Reimagining the Delivery of International Student Services During a Global Pandemic: A Case Study in the United States

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Abstract
The COVID-19 global pandemic caught the United States and the rest of the world ill-prepared, and many institutions of higher education continue to wrestle with unprecedented challenges to provide effective support services to their students. This paper examines how a mid-sized university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States reimagined the delivery of services to its international student population at the onset of the health crisis. The study employed a qualitative method and a case study research design to describe, from an institutional perspective, the shift from a traditional in-person service model to a virtual mode of support for international students as a result of campus closures and a switch to remote learning. Based on the findings, the authors offer five key considerations that can be crucial in effectively delivering International Student Services in an online environment. Implications for international educators and support staff are discussed.

Keywords
COVID-19 pandemic, emergency response, International Student Services, online advising, virtual programming

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Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global health pandemic, and public health officials warned that large numbers of Americans could be affected by the disease (Ranney et al., 2020). As a consequence, the United States and many other countries closed their borders imposing both national and international lockdowns. Several factors accounted for COVID-19 becoming a security issue, including the novelty of the virus, the lack of knowledge regarding transmission, and the known population-level risk posed by mildly symptomatic or asymptomatic individuals (Munster et al., 2020). As the pandemic unfolded, public health experts deemed “social distancing” an appropriate measure to contain community transmission of the disease (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). In response, many higher education institutions in the United States closed their campuses, suspending both face-to-face student learning and in-person student services. In an attempt to limit full interruption of their programs, institutions adopted emergency e-learning protocols by moving classes and support services to a virtual or online environment (Murphy, 2020, p. 492). Others made procedural adjustments to their academic calendar and introduced a hybrid model for class instruction and service delivery.

E-learning as a crisis response measure is not entirely new to American higher education. In 2005, damage caused by Hurricane Katrina to campuses in the Gulf region of the United States required educational institutions to adopt e-learning as an emergency option (Meyer & Wilson, 2011). The H1N1 virus outbreak in 2009 prompted traditional, on-campus classes to move to online instruction in a time of crisis (Allen & Seaman, 2010). According to Murphy (2020), the “Sloan Semester” that ensued following the aforementioned crises allowed US institutions to deploy 1,300 online courses as an alternative learning model. E-learning is a constantly changing concept, which is defined by Sangrà et al. (2012) as an approach to teaching and learning based on the use of electronic media and devices as tools for improving access to training, communication, and interaction in a particular educational model. The COVID-19 global pandemic has left many higher education experts pondering whether this mode of learning and other information and communication technologies would remain a crisis response in higher education or become the norm in the future.

As with many universities around the world, US institutions offer a plethora of in-person support services to ensure students succeed when they enroll in their respective program of study. These services extend beyond learning materials and include resources such as tutoring, academic advisement, personal counseling, career counseling, library services, orientation for new students, and diagnostic testing or assessment (LaPadula, 2003). These multifaceted services are important because they aid students with their intellectual and personal growth and contribute to their academic success. Students are more likely to succeed in college when they engage with their learning environment and develop a strong sense of belonging through curricular and cocurricular activities on campuses (Strayhorn, 2019). Additionally, satisfaction with support
services provided by their institution can help improve student retention (Heyman, 2010).

With a drastic increase in the number of international students enrolled at US institutions over the past few decades, International Student Services (ISS) has grown into a specialized and dedicated area of operation on university campuses (Ping, 1999). ISS offices have evolved to provide both academic and nonacademic support to international students (Osfield et al., 2016). For example, ISS staff advise international students on their visa and immigration status in the United States and assist them with their academic, social, and cultural transitions to campus (Newsome & Cooper, 2016). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, ISS offices and professionals inevitably had to recalibrate the way they offer and deliver support services to their international student community.

Being abroad and away from home can impact the well-being of international students, especially during crisis situations (Aucejo et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing isolations increased the vulnerability of these students at a time when university staff, including those in ISS offices, may have been underprepared to provide support services remotely. The readiness of staff to transition from in-person delivery of services to an online mode of support during a pandemic, therefore, warrants particular attention. In this light, this qualitative study explores and describes how a midsized institution in the United States reimagined its delivery of support services to international students as its campus shifted to online ISS programs and services. Specifically, it analyzes interview responses from ISS staff who, by design, were trained to provide services in person and who had to quickly adapt to maintain services to students in a virtual format. The findings from this study are pertinent and contribute to knowledge in the field of ISS, given the emergence of online service delivery during the pandemic.

**Literature Review**

**International Students**

International students are defined as students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are enrolled outside their country of origin (UNESCO, 2021). Over the past two decades, there has been a significant surge in the number of international students enrolled at institutions of higher education around the world. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019), 5.3 million foreign students were engaged in tertiary education in 2017, indicating a jump of 165% in enrollment since 1998. International students studying in the United States represent 5.5% of all students in US higher education, and for the fifth consecutive year, more than one million international students enrolled at US institutions in 2019–2020, despite a marginal decline of 1.8% over the previous year (Institute of International Education, 2020). International students contributed $44 billion and 460,000 jobs to the US economy in 2019.
But perhaps more importantly, they make invaluable intellectual, cultural, and economic contributions to their host institution and country, serving as a key aspect for advancing internationalization, inclusivity, and diversity efforts on campus (Smith, 2020). Scholars have noted that international students are critical to the competitiveness of American higher education as they add diverse perspectives that enrich both in-classroom and noneducational experiences for all students (Choudaha, 2018). However, the recent political instability and subsequent presidential proclamations and executive orders introduced to tighten immigration regulations for visa holders heightened concerns and anxiety among many international students (Laws & Ammigan, 2020; Todoran & Peterson, 2020).

International Student Services

Over the years, as the international student body grew across the United States, ISS delivery on university campuses has attracted scrutiny and has drawn attention to the knowledge and skills needed to ensure a more humane, socially responsible, and improved model of support services for international students. In their quest to increase campus revenues, institutions of higher education have often acted to increase international student numbers at the expense of paying attention to the “unique needs” of this community (Bista et al., 2018, p. 5). As a specialized unit, ISS offices do not usually serve international students from a transmigration lens and consequently, the specific needs of this student body are often left unattended (Bista, 2015). International students often “encounter social, cultural and educational challenges upon entry to the host institutions in America” (Bista, 2015 p. 39). Therefore, broadening campus integration and engagement opportunities can help address the distinct needs and challenges faced by this community. Briggs and Ammigan (2017) pointed to the benefits of increasing campus-wide collaboration and community engagement as a means of enhancing ISS and support. Additionally, the way in which ISS offices disseminate key information and resources to students is of utmost importance. In their research, Ammigan and Laws (2018) found that many campuses fall short when reaching out to and communicating with their international students and do not necessarily adopt a strategic approach that recognizes the communication preferences of students across a variety of platforms and technologies. The emerging body of critical research in the field has led some scholars to conclude that most campuses provide inadequate programs and services to their international student community (Bista et al., 2018).

Although the structure and organization of ISS offices can vary greatly in function, role, and reporting line, ISS personnel, commonly known as international student or scholar advisors, are generally responsible for advising foreign nationals who enter the United States for a set period of time to study or conduct research on campus. Once on US soil, international students are subject to both legal monitoring and restrictive enrollment protocols. ISS personnel are responsible, on behalf of their institution, for regularly monitoring, tracking, and reporting international student information to
federal agencies, including the US Department of Homeland Security (Austell, 2013). This ensures compliance with immigration regulations as international students enroll in different course modalities on their respective campuses. Through various programming and engagement efforts, ISS offices also offer social and cultural support to international students and often act as their “home away from home” (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2018). In essence, ISS personnel serve as the main point of contact on campus, and the majority of ISS services have traditionally been delivered in person.

The global health crisis has had a significant impact on university students due to a number of issues including economic uncertainties, health concerns, isolation and loneliness, adjusting to the e-learning environment, and graduating on time (Aucejo et al., 2020). These fears and disruptions were particularly evident among international students, thus shining a light on the complex knowledge and skillset needed to advise this community and others with diverse needs in times of crisis. International students faced heightened emotional and financial hardships that were led by issues such as the need for emergency housing, adapting to emergency online learning, complicated health care and insurance coverage, bank closures in home countries, travel and reentry restrictions, and new immigration regulations for maintaining status in the United States (Beckstein, 2020; Cohen, 2020; Study International, 2020). As a result, these students turned to their universities for help, guidance, and support during these difficult times (Firang, 2020).

**Virtual Delivery of ISS**

In March 2020, the pandemic brought in-person connectivity on campuses to an abrupt end, and the online delivery of both student learning and student services was adopted to meet social distancing guidelines (Durrani, 2020; West, 2020). In general, support services for distance or e-learners on American campuses have been scant and marginal (LaPadula, 2003). More relevantly, scholars have stated that online delivery of support services to students often has serious limitations. For example, students tend to miss out on important nonverbal communications, which usually occur during in-person interactions (Pentland, 2008). Language barriers may also undermine how some students request for and receive support services online (Beckstein, 2020). In fact, Liu et al. (2010) established that cultural differences can impact online learning for international students and, by analogy, it can be assumed that cultural barriers and perceived cultural differences might also hamper online support services to this community of students.

Although information and communication technologies have been used in some instances to assist students in developing international perspectives and engaging in cross-cultural interactions and learning, it is critical that institutions provide students with the technical, learning, and administrative support needed to be a successful online student (Leask, 2004). International students may take time to adapt to their new digital environment on campus, which may be very different than the sources
of online information they relied on while in their home country (Chang & Gomes, 2017). At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions had to act quickly to move their support services (including ISS) online, sometimes without clearly enunciated protocols to staff and students. At the time this paper was written, limited research had explored the shift in university staff experiences from in-person to online delivery of ISS during a pandemic. Although it is clear that more work needs to be done to contribute to the literature base of this important topic, we must recognize that a number of good practice considerations for online service provision were perhaps already in place before the pandemic. For instance, Mohamed et al. (2020) discuss the example of an online orientation model established at US institution in 2015 to complement face-to-face programming and opportunities for intercultural engagement. This orientation model introduced new tracking, feedback, and assessment features as it evolved over the years with new advancement in technology practices and pedagogical research around online classes but the goal for providing a holistic orientation experience for international students remained a priority for this institution. Chang et al. (2021) offer insights on the importance of online social networking and engagement and confirms that, although international students regularly use their institutions’ websites, they also rely heavily on a range of social networking outlets as sources of information. With a renewed focus on remote learning, institutions must continue to ensure that students have access to information and services online, as well as opportunities to interact across cultures. Incidentally, Bouchey et al. (2021) argue that institutions that had invested in online programming and services prior to the shutdowns were at an advantage to pivot quickly to emergency remote operations and will most likely adapt faster to any future changes in their current support services setup. Therefore, it is critical that institutions continue to build on their existing support service practices and underlying principles such as developing engaging and innovative programming content and themes, building connections and relationships with new and continuing students, and actively involving students in the program evaluation process (Mohamed et al., 2020), to strengthen the online mode of service delivery.

**Conceptual Framework**

Scholars have maintained that well-established academic and student engagement services contribute to international student success on campus (Hegarty, 2014). Support services, information and resources, and programming activities are all critical for international students to achieve their educational goals (Akanwa, 2015; Andrade, 2006; Warren & Hale, 2016). Briggs and Ammigan (2017) developed the Collaborative Programing and Outreach (CPO) model to outline a practical structure for providing in-person ISS and engagement services on university campuses. The CPO model calls for collaboration between various stakeholders on campus and in the local community to ensure the effective delivery of programs and services. It relies on four clearly demarcated pillars of programming, namely: (1) programs
to support international student success; (2) programs to understand government regulations; (3) programs to promote international understanding; and (4) programs to connect with the local community. Findlay (2020) used the CPO model as the guiding framework for interpreting data on the delivery of ISS and engagement as the model provides a holistic organizational structure for ISS offices grounded on the academic, social, and cultural needs of students. The conceptual framework for the present research was drawn from Briggs and Ammigan’s CPO model, which was used as a guiding principle by the ISS office in this study for developing and administering support services to international students at the university site.

**Method**

In the context of the global health crisis, the purpose of this research was to explore and describe, from an institutional perspective, the shift from in-person to online delivery of ISS. The study was guided by the following research question: *How did a mid-sized American university respond to provide services to international students at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Employing a qualitative research method, namely a single instrumental case study design, this study was bounded by both “place” and “time” in its quest for data (Stake, 1995). Since the study sought to address the “how” and “why” questions (in ISS delivery during the pandemic), a case study provided an appropriate research design (Yin, 2009). Within the constructivist paradigm, case studies allow participants to tell their stories and allow researchers to interpret the data set (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Generally, data for case studies can be collected from multiple sources, namely from documents and from interviews (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Institutional Review Board approval for the research was granted for this study.

**Data Collection**

Data collection was organized in two phases. First, we collected existing data from the university site’s website about the ISS office’s responsibilities and organizational setup, staffing structure, and student advising and programming functions. Second, to gain information-rich data, we conducted semistructured interviews with the university’s ISS personnel. All 22 ISS staff members were invited to participate in the study via email, of which seven responded and agreed to an interview. Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of the participants of this study.

**Data Analysis**

During the first phase of data collection, we retrieved and shifted information from the ISS office’s website and other electronic planning documents and archived materials such as statistical and impact reports, programming calendars, and student support and outreach strategic plans. We then established basic categories to describe the data
collected in order to facilitate content analysis of the data. Data were validated from the website through triangulation by verifying information available in documents from the ISS office. For example, information was triangulated from the ISS website against information from electronic reports and strategic planning documents on the university website and archives.

In the second phase of data collection, one round of interviews was conducted with seven ISS personnel holding a variety of responsibilities and areas of expertise at the office. Participant responsibilities included advisory and engagement support services to undergraduate, graduate, and nondegree students. The work experience of participants spanned between 3 and 25 years in an ISS-related work setting at the university site. We transcribed the interviews, recorded field notes during the interviews, and conducted one round of member checking of the information collected.

As part of the data analysis process, we worked together to identify and verify relevant text segments from documents and interview transcripts and organized categories of information under codes using lean coding (Creswell, 2013). Document

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants.**

| Participant # | Job title     | Area of expertise                                                                 | Years of experience |
|---------------|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Participant 1 | Assistant Director | Manages the office’s international student programming and engagement activities such as orientation programs, coffee hour, and student leadership initiatives. | 8 years+            |
| Participant 2 | Program Associate | Implements programming and outreach programs and events for international students, scholars, and their families. | 3 years+            |
| Participant 3 | Student Advisor | Advises F-1 and J-1 graduate international students on immigration, academic, and employment issues. | 4 years+            |
| Participant 4 | Assistant Director | Advises sponsored international students on visa, academic, and employment issues, and liaises with sponsoring organizations, foundations, and government agencies. | 4 years+            |
| Participant 5 | Student Advisor | Advises F-1 and J-1 undergraduate international students on immigration, academic, and employment issues. | 30 years+           |
| Participant 6 | Student Advisor | Advises F-1 and J-1 undergraduate international students on immigration, academic, and employment issues. | 4 years+            |
| Participant 7 | Associate Director | Oversees the student immigration advising team and the office’s regulatory and government reporting responsibilities. | 9 years+            |
Analysis yielded seven codes (e.g., general information; regulatory information; events on campus; academics; etc), which were then organized within the four support services themes of the CPO conceptual framework (academic success; government regulations; international understanding; and community engagement). Data from interviews with participants generated fifteen codes (e.g., virtual is different; institutional help with technology; self-taught virtual skills; etc), which were regrouped under the following six themes: (1) online delivery; (2) technology access and support; (3) lack of training; (4) strategic communication and dissemination of information; (5) access to staff, resources, and information; and (6) emerging areas for professional development. Table 2 lists examples of text segments, codes, and themes used for data analysis in this study.

Findings

The university site in this study has a designated ISS office, which consists of 22 employees (including administrative staff) and usually operates in a physical building that is centrally located on campus. The mission of the office is to provide support services to international students, scholars, and their dependents, and the primary responsibility of its staff includes advising international students, scholars, their families, and their host departments, on US immigration regulations and visa compliance issues. The office is also responsible for helping international visitors adjust and acculturate

| Text segment                                      | Code                           | Theme                      |
|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| “Virtual had a different feel”                    | Virtual is different           | Online delivery             |
| “Virtual is transactional”                        | Virtual is different           | Online delivery             |
| “Crisis response and we went online”              | Virtual space                  | Online delivery             |
| “We used existing software”                       | Virtual space                  | Online delivery             |
| “Having staff and students alike trained on how to do things online” | Train students and staff for online delivery | Lack of training |
| “It was self-taught, nobody showed us how to do things” | Train students and staff for online delivery | Lack of training |
| “We had to learn new skills on the fly”           | Staff learned new skills on the fly | Lack of training |
| “Since things have gone virtual, we have been experimenting” | Staff learned new skills on the fly | Lack of training |

Table 2. Examples of Text Segments, Codes, and Themes Used for Data Analysis.
to campus; hosting orientation sessions and cross-cultural programming; and supporting the university’s global engagement initiatives and internationalization efforts.

The ISS office’s programming and outreach philosophy is aligned with the Briggs and Ammigan CPO model to deliver services and engagement activities for international students across various settings on campus and in the local community. Although some information and resources are available on the office’s website, most of its services and programs were originally designed to occur in person. For instance, immigration advising included a process for students to bring their documents physically to the office for final verification and processing. Hundreds of programming events, such as weekly Coffee Hours and Ice cream Socials, were traditionally set up as in-person engagement activities. As the university closed its doors to contain community transmission of the COVID-19 virus, a majority of services offered by the ISS office moved to online delivery, mirroring the line-up of existing programs that were available to international students prior to the pandemic.

Although the ISS office increased posts and announcements on its websites in the form of FAQs and links to key campus resources, the layout of the website remained mostly unchanged following the pandemic. The announcement section was updated regularly to reflect adjustments to immigration regulations, academic procedures, and health and safety information. Accordingly, participant 5 from the interview noted, “more notices are going out now, our website is constantly being updated.” Another ISS staff member, participant 7, stated that “the announcement page has always been there but now with COVID-19, the announcements have increased.”

In general, ISS office staff reported that the decision to move services online was in response to the emergency COVID-19 crisis. According to participant 1, “at the onset of the pandemic, our roles changed to crisis management, we went into fast response gear. It was an emergency.” Initially, staff adjusted to online delivery of their services, anticipating a temporary disruption. Participant 4 had similar observations as participant 1, stating, “we thought it would be for two weeks.” Participant 6 noted, “I have not been back to my office since March 2020, when we left the office in March, we did not know we would not be back.”

Prior to COVID 19, the structure of the ISS office encompassed front desk personnel, who welcomed students in the reception area, triaging and redirecting students to staff entrusted with skills to advise them on a number of concerns pertaining to their academic, immigration, and visa status. Participant 6 from the study noted the office used to allow in-person walk-ins and international students would drop in at any time during business hours to get a quick answer to a question:

Pre COVID-19, our day was a little bit more open-ended. We had an office on campus accessible to students through drop-in and by appointment. They can come by and ask questions and walk-in to get something resolved.

As ISS moved from in-person to online, staff expressed mixed responses to the transition. Participant 3 stated that “there has been a very smooth transition [from
in-person to online].” Participant 7 noted that “overall, it was an adjustment for everyone, some people at the beginning did not think it would work.” For other participants, new skills had to be learned, and participant 5 noted, “I’m older, I had to learn how to do Zoom, how to upload documents.”

Although the University site had made some resources available to faculty and staff for the transition to virtual operations, direct training and specific guidance were not provided to individual units and staff, including the ISS office. Participant 4 reported that:

We trained ourselves on how to use Trello and Zoom. We experimented before leaving for home, setting up the VPN, we looked at the daily tools we used, it was all self-taught, nobody came in to show us how to do things.

Participant 5 described that “in the office, one colleague is computer savvy. He is very patient. He trained me, and another colleague helped me with any issues…I can call IT if I have computer issues.”

University resources pertaining to technology were made available to staff for the transition. Participant 1 stated that “[the institution] helped with resources, we had access to Zoom, Microsoft Teams. They helped with technology.” For participant 7, “training was not absolutely necessary but additional training and support is always welcomed.” Some office equipment, supplies, and stationery were shipped to ISS staff homes. Participant 4 claimed, “we were able to borrow printers, scanners from the office—smaller printers from the office were distributed.”

Focused on their agility with technology and their ability to use reporting systems and communication software, participants felt that they met their main service delivery goals, at least from an immigration advising and compliance standpoint. Participant 4 stated, “we knew some stuff [about how to use our systems] and figured out how to send students [their immigration] documents electronically” while participant 5 noted, “yes, online delivery allowed me to meet my goals [as an international student advisor]. It’s been amazing the communication that goes out. It is easy to reach students and to get the information out to them.” Participant 3 said, “I assume because students have relied on Zoom, they have gotten used to online advising.”

As far as communicating with students is concerned, participants reported following a process to meet via Zoom and being more transactional in the delivery of their services, as opposed to the fluid in-person style, where students would walk into the office or call to set up face-to-face appointments. One adviser, participant 6, declared:

If the students want to talk to us, there is a process where they email the front desk, and the front desk emails us, and we need to send a Zoom link. Our relationship has become more transactional, we don’t have interactions with students to get to know them and understand where they have come from and where they want to go.
Participants in this study also indicated that they were sending out more emails and becoming more structured in what they communicate with students. Participant 6 mentioned that “the pandemic and online [environment] has formalized and standardized our communication. We are typically writing emails and if the email is significant, a copy goes to the student’s [electronic] file.” Another staff member, participant 5, claimed, “I never used Zoom before, normally I used to meet with students to help them with OPT [employment requests], now I meet on Zoom. I don’t have walk-ins. I think emails increased because students can’t come in.”

With respect to campus programming and outreach to the community, it was challenging for the ISS office to connect with and engage international visitors and their family members via online programs. Participant 2, who worked on the engagement team, reported:

We could not adapt completely to the online environment—for families there was nothing online before…[the] online [platform] does not provide a lot of opportunities—no matter what we did we could not [get them to] meet…not having outdoor activities was tough, no matter how fun online games were, there were challenges.

Participants also reported Zoom fatigue and a lower attendance from students in online programs compared to in-person, on-campus events, possibly due to the steep adjustment to online learning. Participant 2 stated, “we have about 35–50% attendance online… [as opposed to] 60–70% in-person.” However, despite the challenges, online participation became more desirable for certain social activities, “we started having meetings after hours and more people attended—10 people attended compared to 5 before.”

ISS staff whose duties involved interaction with students on a daily basis reported missing the “personal touch.” Participant 3 said:

Students don’t turn on their cameras, it is awkward, it is not a problem but is sad not to have a personal touch, body language is a little less clear, nonverbal has changed, it is so static, you can only do so much to communicate. On Zoom, students just jump into questions. There is no opportunity for small talk and warm ups. They just jump into an immigration question. Zoom is more straightforward and the interpersonal touch is missing.”

However, the prospect of working from home has become appealing to some ISS staff. Several participants disclosed that working from home was more efficient for them. One adviser, participant 6, noted, “we are also more efficient and productive—no walk in, less distractions.” Participant 7, who did not attend to students regularly, described, “for what I do…I prefer the virtual world, but I think a lot of people like the hybrid idea—work from home and have the office kind of balance.” Finally, participant 6 reported that working “with home” and having family distractions was taxing: “the challenge comes from working from home—having kids at home who are going to school online in their bedroom or in the living room makes it
challenging.” For another staff member, participant 3, working from home made them feel lonely: “I miss my office, I miss meetings, I have lost touch with coworkers, knowing what is going on in their lives, interpersonal interactions with students. It gets quiet in the house.”

**Discussion**

As the pandemic emerged, institutions adapted and reimagined the delivery of ISS to their international students. Despite offering some webinars and advisory information online, a dedicated, outlined master plan that solely focused on delivering support services virtually during a time of crisis was nonexistent at the university site. ISS staff extended themselves to adapt and provide uninterrupted service to students to the best of their ability. Respondents in this study had the opportunity to take home existing office supplies and equipment, which were not originally designed to be set up and used remotely. The institutional resources that were made available to offices mainly focused on general software and technology and did not include training for delivering support services online or serving a culturally diverse and vulnerable student population during a health crisis. The participants in this study depended on their own knowledge of technology and found assistance from their coworkers to learn new online methods for providing services online. Additionally, the ISS office made internal provisions so their advisors could continue to handle sensitive data and information remotely. Coupled with feedback from students and their supervisor, office staff felt that they were doing a great job and that the international community at the university was happy and satisfied with the support they were receiving. The stress of working “with home,” namely with young children, pets, and family members, surfaced as a challenge despite the dedicated wellness resources that the institution made available to help staff. One participant described receiving assistance to deal with Zoom fatigue and to navigate the complex regulations and procedural adjustments brought by the global pandemic. Before engaging into a discussion on the implications and recommendations of this study, we present few examples of virtual programs that the ISS office at the university site offered to its international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The examples are listed and grouped within each pillar of the CPO model in Table 3.

**Implications and Recommendations**

Student success in the online environment requires institutions to adopt a holistic and collaborative approach that takes into consideration students’ academic, social, and personal well-being. The effective delivery of online student services relies on adequate training and professional development for personnel. To best serve the growing number of international students, we argue that a student-centric approach must be adopted to ensure efficiency in the provision of ISS online. Institutions must recognize that international students hold temporary legal status in their host
country, and the distance that exists between them and their families back home often leads to acculturative stress, which is exacerbated at a time of crisis. In this vein, as part of a broader ISS advising framework, we offer three main recommendations. First, it is important that faculty and university staff are sensitized to the sociocultural needs and challenges that international students face, so they can be referred to relevant support services and resources on campus. This recommendation is driven by the fact that faculty members and many frontline staff are the premier point of contact for students. Second, ISS offices, which serve as the dedicated support unit for the international community on campus, must receive intentional training on how to deliver online services effectively, especially in the context of an emergency or crisis warranting a rapid transition to remote learning. Third, based on the findings of the present research, we recommend extending the Briggs and Ammigan CPO model to include a fifth pillar, which focuses on the virtual delivery of ISS offices. To better support this recommendation, we offer five key considerations that are essential in ensuring an effective delivery of ISS in a virtual environment. These are discussed below.

**Table 3. Examples of Virtual ISS Programs.**

| CPO pillar                              | Examples of virtual ISS programs                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. To support student success           | Online tutoring services; virtual career advising; tips for communicating with faculty and academic advisors; telehealth programs; online counseling and well-being discussion series; peer mentoring live chats; student life virtual hub; online library exhibitions; and e-Banking |
| 2. To understand government regulations  | Virtual immigration advising and check-in; employment webinars; online travel advisories and reminders; predeparture webinars; electronic document processing and reporting |
| 3. To promote international understanding| Online weekly coffee hours and social events, orientation and welcome receptions, intercultural communication workshops, and family and dependent programming via Zoom |
| 4. To connect with the local community   | Outdoors excursions and recreational activities; socially distanced community events and festivals; student leadership and e-networking initiatives; virtual language programs; and local school cultural emersion programs |

Note: ISS, International Student Services; CPO, Collaborative Programing and Outreach.

Prioritize Employee Education and Training for Delivering Online ISS. The findings suggest that institution-wide emergency preparedness, contingency, and crisis response management planning are essential to ensure ongoing student support for international students during adverse unforeseen events. This could be addressed through broader
collaborations between ISS and other units on campus, and mandatory professional development training to generate staff and faculty awareness of these plans and provide access to supporting resources. A particular training focus for ISS staff would be online advising, including key factors that guide the delivery of support services virtually and address the intricacies linked to remote processing and reporting of sensitive immigration documents. Additional coaching for ISS advisors would aim to raise their intercultural awareness and navigate the sensitivities of providing services in a nontraditional, face-to-face setting. Through such professional education initiatives, universities can respond to the urgent need for health and wellness programs that attend to anxiety, stress, and strain in the workplace due to the global pandemic.

Ensure Remote Access to Visa Services and Immigration Advising. COVID-19 has added another layer of complexity for international students as they grapple with newly introduced immigration policies and compliance standards, health and safety concerns, and travel issues. It is therefore very important that ISS staff and student advisors continue to be mindful of this added pressure to ensure that the delivery of advisory services and resources remain in a student-friendly and accessible format. It is also essential that the ISS office works closely with academic departments and student affairs units to field important guidance on enrollment requirements and protocols, employment authorization, and other visa-related processes to students across different university settings. To support students in a new, virtual-only environment, it is critical that the ISS offices remain proactive in reaching out and cross-checking whether students clearly understand the procedures, documentation, and reporting requirements. The endeavor to manage critical, time-sensitive regulatory situations, and deadlines online could also help students maintain their immigration status and avoid compliance issues in their host country in times of crisis.

Implement Virtual Orientation and Transition Programs. The transition to university life can be an intimidating process for all students, and particularly for international students, as they seek to familiarize themselves with their new campus environment. In response, host institutions organize orientation and transition programs to help them feel welcome and build a sense of belonging, which can lead to long-term academic and personal success (Nadler et al., 2019). For these initiatives to be meaningful in a virtual setting, we recommend that incoming international students have ample exposure to key expectations of online learning and service delivery. Intentional efforts could be made to outline resources to access services and online programs at orientation and in programs throughout their studies. These include access to ISS resources and campus services, such as health and safety, academic support, student wellness, housing, and emergency assistance. Moreover, the need for predeparture information sessions to prepare incoming students on what to expect upon arrival and navigate a new campus environment has now become more crucial. As Mohamed et al. (2020) suggest, online orientation programs can be developed around a variety of modules that are covered within eight main thematic areas,
namely: (1) Welcome Introduction; (2) Before you Arrive; (3) When you Arrive; (4) Registering for Classes; (5) Studying and Teaching in the United States; (6) Where can I get a job?; (7) Travel Regulations; and (8) Cultural Adjustment. To ensure utmost efficiency, ISS offices should introduce tracking and feedback-oriented features as well as assessment and benchmarking mechanisms as part of their virtual orientation programs.

**Optimize Communication and Outreach Strategies.** The dissemination of information to international students through strategic communication methods and tools is critical during global crisis. Adopting an around-the-wheel approach, which includes video and teleconferencing, direct and mass email, social media, phone, newsletters, and website updates, can help reach and meet the communication preferences of a diverse student population. ISS offices must be prepared to diversify, assess, and optimize their communications strategies on a regular basis in coordination with other university departments to amplify messaging across campus (Ammigan & Laws, 2018). Close collaboration with the institution’s central office of communications and marketing is also vital in ensuring the successful implementation of a holistic communications strategy that can help reach and convey critical information to the international student community.

**Emphasize Reinvestment into Institutional Resources and Support Services.** Adapting ISS for effective online delivery may require additional funding for enhanced technology and software licensing. Hence, we suggest that institutions prioritize reinvestment into resources and programs that support the international student experience online. The concept of strategic reinvestment in higher education relates to setting aside a portion of tuition and other revenues toward overall academic and student support programs as institutions develop their strategic and budget plan. In the context of reimagining ISS delivery online, resources could be intentionally reinvested into virtual platforms that support the social, academic, and cultural needs of international students.

**Conclusion**

This article set out to explore and describe how an ISS office at a midsized American university responded to provide support services and programs to international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. As ISS staff transitioned from in-person to online delivery of services, they adapted rapidly with limited training and preparedness from their institution. To provide effective services, which takes into consideration the needs and well-being of both international students and ISS support staff, institutions of higher education must be strategic and intentional in gearing their support offices with the tools and guidance necessary to optimize the delivery of online services. This research is not intended for generalizability but instead, relied on deep information to capture staff experiences and share relatable challenges that emerged during unexpected times. Although limited by its focus on one US institution,
the findings from this study merit consideration and may serve as a point of reference for international educators and practitioners tasked with enhancing the experience and success of international students. The implications and recommendations offered could be of value to institutions and student support units worldwide. It is evident that there is a lack of research on the topic of online delivery of ISS and we encourage future scholars to examine the specific issues affecting students during the pandemic and investigate whether the virtual services and programs put in place were indeed successful in addressing their needs as we continue to explore opportunities to reimagine the mode of ISS delivery.

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