

Cooperation and coordination across Montana State University to better understand and serve international graduate students' academic and career opportunities

I. INTRODUCTION

Public organizations have gained a negative perception of their rigidity and unhurriedness when making decisions and even when executing already-decided plans. Some authors like McSwite (2001) attempt to give context to this reality through what they call “structuralist attitude,” referring to the existence of underlying codes that govern the situations and how we can understand them (p. 113). They also emphasize that some experiences are in fact beyond human comprehension (McSwite’s Mysterian dimension) (p. 114). This last one might be a helpful way to keep our minds open to one reality at Montana State University, and potentially in many other public universities in the United States.

An international student who joins a university in the U.S. to pursue a graduate program is considered an F1 visa holder for the type of authorization they get. This is a student visa that only allows international students to work up to 19.5 hours per week during the Fall and Spring semesters, respectively. Even though there is more flexibility during the summer term, a series of processes are needed to secure compliance with what they are allowed or not to do. Furthermore, these students are limited to only working on campus, and all sources of income are limited. A similar situation occurs with certain funding applications for scholarships or fellowships that mostly, if not only, benefit 1) Undergraduate students and 2) Domestic (U.S. Citizens) students. What happens with those who are 1) Graduate students and 2) International students at MSU, then?

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

This paper examines a case I had the opportunity to be involved in and assess from a close perspective, where a Latino international graduate student obtained a unique opportunity to travel to a conference in Japan to discuss his research findings. However, departments and research labs don't have abundant resources to cover some trip' expenses.

Thus, how can MSU administrators cooperate and collaborate to better serve students with such invaluable career development, research advancement, and networking opportunities when the other on-campus and off-campus resources are not suitable for graduates or international students? How other offices and programs can come up with a plan to create bridges for underrepresented students through affirmative action, better budgeting allocation, and organizational slack knowing those students' needs for their academic and professional development?

III. CASE EXPLANATION

Some weeks ago, I came across a graduate student case, an international student to be more specific, who is a Ph.D. candidate in one STEM-related department. This student, who I will refer to as The Student for this paper, has an outstanding research profile. Evidence of this is his research production in years even before joining MSU, but also because of the awards/recognitions and scholarships he has gotten at this institution. It's also worth mentioning that he is a research assistant and keeps a 3.5 GPA.

One of his latest research papers was accepted at the IEEE World Congress on Computational Intelligence (IEEE WCCI 2024) conference in Yokohama, Japan. This conference is considered the world's largest technical event on computational intelligence which will feature "the three flagship conferences of the CIS under one roof: IJCNN, FUZZ-IEEE and IEEE CEC" (para. 1).

Although this is a unique event that would greatly bolster his networking and professional development, he does not have enough funding to travel and present his research. As a result, besides applying for the travel grant the conference offers, he found himself in a situation of uncertainty due to the total expenses the trip might require from him.

After not receiving a confirmation from the principal investigator and advisor on funding the conference travel, The Student and his advisor agreed to apply to other sources of funding besides the one from the organizers (as the total cost surpasses it). Even though the alternatives were just a handful, he reached out to some of the on-campus resources for travel grants and or diversity-focused funding/sponsorship opportunities:

The Graduate School travel grant, The Empowerment Center travel grant, and The Office of Diversity and Inclusion. The Graduate School awarded him with the \$500 it offers to students who apply and provide justification for the travel. However, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion mentioned they ran off funds for the entire semester (even though the request was sent on March 27). Furthermore, the Empowerment Center replied by stating that the center “focuses its funding on undergraduate students” and that just doesn’t “have a mechanism to fund graduate students,” but they could see if they could leverage \$500 if The Student “secure funding for most of the trip.”

After receiving this feedback from the above-mentioned offices, the outcome seemed inevitable. The Student even reached out to the Office of Research and Economic Development to learn about the options, but the result was that of the introduction part: all were directed towards undergraduates or domestic students. However, there was one office that stepped in. For the sake of keeping this case private, we will refer to it as The Office. Such an office doesn’t have a figure (or “mechanism” as another office mentioned) to financially support students looking for travel grants, but they saw beyond that and tried to help after getting to know how international

conference participation increases MSU's visibility, promotes worldwide connections and aligns with the university strategic plan.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

History and Evolution

Weick (1993) describes a clear example of how not only essential but vital it is to coordinate in a fast-paced environment. Although they talked about cosmology in the big fire disaster, as a phenomenon that shakes people's way to see or understand the world, some elements are shared between that case and a public university administration's organizing and allocation of resources. For example, the need for structures and structuring plays a direct role here as you will notice in the departments and offices involved in the academic and professional development of international students. For Weick (1993), "Meanings affect frameworks, which affect meaning" and that in more shared meanings, more elaborate frameworks of roles happen (p. 645).

Not surprisingly, Lake (2014) expressed what we can certainly affirm, that many, if not all, "our social problems today are characterized by intense disagreement between fragmented stakeholders, multiple and often conflicting objectives" paired with uncertainty, variability, and risk (p. 77). The author went forward and mentioned that in confronting wicked problems, "we are most likely to encounter large epistemological, ethical and political gulfs" (p. 80). However, based on Addams' conception of "Subjective Necessity," Lake (2014) also highlights the need for growing fellowship as a way to expand our ethical framework and build relationships. "Consistently emphasizing one's own point of view over time reduces the likelihood that one builds 'a simple human relationship' with those actors (or staff, administrators) involved in the problem (p. 81).

From other relevant theories, there is that of Cheng (1983). Although the article is a little dated, the author's views on interdependence and coordination in organizations keep having a big impact until today. For instance, Cheng (1983) describes interdependence as the "extent to which the organization's tasks require its members to work with one another" (p. 156) and coordination as how those tasks are performed consistently and coherently among the members. One of the author's main claims is that interdependence is a key moderator of the organization's performance and coordination, as well as in their relationship (p. 161).

Faraj and Xiao (2006) highlighted that the more interdisciplinary and specialized different teams are and the more use of "communication technology," the more need for coordination takes place (p. 1155). In that sense, as a land-grant university with a moderate number of students, MSU is an organization with multiple specialists working towards different goals that might cross paths in special cases, such as the one described in this paper.

V. APPLICATION OF THE THEORY

Surowiecki: Cooperation

Surowiecki's (2004) depiction of cooperation portrays the notion of a collective agreement of integrating efforts towards the same or shared ends (p. 7). In this scenario, an ideal response would have started in the research lab or the department; nevertheless, as the travel grants and other forms of sponsorship should be initiated for the final user, The Student is the one who started to make those connections as a way to co-create a support network.

Conversely, what should have been a great opportunity for a joint series of efforts, ended up being a reference-after-denial practice where The Student witnessed his chances decrease.

Suroweicki: Diversity, Independence

On the other hand, Suroweicki's (2004) concepts of *Diversity* and *Independence* also play an important role in explaining how the theory relates to this case. MSU has *Diversity* as part of the focus on its website and "Inclusion" is one of its core values. MSU's Mission, Vision & Values website states, "We create a civil, supportive and respectful environment where difference and diversity are sources of strength." (para. 12). Even though Suroweicki's definition is more related to specialization, it is worth noting that diversity is also a difference in background, thinking and behaving. Thus, not only do the above-mentioned offices and centers specialize in serving different publics and have diverse funding/sponsorship figures but also people who are decision-makers in those offices have different lenses through which they see the world. Besides, with such a broad pull of expertise, better ways to contribute to closing a gap could occur.

Regarding *Independence*, it refers to when "people's opinions are not determined by the opinions of those around them" (p. 10) and when individuals bring their knowledge and insights to the table. In this particular case, The Office's administrator decided to not see barriers to what type of help they could provide, and the fact that there was no clear figure or form to bring that support didn't prevent them from accomplishing what MSU is for: "transform lives and communities in the people's interest." (Montana.edu, n.d., para. 5). The Office's representative even reached out to other offices in an intent to bring more opportunities to The Student. They were ready to embody the *Cooperation's* goal where multiple units work together towards the same/shared end.

Follet: Law of the situation

In describing this instance, I also include Follet's Law of the Situation. Thinking of it from a different perspective, where it is not just a matter of administrators or program

managers/coordinators mere agency, which includes biases and self-projected limitations, but a matter of what the situation dictates for them to do; I find that resolution as an interesting approach. For Follet (1995), “it is the situation that holds authority, allowing each person to play an appropriate role given the context in a ‘self-generating process’ and a ‘jointly developing power, the aim, a unifying which, while allowing for infinite differing, does away with fighting” (p. 118, as cited in Stout & Staton, 2011, p. 276). For her, the situation involves more elements than we could think of, being “all the factors it holds, including physical, institutional, and human aspects” (Stout & Staton, 2011, p. 274). This is one way to see cooperation and more especially collaboration taking place.

VI. EXECUTIVE ACTION PLAN

1. Affirmative action and MSU’s strategic plan

Different scholars, including Foley and Williamson (2018) discuss how affirmative action plays a fundamental role by aiming to “improve the ability of underrepresented groups to access opportunities and measures that give preferential treatment to individuals in target groups” (p. 36). In that sense, supporting this participation would align with access to better educational and professional outcomes and would also be based on merit. The Student has demonstrated a real commitment to advancing his lab’s reputation and his career. Besides, by doing so, MSU would be executing the following Strategic Plan themes toward diversity and inclusion:

Theme: Campus Climate and Intergroup Relations

Attending and presenting his research will foster network opportunities for himself and other students with underrepresented identities. Having a Latino in such a big gathering of researchers

will serve to meaningfully represent this minority group in STEM research fields. His efforts will transcend the publication itself by being present in a room full of opportunities.

According to Pew Research Center analysis of federal government data, “Hispanic workers make up 17% of total employment across all occupations, but just 8% of all STEM workers” (2022, para. 8). In the same article, people comment on how they wish to see more scientific Latinx to trust more on science, and to feel related to (para. 24-26). Therefore, promoting this type of experience would boost The Student’s way into an academic future as a scientist.

Theme: Education and Scholarship

This would be a faculty-led trip since The Student’s advisor will attend this conference where many fellow doctors and scientists familiar with MSU’s research endeavors will also participate. Thus, the chances of an international network expansion are high, and The Student would serve as a depiction of how an outstanding graduate student in STEM at MSU looks like by embodying our values. By attending and presenting his work, he could foster the integration of new collaborative research projects and, potentially, the recruitment of new faculty and/or graduate students at MSU.

Theme: Access and Success

Montana State University offers multiple benefits for all students; however, it is a fact that some groups are more advantaged and privileged than others. Each student’s opportunities are also framed by their background, their historical representation - or the lack of it- in multiple fields like education, and finances, and how the sum of both plus other elements resulted in their current situations. MSU would be creating a shift into a brighter path; MSU would be intervening.

2. Budget and resources reallocation

Most of the funding the advisor/research lab has comes from research grants. In every grant project, the budget has been already decided and the resources allocated. Thus, even if one of the recommendations from one of the Deans was to “improve faculty’s grant proposals” through better writing techniques, this would be a long shot. Other scholarships are not offered necessarily with the *CatScholarship* system, for example, the one that awards \$10,000 to a prospective student who declares their desire to become a Bobcat (new undergraduate) in social media. The prospective students, most of them domestic high school students, only need to post a picture of themselves and a specific hashtag to be entered into the drawing.

That type of example increases my concerns about budget allocation and where the priorities reside. As my current role in the Graduate School is directly related to recruitment, I understand that efforts in revamping the enrollment and marketing efforts (the additional exposure that those prospective students would be helping us to achieve) are important for MSU. Nevertheless, I have also heard from some current graduate students who lost their assistantships because their advisors or departments don’t have more funds to cover those students' credits and stipends.

I would look for opportunities to discuss these situations, along with the travel grants, and to jointly analyze what offices/departments are struggling to serve their students. It is not a matter of enrolling students and then not fully supporting them. MSU would need to better distribute its resources.

3. Time to create and organize

Lawson (2001) refers to organizational slack as an essential element since it's "necessary to have room to adapt, change, and protect critical processes from environmental turbulence." (p. 126). Therefore, even if the priorities are measured quantitatively, organizational slack opens the possibility of creating qualitative and simultaneously achievable goals. As commented by Lawson (2001), it offers time to learn and time to create knowledge (p. 131). Thus, if the organization is focused on feasible and measurable outcomes (generally in the form of outputs), it is better to start investing in organizational slack.

One way to start doing so is to set up strategic meetings twice a month. I have seen that important meetings are left to only one time per month on key personnel's calendars; however, a sense of urgency and adaptability must prime. Despite the very busy agendas everyone has, we would need a more open disposition to meet and think. Think, listen and co-create.

On a separate note, as sometimes the initiatives and ideas come with an identity, our ego brain might not be too receptive to listening to those. It might be the case that some ideas don't see the light or come to have a clearer shape and therefore support because of personal controversies. This is something to keep an eye on since we might need a mediator to keep the flow of ideas and comments going forward.

VII. LIMITATIONS

I want to acknowledge that universities' funding comes from different sources, including federal and state grants, as well as other outside foundations and donors. Not surprisingly, I have commented on my insights to the extent of what my knowledge allows me to. I have supported my

recommendations and analysis with theory, but it might be the case that some options are not entirely possible due to those funding sources' restrictions.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

Even though The Student doesn't know if he will get the conference's travel grant, which would make up the greatest portion of the expenses, having at least the support of two offices increased his optimism about traveling to Japan and having such a valuable academic and professional opportunity. Besides, it sent an important message about what offices consider possible or a priority.

As learned from the COLEGAS webinar I attended one week ago, creating a welcoming environment it's not the same as avoiding having a threatening environment. Thus, my objective is to try to look for opportunities for those underrepresented and underserved students at MSU, more specifically, international graduate students.

As another element for further consideration, I would raise the question, how can MSU also better fulfill its faculty and staff's needs to better satisfy students' needs? That might be a question for future work on this topic with overlapping topics.

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