Association of International Educators

Educators attributed foreign undergraduates’ decision to drop out or transfer to a variety of reasons, including finances, academics, English-language problems, and the desire to attend an institution that is a "better fit."

By contrast, the factors most cited by the students themselves were squarely financial: access to jobs or internships, affordability, and availability of scholarships. Rounding out the top five: dissatisfaction with the food and the dormitories.

'A Gap in Understanding'

That's not to say either perception is wrong, said Rahul Choudaha, the project's lead researcher. Rather, the survey results, based on responses from nearly 500 educators and 500 students at more than 100 colleges, underscore that "there may be a gap in understanding about what students want and what they're getting," he said. "And students may not understand what institutions want and what they're getting."

The results also show some variability between different types of colleges. Administrators at doctorate-granting institutions, for example, were more likely to say academic and English-language difficulties were at the root of retention problems. Meanwhile, students at baccalaureate institutions were more concerned about affordability but reported greater satisfaction with the availability of scholarships than did their peers at other colleges.

The research did not examine the full range of foreign students in the United States. It did not include graduate students or students who transfer to four-year institutions from community colleges, intensive-English courses, or so-called [pathways programs](#).

Yet, over all, the findings do suggest that American colleges need to do a better job of dealing with the mismatch between the expectations international students have of studying in the United States and their experience once on an American campus, said Sheila Schulte, Nafsa's senior director for international enrollment management and international student and scholar services.

College recruiters should be upfront about academic requirements and about what it takes to succeed in an American college classroom, Ms. Schulte said, especially with students who come from very different educational backgrounds. They should also be transparent about college costs and financing, she said. If campus jobs are limited, for instance, international-admissions officers should make that clear to foreign students, who are forbidden under U.S. law to work off-campus.

In addition, international-student advisers may need to collaborate more with other campus offices, such as career services, to make sure those offices are prepared to handle the special needs of foreign students, Ms. Schulte noted. More than a third of the students surveyed singled out access to jobs and internships as one of the most effective ways to retain students.

Seeking Satisfaction

Despite those concerns, retention and graduation rates for international students remain high—in many cases, higher than those of American students. More than 60 percent of the baccalaureate and master's institutions surveyed and more than half of the doctorate institutions said their retention rates were higher for foreign than for domestic undergraduates.

Still, as the number of students from overseas continues to increase—the Institute of International Education reports there are [40 percent more foreign students](#) at American colleges than a decade ago—their retention rates bear watching, Ms. Schulte said.

And the Nafsa data hint at a lack of satisfaction even among international students who choose not to leave their institution. Just 60 percent of students who said they did not plan to transfer reported being satisfied with their experience.

Jill Munro, director of international student and scholar services at the College of Wooster, in Ohio, said that while international retention rates remained strong, "I don't want to lose the few that I do or have those who stay have a less-than-great experience."

Wooster will begin offering a course this fall to new international students to help them adjust academically and culturally to American higher education. Ms. Munro said she hopes the class will allow her and other instructors to spot students who are struggling early, instead of "when they fail their classes first semester."

At West Florida, Ms. Errington has conducted her own surveys to try to determine the reasons behind falling retention rates. She has used the findings to craft some possible fixes. Among them, starting a voucher program to cut the cost of taxi rides from the college's relatively isolated campus into downtown Pensacola and encouraging other offices and departments to offer more on-campus jobs and internships to foreign students. Her latest effort is a mentoring program that connects international students with American classmates.

West Florida's retention rate, she said, has rebounded.

Courtesy of The Chronicle, 2014