

## **Program Proposal and Implementation Plan**

### **I. Introduction about the Agency:**

Our Agency, *Flourish in Your Mission*, has more than a decade of experience serving organizations in the public sector. Our portfolio includes clients from the non-profit sphere and state universities. In our commitment to providing high-quality services, we have created this comprehensive Program Proposal and Implementation Plan for you, the Graduate School of Montana State University, to carefully read and evaluate our next steps. We are confident that you will find this information as valuable and strategic as we do.

### **II. Description of Issue or Problem**

An international graduate student (IGS) at Montana State University, is a student who was issued an I-20 form to obtain a student visa that would allow them to pursue their graduate studies in the United States. By starting the process of moving away from their hometowns and all that they know, many different challenges start emerging during the process of applying, but even more, after being admitted into a program. Some of these include securing housing, an assistantship (if not self-funded), and the culture shock they experience when starting their first semester.

Therefore, we propose creating a program within the Graduate School that could be the first point of contact or a trustful resource for newly admitted international graduate students. The program would provide two services: a) One while the students are still in their home countries, and b) One after they start their classes at MSU. The first service would ensure that IGSs come to the U.S. after completing essential tasks such as securing housing, a source of income, and others that could be coordinated with the Office of International Programs and the students' advisors. This would ensure a smoother and more thoughtful transition. The second service would include frequent

check-ins with the students, the development of a resource plan, and connection with student organizations. By doing that, we would increase the IGSs' sense of belonging, ultimately leading to student success and retention.

### **III. Data used to determine and analyze community needs**

#### **A. Description of the community to be served**

- **Enrollment data**

IGSs come from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Some of them have strong financial and emotional support from their families, but some others come to the U.S. hoping they can start a new life with promising opportunities and earning high-value knowledge. According to the historical trends in the University Data & Analytics site, the number of students who identified as “International” attending MSU kept increasing by the year (Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity & College, table 1). Based on enrollment data from 2023, the total of international students at MSU represents at least 72 countries. Therefore, the trends inform a potential consistency in the growth in the number of students.

- **First-Generation students**

Imagine having to find the courage to start a new life in another country, and, while it might last 2 years in the case of master’s programs or 5-7 years in the case of a doctoral one, it’ll still require the student to make many different sacrifices for the sake of a better life quality. This scenario can be more daunting when being the only person in their families to start a college program, especially a graduate program. According to the most recent MSU’s First-Generation Student Enrollment report, 6.4% of the total first-generation students are graduate students (para. 2). However, we believe there might be an information gap that is not reflecting the international graduate students’ first-generation status since there is a

lack of knowledge and most of the IGSs don't self-identify as a first-gen when filling out their application.

**B. MSU offices' requirements: Current and New**

- **OIP's Financial Certificate:**

The Office of International Programs requires international students to submit a financial certificate. This self-reported document should have attached a letter from the candidate's bank stating their savings. There are exceptions, for instance, when the applicant's offer letter comes with a graduate assistantship. In this case, the offer letter with the assistantship would suffice. However, in other cases, applicants must present their savings attached to the financial certificate.

According to the MSU International Admissions website, the requested amount for Fall 2024 is \$42,933 (for graduate applicants) to cover at least one academic year of expenses related to Tuition and Fees, Room/Board, Books/Supplies, and Health Insurance (International Graduate Student Financial Certificate, p. 2). This amount should be reflected in a letter from their banks. This has increased every year. For Fall 2022, the required amount was about \$32,000.

- **Housing in Bozeman:**

Off-campus housing is considerably more expensive than on-campus options. Even though different housing units have different prices, it is still more affordable than looking for off-campus alternatives. Now, the Housing portal shows a new mechanism for assigning on-campus housing for this 2025 academic year. Rather than a first come first serve process, it will now be a lottery one (Housing Portal, para 1-2).

With this change, having an early start is more than fundamental since some students might need to look for off-campus housing and it could be a lengthy process. This situation leads us to the next point: the need to secure an assistantship promptly.

- **Assistantships at MSU**

Self-funded IGSs won't face issues if they have enough funds to not worry about having an assistantship; nevertheless, in most other cases, pursuing graduate degrees without an assistantship that covers not only tuition but other basic needs through the monthly stipends is not possible. As a result, securing funding is a priority that should be figured out before coming to the United States.

The Graduate School Understanding Costs' website states "Assistantships are a great deal. Students get a monthly stipend, and their tuition is almost always covered" (Understanding Costs, para. 8). This same site portrays the difference between master's and doctoral students with an assistantship, being 10% of the doctoral students those without an assistantship and a very distinctive 60% of master's students without this financial support. Thus, we observe a high competition in obtaining an assistantship in the form of a research assistantship, teaching assistantship, or graduate student assistantship (a more administrative, project-and-degree-focused type of job).

### **C. Importance of addressing this need**

This specific community's needs fall into the Comparative Needs group since the objective is to shed light on the living and educational conditions of this group. "Comparative measures are sometimes used to give high priority to people or communities that are relatively less well off or deemed to be at higher risk than others" (Pawlak & Vinter, 2004, p. 94). The idea is to provide a

set of services. “Service programs are almost continuously being modified, cut back, or started up in response to changing conditions and opportunities.” (Pawlak & Vinter, 2004, p. 6).

Especially since a considerable number of IGSs are first-generation students (probably without their knowledge), adding another layer to the mix. Davis (2010) highlights the need for a first-generation student experience awareness so faculty and staff can serve this group of students better and MSU has proven a high commitment to this student population (Montana State University, para. 2).

- **Office of Diversity and Inclusion retention report**

The retention metrics overview offered by the Office of Diversity website shows a chart the Office of Planning and Analysis provided, showing that there is a slight but consistent decrease in the efficiency of the retention of students with underrepresented races/ethnicities and first-generation. In 2023, the first group got 13.8% of retention and the latter 13.6 % (p. 6).

These numbers inform us of the urgency of planning a program to fulfill IGSs’ needs from an early stage through their program until graduation.

#### **IV. Organizational capacity – About the Graduate School**

- A. **Staff:** The Graduate School has 12 staff members, 5 graduate assistants, and 2 student workers. Its mission is “The Graduate School enriches the graduate student experience by providing excellent service, timely oversight, and relentless advocacy for student success.” (The Graduate School, n.d., para. 3). Besides the Dean and the Associate Dean who oversees more complex Student Affairs and separate from the Program Manager/front desk person and the Business Operations Manager, there are two units.

One of them is the Recruitment and Admissions unit, with a director, 3 admissions coordinators, and two graduate assistants. They engage in the recruitment of prospective graduate students and the processing of admissions applications. The other unit is Student Success and has 3 staff members and 1 graduate assistant. They work with current graduate students, fostering a sense of belonging through events and programs, as well as helping them with their required paperwork (i.e. forms, thesis formatting, etc.)

B. **Environmental Context:** Montana State University, like other universities in the U.S., exists within an environment with multiple arrays. One of them is the Montana University System's Board of Regents (BOR). The BOR Academic, Research and Student Affairs Committee encourages the revision and creation of policies that address student services, college access and success, including that of minorities. More specifically, this new program would fit in the minority-serving students towards college success. (Montana University System, n.d., para. 6).

C. **A needed effort:** In previous meetings and briefs, we have discussed an Eisenhower Matrix assessment and a Public Value Scorecard (Meynhardt et al., 2004) responding to the benefits of addressing these specific set of needs. We have highlighted its usefulness, its decency level, why it is politically acceptable, its profitability and why it will be a positive experience for the beneficiaries.

Hence, we propose that the Graduate School create this program within the Student Success team. For this purpose, we propose hiring two staff members, one director and one program manager, with possible shared funding from offices like the Office of International Programs and other types of revenues. We will provide more explanation of the budget in

the next pages. As of now, below is the description of the services towards newly admitted/first-year IGSs.

#### **V. Services to be Provided – Outcomes, Outputs, and Activities:**

The Graduate School is proud to introduce: “First-year International Graduate Student Support” (1st-year IGS support). There will be two staff members dedicated to serving newly admitted international graduate students. Newly IGSs will now have a specific point of contact to reach out to after being offered admissions and will hold frequent meetings to mark boxes out of their checklists, to be better prepared before moving in MSU. Not only that, but once the semester starts, these students will have more opportunities to have a smoother transition into Bobcat country, build community, find all sorts of resources, and set a solid foundation for their entire graduate journeys.

Considering Pawlak and Vinter’s (2004) framework, we created the following chart. “Each program outcome objective must have related process and output objectives” so that process objectives are operational and procedural-oriented while output objectives pertain to the number of results wanted in a certain period of time (Pawlak & Vinter, 2004, p. 123)

<b>1<sup>ST</sup> YEAR IGS SUPPORT PROGRAM</b>	
<b><u>Before they arrive at MSU</u></b>	<b><u>After they arrive at MSU</u></b>
<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
A better understanding of these priorities thanks to the timely information exchange and close follow-up with the IGSs.	Bigger sense of belonging through the awareness of what’s available at MSU for them (including student organizations connections).
Smoother transition on the overall moving up process and reduced anxiety and culture shock.	Broader knowledge of their resource networks and how to apply/access those from an early stage.

<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Outputs</b>
A higher number of IGSs with secured funding	A higher number of IGSs with a roadmap for their studies
A higher number of IGSs with secured housing	A higher number of IGSs with resource knowledge
<b>Activities</b>	<b>Activities</b>
Timely and consistent communication with the student through emails and scheduled meetings while engaging in cross-departmental communications.	Through regular 1-on-1 meetings, as well as monthly seminars, the students develop their resource map and clearly identify who their point of contact for each need might be. This includes student leaders (from student organizations or peer-mentor volunteers).

Shah et al. (2021) comment that “leaving higher education (1993) has been highly influential; it sees departure, or persistence, as the outcome of integration of students with the academic and social systems of a higher education institution. The model acknowledges that students have different attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experiences and dispositions (intentions and commitments) which influence their integration – and their retention.” (p. 43) The authors also mention that to continue in Higher Education, students need to be integrated into both the academic and social systems of an institution. Thus, our activities for the second stage are based on this claim about the need for better integration in our efforts.

## **VI. Metrics and Tracking**

In the development of our SMARTIE goals, we tried to not only be strategic and ambitious, but also inclusive and equitable. Not surprisingly, we also want to provide the team with essential metrics to measure and track the success of the proposed services. Blake et al. (2024) express that metrics can help establish the value of activities themselves (p. 1). Therefore, we have included some concrete examples for a potential future program evaluation.



**Metrics:**

- Through CollegeNet, the system the Graduate School uses for admissions processes, we could know who are all the IGSs joining the upcoming semester. Through the Housing system, we could count how many of them have already applied for housing. A different process should be considered for off-campus housing.
- Attendance of meetings and deliverables such as resource maps. Others include a plan of studies, class attendance, and retention in general.

**Tracking:**

- Email exchanges with the students, and the abovementioned offices separately. Personalized emails, because automatic emails can be considered spam, and students do not pay attention to long email templates.
- Self-reporting at meetings/seminars. For the course-related tracking, Degreeworks and other information in Banner will be helpful.

**VII. Evaluation Criteria for Successful Implementation – How is the Budget****Budget**

After our previous meetings with the Graduate School Business Operations Manager, we have better understood the revenues and what can be feasible for the start of the program. Furthermore, we have held initial meetings with the Director of Recruitment and Admissions to evaluate the possibility of increasing the application fee from \$70 to \$90 to help cover some of the program's expenses. Thus, here is our revised budget.

Revenues:	Annual
Federal Grants Revenue	90,000
State funds	50,000
Fundraising through the Alumni Foundation and Office of International Programs support	10,000
Application fees (If incremented from \$70 to \$90)	10,000
University Support for software costs (CNET, Banner, Degreeworks, Webex, Microsoft)	10,000
<b>TOTAL REVENUES</b>	<b>170,000</b>
Expenses:	
Program director salary	\$80,000
Program assistant salary	\$60,000
Program events	\$4,000
Contract Services	
Outreach/Advertising	\$1,000
Staff Training	\$4,000
Equipment (computers, desktops)	\$10,000
This may vary after the first equipment is bought	
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>109,000</b>
<b>EXCESS/(DEFICIT)</b>	<b>None</b>

Besides the overall federal and state support and our preliminary plan on the application fee increase, I plan on creating strong and long-lasting connections with the Alumni Foundation donors and building a partnership with the Office of International Programs.

The salaries for the staff were proposed based on what other public organizations offer to their employees. We believe that a program director and a program manager can distribute some of the roles as follows:

Director of the program: Will take half of the number of students to serve in their first year and will oversee building relationships, partnerships, and leading fundraising opportunities. We think that the program can start with 50 students per semester.

Program manager: Will take the other half of the students (25) and will plan and host the seminars as well as other types of events. Bear in mind that the staff will have the support of volunteers who can serve as peer navigators and have multiple roles during bigger events.

**Program Evaluation:**

Our agency recommends performing a Program evaluation to assess the sustainability and impact of the 1<sup>st</sup>-Year IGS support program. That way, we can ensure we are properly satisfying the observed IGSs community needs. Linfield and Posavac (2019) state the relevance of doing so, “The improvement-focused approach, it is argued, best meets the criteria necessary for effective evaluation: serving the needs of stakeholders, providing valid information, and offering an alternative point of view to those doing the really hard work of serving program participants.” (p. 37).

**VIII. Conclusion**

We have described the problem, shown trustworthy data that reflects the IGS community needs, explained the organizational capacity to cover those needs, and presented who IGSs are and why it is institutionally relevant to address their needs. Furthermore, we have exemplified the program’s outcomes, outputs, activities, and the interconnection among them while also providing metrics and tracking systems. Finally, the budget and a recommendation for performing a program evaluation in the future were presented to ensure continuous successful implementation.

Thus, we are open to revisiting some parts of this proposal when your team. Our commitment is to co-create solutions for the evaluated needs of your student population. We appreciate your trust in us and look forward to starting implementing this plan.

## XI. References

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