

April 21, 2005

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BTW 250 Instructor
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Dear Mrs. Flint:

This letter is in regards to the ethnography report that our group has prepared meeting the requirements of the assignment you gave us. This report analyzes International Admissions at the University of Illinois as an activity system.

The purpose of this report is to study the International Admissions department, and see how it differs from the general admissions process. We will do this by observing all components of the international admissions activity system, including tools, subject, rules, community, object, and division of labor. This will allow us to fully understand this system.

Also by picking a pertinent textual tool used by this activity system, we are able to better grasp the importance of this department. We chose the International Admissions website as our textual tool because we thought that it was widely used by prospective international students and also the faculty and staff of the department. Faculty must continually update the website if certain changes in the admissions process or criteria change. This textual tool is important through many ways.

After careful research, there were some major recommendations that our group thought of for this topic. Due to time constraints we feel further research about international admissions at the University of Illinois would be useful. There are many variables we could still study, but unfortunately we were not able to do so. Also, if we had more time, it would be interesting to go and analyze admissions processes for other countries. For example, if an American student was studying internationally in a foreign country, what are the requirements? Are there special documents that need to be shown or tests that must be taken in order to gain admittance? These are important questions and the results should be looked into at some point.

I hope you will find this report useful and relevant in learning about the International Admissions process here at the University of Illinois. If you would like to discuss it with our group, we can be reached at the emails below.

Sincerely,

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Analysis of International Admissions at the University of Illinois as an Activity System

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Abstract

This research report was prepared for the ethnography of the University of Illinois. The report analyzes International Admissions at the University of Illinois as an activity system. History of international students in America dates back to just after World War II. Differences exist between the University of Illinois and University of Michigan with regards to requirements for international admissions. An interview with Aditya Mehta, a current international student, revealed that despite a couple of complications his experience with international admissions at the University of Illinois was positive. An interview with Mark Williams, an International Admissions department faculty member, discussed the various components of the department within the framework of an activity system. The International Admissions website is the most important textual tool for both faculty and prospective students because it can be accessed from anywhere in the world and contains links to a wealth of information. The interaction between the different components in the International Admissions department activity system and the high quality education offered at the University of Illinois ensure that an increasing number of international students will pursue degrees at the school. Recommendations for further research include conducting additional interviews and departmental observations. Another recommended research possibility is reviewing what students from the University of Illinois who want to transfer overseas must do to be admitted in another country.

Introduction

Background

A Brief History of International Admissions in the United States

Prior to World War II, there was little development of institutional philosophy concerning international education. The world at the time was fragmented with European colonies and the majority of international discourse was focused on imperial domination. The process of selection and enrollment of foreign students could be best characterized as a well-intentioned experiment of trial and error, handled by clerical employees and considered minor assignments.

After World War II, two key developments in postsecondary education in the United States have led to the steady increase of interest from top academic administrators on the subject of international studies. First, the large increase of well-qualified foreign applicants eager to study at American universities. As the volume and variety of international students began to grow, universities realized they were unprepared to handle the foreign students' unique needs. This led to the second key development, the need for specialized resources to handle the demand of interested and potential international students. The United States government realized the imbalance of resources and personnel dedicated to international affairs and took some necessary steps to lead the country out of its introverted state.

On September 4, 1961, Congress passed the Foreign Assistance Act. As a result, the United States foreign assistance programs were reorganized with a focus on separating military and non-military aid. The Act created an agency whose sole purpose was to administer economic assistance programs, and by November 3, 1961, President John F. Kennedy established the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Shortly thereafter the USAID entered into a contract with the already existing American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) to develop a more efficient way of handling the increased interest of international students studying in the United States. This commenced the largest examination into the selection, admission, and placement of foreign students in United States universities and colleges.

Each year, qualified foreign academic advisors and researchers are asked to spend two weeks providing credential analysis for AACRAO member institutions. The credential analysts use their knowledge of the global educational environment to examine recent trends and developments in admissions, costs, program offerings, and the progress of international students. To this day, credential analysts have developed a sound institutional philosophy to negotiate the obstacles inherently found in international academics. Without a solid commitment, universities and colleges in the United States are vulnerable to problems caused by a lack of appropriate resources dedicated their cause.

Understanding the basic steps needed to realize a successful international studies program is important for all participants in the process. This gives the institution's chief administrator officers, deans, and foreign faculty advisors an idea of how complex the process of implementing and sustaining a thriving international studies program. The first task for the USAID was to provide a blueprint for the essential resources needed to handle foreign applications.

The USAID first called for an adequate professional staff of credential analysts to evaluate international academic qualifications while maintaining a sensitive and understanding disposition of cultural differences. The academic institutions should also provide their credential analysts with opportunities for further professional development through seminars and workshops.

Secondly, the USAID advised institutions to provide suitable office space in which to carry out their day to day operations. This would include space for faculty activity as well as the storage of foreign files and resources. It is recommended that the resource library include books, publications, and past records pertaining to international educational systems.

The last provision of the USAID identified the need for well designed application forms and supplementary information targeted at interested students and their families. The supplementary information offered to the students should detail what they need to do, what tests need to be taken, what records are required, the costs of the programs, and where to send the information.

A number of opinions have developed over the years on the best ways to operate an international studies program within the United States. The most important fundamental concept researchers of international education systems have developed is the understanding that the admissions process for foreign students is more complex than that of domestic students. This requires a specialized staff with international academic knowledge of current trends and developments and the necessary resources to create a successful international studies program.

Purpose Statement

We have decided to analyze the department of International Admissions at the University of Illinois. We will inform current students and perhaps prospective students at the University of Illinois about the differences between the international and general admissions processes. Indeed, International Admissions is its own activity system. In this report we will analyze the different aspects of the activity system including subject, rules, community, division of labor, and motives. These elements may appear mutually independent at first, yet through careful analysis of this activity system, we have discovered that the whole international admissions process is greater than the sum of its integral parts. The report will also take a more in depth look at a specific textual tool within this activity system. We chose to focus on the International Admissions website because it is the most accessible textual tool for prospective international students as well as faculty. The report concludes by recommending further research into international admissions at the University of Illinois.

Scope

This report analyzes International Admissions at the University of Illinois as an activity system through various researched resources. The report considers International Admissions both from the perspective of faculty and international students. The report subsequently makes recommendations regarding further research into the department.

Discussion

International Admissions at the University of Illinois and the University of Michigan Compared and Contrasted

Being apart of the Big Ten Conference, one would think that the admissions for international students would be similar. However, examining the two universities websites reveals that Michigan University's requirements for international admissions are quite different from the admissions guidelines here at the University of Illinois. For the University of Michigan there are different standards for prospective students from each country, the details of what requirements that are to be met before applying to the

university are listed on the website. The University of Illinois does not actually go into detail what qualifications are needed for a specific country. Other differences with regard to English aptitude, as well as financial requirements, exist between the two Universities. These differences are outlined below.

English Aptitude Tests

There are three different exams that can be taken for applying for the University of Michigan. One is the MELAB (Michigan English Language Assessment Battery) which is an exam for non-native English speaking students and tests them on English composition, listening, grammar, vocabulary, and reading. Not only is it used for Michigan University but other universities use the exams as well, like Dixie University in Utah. The MELAB encompasses both spoken and written English: Part 1 is a 30 minute impromptu composition, written on an assigned topic; Part 2 is a 25 minute multiple choice listening comprehension test, delivered via tape recording; Part 3 is a 100 item 75 minute multiple choice test containing grammar, close reading, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

Another exam is the TOEFL (Testing of English as a Foreign Language) which is the exam that is also used at the University of Michigan as well as here at the University of Illinois. It exams students for the four main points in communication: structure, listening, reading, and writing of the English language. Over the past years, it has been moved to an internet based exam, which means that the results are calculated much sooner than before. It is offered in over one hundred and eighty countries and is accepted by over five thousand colleges. Here at the University of Illinois admissions want their prospective students to take this exam.

The last exam is another exam that is the University of Michigan uses is the International Testing System. The IELTS was developed, currently owned and operated by the British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia and the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations. Like the other exams, it covers the four language skills but has two formats: Academic and General Training. The speaking part of the examination is performed as a one-on-one interview with a certified examiner. It is even recorded on a cassette tape.

Financial Requirements

At Michigan only accounts for the eight month academic year. The expenses are \$27,601 for tuition and fees, \$11,073 living expenses, which equals \$38,674. International student prospects have to prove an official source of funds but not say what specific form they want. On the University of Illinois' website it specifically says that needs a bank statement showing that there is more than forty thousand dollars to cover expenses. The expenses that are shown for international students at Illinois are: \$11,207 for living allowances for a full year, \$1,000 for books and supplies for two semesters, and \$24,148 for tuition and fees for two semesters with a total of \$36,135 for a full year.

Visa

Students also need to attain a visa while attending school, which is required by most colleges that accept international students. The visa can be a student visa which can only be attained one hundred and twenty days before the course registration date. If a prospective student waits and wants to enter the United States less than 30 days prior to the start date of classes or stay after their classes are finished, they will have to get a visitor visa. This is the same requirement for all universities that accept international students since it has to go through the United States government.

Interviews

Interview with Mark Williams:

Mr. Williams has worked in the University of Illinois International Admissions department for over 20 years. He is also an active member of NAFSA: Association of International Educators. This organization holds regional and national conferences in the field of international education. Mr. Williams described his work as challenging, interesting and rewarding. Mr. Williams answered questions about international admissions within the frame work of analyzing the department as an activity system:

Tools

Mr. Williams indicated that the two main tools utilized by the international admissions staff are educational system resources, and the computer. Educational system resources are texts that outline the curriculum taught by schools in different countries. These resources are found both online and as paper documents. The international admissions department uses these resources as both an equivalency guide and to give them an overall picture of a particular perspective international student's educational background. Mr. Williams related that the computer was also vital. The computer is used to store relevant information about perspective students as well as serve as a communication tool. The computer is also a crucial compliment to the department's website. The website will be analyzed in greater detail later in this report.

When asked, Mr. Williams indicated that both the computer and educational system resources have changed and evolved in the more than two decades he has worked in international admissions. The use of the computer, including hosting the departmental website, as well as using email as a tool for communication, was not available at the beginning of Mr. Williams's employment in the department. The educational system resources, both online and in hard copy, are constantly updated to insure accuracy.

Motives

Mr. Williams suggested that the short term, as well as long term goal of the department is to increase the international component of the undergraduate population. The two main reasons for this goal are to increase the diversity of the University as well as to raise funds through the tuition paid by international students. When asked about graduate admissions, Mr. Williams indicated that international graduate admissions are hosted by

the individual colleges and departments. Each college or department has their own set of standards and qualifications that must be met by prospective students.

Division of Labor

Mr. Williams related that international admissions is a division within the overall admissions department. The workload and responsibilities within international admissions are handled by a processing division and then an evaluating division. The main responsibility of the processing division is to gather required information from the prospective students. This would include the application and any other necessary documents. The evaluating division, which is the division Mr. Williams works in, is responsible for evaluating a prospective student, and ultimately deciding whether or not to admit the student.

Community

When asked what different groups of people shape the department with regards to standards and daily operations, Mr. Williams responded that the department is fairly autonomous. They ultimately create their own standards; however, they work closely with various undergraduate colleges, specifically the admissions deans. This collaborative effort ensures that students meet the expectations of both parties.

Rules

Mr. Williams stated that their department must adhere to SEViS. SEViS which is an acronym for "Student and Exchange Visitor Information System," is a database that contains information on all international students currently studying in the United States. This database is hosted by the United States Department of Homeland Security, and has been in place since July of 2002. Besides keeping track of the international students that are already here, this website is also the path to getting students the visas and other documents that are required to gain entry into the United States.

The international admissions department also works along side the study abroad office to enter into direct exchange agreements with Universities around the world. Through these agreements, domestic students can study overseas and foreign students can study at our school, gaining entry into our country through a J-1 visa.

Mr. Williams related that there are certain restrictions placed on prospective international students regardless of academic ability. The first of these restrictions is financial in nature. The student must provide an original bank statement showing a balance of greater than \$40,000. This proves that the student has the ability to meet the financial obligations associated with attending the University. A second restriction is that students who have never attended school in the United States prior to their application to the University must provide a passing score on a TOEFL test. TOEFL is an acronym for "Test of English as a Foreign Language." This standardized aptitude test evaluates the prospective student's written and verbal English abilities. The student must meet the minimum requirement in

order to be admitted.

Interview with Aditya Mehta:

Aditya Mehta is an international student from Singapore. He is currently a junior in Electrical Engineering. He chose to study internationally because the high school he went to was geared in a way that prepared their students to attend college in different countries.

He was choosing between studying in the US or in England, and decided to come to University of Illinois because of its affordability and its prominent engineering college. He went through the International admissions process and said it was pretty simple. The department looked at his coursework and he had to show certain documents, such as bank statements, in order to get admitted. He also had to take the TOEFL exam required of all international students studying in the US. There were some difficulties he faced when he applied. First, at the time he applied, there was no online application, so he had to mail everything to the school. Also, the department lost his application after they admitted him, so then he had to resend his transcripts.

When comparing the standards for admission, he thought it was a lot harder to get in to colleges as an international student. Out of all the school he applied to, University of Illinois's application was straightforward. Other schools had questionnaires and many essays accompanying the application. If he had stayed in Singapore, he said the admissions process was much more rigorous. The schools look at the students grades and chose the field they should go in to. There is no freedom in deciding what to pursue, as it is in America. Aditya also said the approaches to study were more liberal here in the US.

Analysis of Textual Tools

University of Illinois Admissions Website as a Textual Tool

The website for International Admissions is the textual tool that our group has chosen to analyze. It is a tool that is going to be used by most students that are interest in attending the university since many prospects cannot receive a brochure or other materials as quickly; the website is a fast, reliable source of information.

Layout

On the left on hand side of the website, it has links users can click on to get information about admissions requirements, tuition and fees, financial aid, frequently asked questions, contact information, and to check the status of an application. The top link you can click on takes you to a page where can apply online, but most students probably want to know the specific requirements are before they apply. This information can be found on the links below the application link.

On the right hand side of the website there are links leading to information about the life here on campus. It takes you to a site that tells some interesting facts about the University as well as other links to information about housing, events, recreation, the Greek community, and many more. Also appearing on the page is a link that allows students to sign up for a visit to the University.

Importance to Students and Faculty

Prospective students that live overseas can visit the site and immediately have all the resources that are required not only to apply to the University, but also to make their transition to studying in the United States as smooth as possible. Furthermore, the site offers links to pages with information about extracurricular activities, clubs, and student organizations. Overall this site is a great source of information available to students that might not be able to visit the University of Illinois in person.

For the faculty of the International Admissions department, whose goal is to increase the international component of enrollment at the University, the website is one of the only tools capable of reaching prospective students. Maintaining the effectiveness, ease of navigation, and ensuring accuracy of information on the website is of paramount importance, since the University of Illinois competes with other Universities across the country for the best and brightest students that the world has to offer.

Other textual tools

The Office of Admissions offers a few brochures that pertain to International Admissions:

The first document is Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) Information and Registration Bulletin for Internet-based Testing. This booklet provides prospective students with information regarding the TOEFL test. Since a passing score on the TOEFL is required to be admitted as an international student, this booklet can be a valuable resource.

The second document is a pamphlet entitled “gateway to success.” This pamphlet, which is geared toward transfer and international students, lists all of the available undergraduate academic programs. It also offers admission guidelines with regard to prerequisites and G.P.A. requirements for admittance to the various colleges of the University. The pamphlet also shows a chart estimating expenses of attending for residents and nonresidents, financial aid information, and contact information for the Office of Admissions and Records.

The last document is the Undergraduate Application for Transfer Admission. This document is used by both domestic and international students. The international student applicant must fill out an additional page on the application that instructs the prospective student how to send the correct documentation verifying financial eligibility. Additionally the application instructs the student to submit proof of an acceptable passing TOEFL test score.

Conclusion

The International Admissions as an activity system is a multi-faceted department. This report allowed us to observe the community, subject, tools, object, rules, and division of labor of the system. All of the following components of this activity system exist within the community of the University of Illinois. The subjects of our report are International students and faculty of the International Admissions Department. The tools we analyzed include the International Admissions website, application, brochures, and knowledge held by the faculty. The website was our main textual tool and we chose it because it is important to both faculty and prospective students. It is the most accessible resource for prospective international students currently overseas. Also, it is used by faculty to increase interest in the school. The object of this activity system is two fold. From the perspective of the University of Illinois admissions department, increasing diversity among students as well as increasing revenue for the school through tuition are the overall goals. Students, on the other hand, seek a quality education when applying to college and see the University of Illinois as meeting this requirement. In order for international students to attend the university, both faculty and students must adhere to certain rules and qualifications. The faculty must provide the US government with information about international students that wish to study in the America. This must be done through the SEViS website. The international students must meet certain qualifications in order to be admitted to the university. Amongst these are English aptitude and financial requirements. Studying the division of labor reveals the admissions process. First students apply to the university. Then the application is handled by the two divisions within the International Admissions department. The first division, which is the processing division, gathers data from prospective students. The second division, the evaluation division, reviews the application and makes a decision regarding admittance.

When analyzing the ethnography of the University of Illinois, international students are important because they comprise a substantial percentage of the student population. Subsequently, it is pertinent and interesting to study the activity system of international admissions here at the university. Our research has uncovered that the current state of international admissions is a product of historical events that have shaped international education as a whole. Furthermore, the international admissions department functions efficiently due to its organization and structure. Also, the academic quality of the University of Illinois continues to attract excellent students from around the world. Throughout the years, international students as a percentage of total enrollment has steadily increased. The way international admissions exists today ensures that this trend will continue into the future.

Recommendations

To assist the ethnography of the university project, with regards to studying admissions, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Further Research into International Admissions at the University of Illinois – Due to the time constraints of this report we were not able to draw upon all available resources. We recommend further interviews with international students and departmental faculty. Conducting observations of a typical day in the department might also yield interesting information. We also believe interviewing various professors about the impact of international students in the classroom could aid in further understanding the topic.
2. Research into admissions processes for University of Illinois students to transfer to universities in other countries – It would be interesting to analyze the international admissions process that a U of I student would go through if they wished to study in another country and compare it to the process we have studied in this report.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

Mark Williams Interview Questions

International Admissions as an activity system:

Tools

Can you tell me about the two tools that are most vital to the staff of the international admissions?

Have these tools changed since you started working here?

Motives

What would you say are the immediate goals of the int. admissions dept.?

What are the long term goals?

Division of Labor

How is the work load and responsibilities divided up amongst the dept.?

What are the different positions within the dept?

Community

What different groups of people shape the international admissions dept, with regards to standards and daily operations?

Rules

Are there any special laws, codes, conventions, customs or agreements that must be followed within the dept?

Are there any interesting or little known facts about international admissions?

Aditya Mehta Interview Questions

Why did you choose to study internationally?

What other schools were you looking at? What criteria were you looking for when applying?

What is your overall feeling about international admissions process?

Did you encounter any difficulties during the application process?

Do you think the standards for domestic and international students are different?

Have you studied in any other countries, besides your native country, and how did their admissions process compare to U of I's?

Are the approaches to studying/ classes different or similar?

Graphs & Charts