

By Glenn Cook

Clearing a Path

Campuses Find Pathway Programs Increasingly Vital to International Student Success

AS GROWTH IN THE NUMBER of international applications to U.S. colleges and universities falls, institutions are widening their recruitment efforts to include more students in regions off the beaten path, including many lacking advanced English language proficiency. To help ease the language transition and help pave the way for academic success for students from this expanding universe of backgrounds, many institutions have turned to pathway programs.

Built around coursework designed to help international students improve their written and spoken English skills at the start of their higher education experience, such programs have had a presence in the United States for more than a decade. But as increasing numbers of U.S. colleges and universities have come to rely on international enrollment to meet revenue and internationalization goals, pathway programs have recently taken on a new importance.

Bridging a Gap

Jeffrey P. Smith, acting director of the International Scholar Transition Program at Ohio Northern University, says pathway programs offer students an opportunity to prove themselves despite their language limitations.

“The whole determination on whether they get a degree should not be based solely on a test score,” Smith says. “These are students who are close but not quite there, and they need help with bumping up their writing skills, their vocabulary, and their ability to listen and understand the language. Through our program they have the ability to prove to the university that they can make it and thrive here.”

Likewise, the University of Arizona’s Center for English as a Second Language (CESL), which established its program in 2012, now serves 25 to 50 undergraduates who take a series of eight-week courses focused on polishing their English proficiency. Amber M. Tetreau-Segura, associate director of admissions, immigration, and student services, says “almost 100 percent” of the cohort’s students have continued their studies at the university.

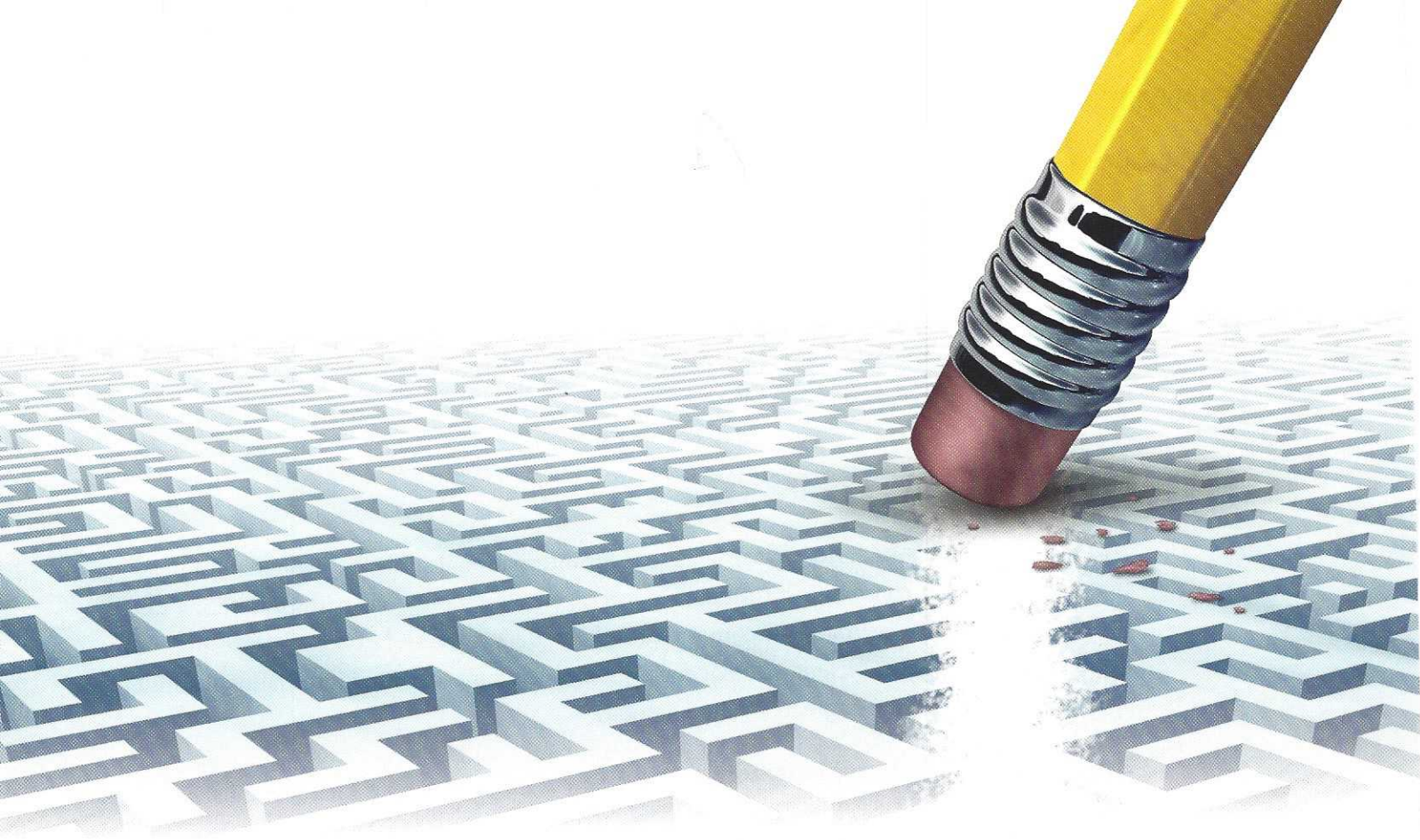
“Cohorts provide a sense of community and support for the students,” Tetreau-Segura says. “They provide the students with a soft landing into university academic courses and teach students how to build the networks they need to be successful both during their time in the university and postgraduation.”

Making It Happen

In 2014, the University of Colorado-Boulder developed an ESL Academic Bridge Program that now serves more than 100 undergraduates, most of whom come from China. “The goal is to complete the program in one academic year, but we have some students who come in needing a brush up on their language skills and others who need a little more time to complete the bridge,” says Patricia Juza, director of the International English Center at the university.

Juza, who also serves as president of the Consortium of University and College Intensive English Programs, says what impressed her about the University of Colorado’s pathway efforts is its focus on transparency: The program was established with the cooperation of all of the university’s deans, the provost, and chancellor, and students’ academic credentials are vetted before they are admitted.

“There are no bait and switches with this program,” Juza says. “We make sure they know what they’re getting into up front. They know the credits they are earning in the program are recognized and transferrable. That’s important, because this is a major investment on the part of their families, and we want to make sure they are successful once they do matriculate full-time into the university.”



Outsourcing the Path

Universities in several large U.S. cities have turned to third-party providers for their pathway programs. Kaplan Pathways, for example, offers recruitment, marketing, and wraparound student support services at Northeastern University in Boston and Pace University in New York City, among others.

Rahul Choudaha, StudyPortals's executive vice president of global engagement, research and intelligence and the principal investigator for a NAFSA-commissioned report on third-party providers that was released earlier this year, says U.S. educators are increasingly open to new models of recruitment and collaboration. Still, 64 percent of the educators surveyed for *The Landscape of Third-Party Pathway Partnerships in the United States* say they are not considering this type of arrangement or prefer an in-house solution.

"The diversity of U.S. higher education institutions calls for equally diverse approaches to pursuing strategic goals of international enrollment," the report says. "The result is a continuum of interest in engaging with third-party pathway providers. Not all institutions need, want, or can engage in third-party pathway partnerships, while for others it may be a mutually beneficial relationship."

The College of Southern Nevada (CSN), which is primarily a two-year college serving students in the Las Vegas area, has its own credit-bearing English as

a Second Language (ESL) program with intermediate and upper-level pathway classes. Agent Partners, a third-party provider, also works with the college to help beginning students qualify for enrollment, but offers no classes on the CSN campus.

"We work hard at keeping our relationships strong," says Mary Sasso, director of the college's International Center. "I'm very satisfied with the caliber of their program and the students they send us."

Tetreau-Segura, on the other hand, says not having a third-party provider gives the University of Arizona "complete academic freedom" and ensures "that our ESL experts are creating the most effective curriculum."

Ohio Northern University serves 2,600 students, only 5 percent of whom come from other countries. Because of its size and culture, Ohio Northern might not be well-served by a third-party provider.

"Our program really is a scaffolded entrance into the university, because it focuses on the campus, the culture, the community, and what's expected in the classroom, along with English language," he says. "We are able to work across the campus with the other faculty and find out what they need us to do so students can finish the program. Within the system we can work the system and help the students get what they need." ■

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