

# Seeking Best Practices for Career Services to International Students

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May 2016

**ISSS** | International  
Student & Scholar  
Services

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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Published by International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS), a unit of the Global Programs and Strategy Alliance at the University of Minnesota.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

This research project was initiated with a goal to find best practices for international students seeking employment opportunities and for career professionals providing services for international students. One of the motivations to initiate this study was international students' lower satisfaction on career related items on University of Minnesota's results from the International Student Barometer (ISB) in 2013. In 2014, a research team in International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) conducted this study on career services for international students with four research instruments: 1) International student survey of their career experiences/expectations, 2) Internship focus groups and 3) International alumni interviews, and 4) Interviews with career professionals in other institutions about best practices.

## Literature

The literature on the topic shows there needs to be more research on international students' vocational situations as one of their motivations to study abroad reflects their desire to broaden their employment opportunities (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Hazen & Alberts, 2006; Obst & Forster, 2005). The existing studies examined the needs of international students' career development, their decision-making process and influence factors. According to Popadiuk and Arthur (2013), international students' decision making process is, rather, a collective endeavor they do with people whom they have relationships with, in both their home and host countries. Knowing the unique vocational situations of international students will help career professionals in meeting their particular needs of career development and their transition from university to workforce (Popadiuk, 2008).

## Findings: Best Practices for International Student Career Services

### International Student/ Alumni Best Practices

International students and graduates of University of Minnesota, Twin Cities (UMN-TC) found internships and jobs in various ways. Themes around the international students' best practices of securing internships and jobs include 1) attending career events and being involved in campus life, 2) utilizing internet resources for job search, 3) using their personal network of people, and 4) showing their best academic and career performances. Here are quotes from participants about how they found jobs:

*"I attended my department job fair to be connected with people who were working for companies of my interest."*

*"I got my internship through a project. I presented this project to a group of engineers and one of them who liked my project offered an internship."*

Many successful international students and alumni found the university services, programs, and resources helpful for their career development. They identified career events and workshops, mentorship, internship classes, online resources, and student clubs as most helpful. However, international students wished they had opportunities to connect with international alumni and employers who would hire international students/ graduates. They suggested that university staff receive training on the needs of international students and clarify the differences in services between Career Centers and International Student and Scholar Services.

### **Career Professional Best Practices**

Career professionals in selected institutions identified their challenges and strategies for providing career services to their international students. The research team identified ten higher education institutions that are well known among peers and professional associations for being leaders or having innovative programs in their career services for international students. Challenges related to international student career services include immigration policy, employers' mindset, students' expectations, and organizational structures. The themes that emerged for the best practices from the ten institutions are as following:

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Best Practices</b>
<b>Collaboration</b>	Promoting collaboration between career services, ISSS, international students, employer relations, and alumni association
<b>Communication with International Students</b>	Increasing visibility of services through new student orientation or use of website, blogs and social media (Facebook, Twitter, Kakao Talk, LinkedIn, and WeChat)
<b>Programs/Workshops</b>	Offering workshops on job search skills tailored to the needs of international students, lists of employers who hired international students; focusing on global career development
<b>Career Events</b>	Networking with international alumni and international student-friendly employers
<b>Employer Relations</b>	Building relations with international student friendly employers, and developing/offering employer guides, handbooks, workshops, webinars, newsletters, and meetings
<b>Staff Training</b>	Providing staff training on cross-cultural communication, immigration policy, and tips of working with international students; offering overseas trips to career staff

### **Conclusion**

Findings suggest that it is important for international students to be involved in campus life to build a network, gain work experiences, and know about one's career passion and related job search process (including work authorization options). The biggest challenges experienced by students and alumni are identified as 1) knowing about the job search process and 2) having to deal with employers who lack information about hiring international students. Successful students and alumni, however, secured internships and full-time employment by utilizing career services

(career events on-campus and internet resources), personal networks (professors, friends, and mentors) and showing their best academic and career performances.

Additionally, findings from the interviews with career professionals suggest career professionals collaborate with other related units, such as international student services, employer relations, and alumni association to build a supportive community for international students' career development. Successful career professionals also identified the importance of collaborating with international student groups on campus and using various means to communicate with them through social media, such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Lastly, career workshops, programs and events need to be tailored in which international students can develop their job search skills in the U.S. and make global connections with international alumni and employers to expand their employment opportunities.

## **BACKGROUND**

At the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities (UMN-TC), the need to better understand the vocational situations of international students arose as the number of international undergraduate students dramatically increased more than fivefold in the past decade from less than 500 in 2007 to more than 2700 in 2015. With this change, career professionals wanted to deliver services to this group to address students' difficulty getting jobs and their higher demand and usage of career services in some colleges. At the same time, the UMN-TC's results of 2013 International Student Barometer (ISB), a measure of international student satisfaction, showed that international students in UMN-TC had lower satisfaction rates on career related items than most other items (ISB, 2013). This provided further evidence of the need for more focus on addressing the career needs of international students.

The literature on international students suggests that they decide to study abroad with the hope of quality education, cross-cultural experiences, and a better trajectory of career path (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Hazen & Albert, 2006; Obst & Forster, 2005; Wadsworth et al, 2008). However, there is a lack of research on international students' vocational situations as they were traditionally viewed as sojourners who came for a foreign degree and would eventually return to their home country after graduation (Pedersen, 1991). Scholars argued that most research focused on problems of cultural adjustment in their initial stage of study abroad and there is less attention on their career development and later transition from a university to workforce (Popadiuk, 2008; Popadiuk & Arthur 2013; Arthur, 2007; 2008).

Most related studies on international students' career development examined their career needs, decision-making process and influence factors. International students need career guidance that can help them explore future options and facilitate their career decision-making process. Although career expectations and experiences of individual international students can vary, it is important to keep in mind that their situation is significantly different from American domestic students. For example,

international students have to make the decision of staying in the host county or returning home. The following table shows the needs of students depending on the decision (Arthur & Nunes, 2014; Spencer-Rodgers, 2000):

The Needs Of International Students Returning Home	The Needs Of International Students Remaining In Host Country
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for sense of loss about leaving the host county</li> <li>• Reentry adjustment</li> <li>• Resources and strategies               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accurate occupational information in the context of home county</li> <li>- Professional network in home country</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work experiences &amp; work authorization</li> <li>• Career planning and preparation               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Job opportunities and knowledge of immigration regulations</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Job search skills               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Job search process &amp; strategy</li> <li>- Cultural differences in writing resume/ curriculum vitae and interviewing</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

According to Popadiuk and Arthur (2013), international students' decision making process is rather collective endeavor with people who they have relationships with in both their home and host countries. Although some international students decide to return to their home countries for family and community obligations (Shen & Herr, 2004), studies showed that many international students are interested in finding employment opportunities in the host country (NCDA, 2014; Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). Additionally, international students' career outcome expectations were related to the degree of their acculturative distress: the lower the career outcomes with the higher acculturative distress and/or intercultural competence concerns (Reynolds & Constantine 2007). Overall, the decision of international students is on-going and multi-layered considering economic, professional, societal and personal factors (Hazen & Alberts, 2006).

It is important for career professionals to know the unique vocational situations of international students to meet their particular career development needs and their transition from university to workforce (Popadiuk, 2008). Some specific challenges of international students include professional networks and accurate vocation information for home country job search as well as work authorization and cultural differences in the hiring process for the host country job search (Arthur & Nunes, 2014; Spencer-Rodgers & Cortijo, 1998). Some implications for career professionals from the literature include 1) being mindful of assumptions in the theories and models that guide career counselors in their practices and 2) being encouraged to explore the strengths of international students and avoid labeling them as having deficits (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2013). Finally, career professionals need to be reminded that international students' experience varies as do their career choice and development process (Shen & Herr, 20014).

## PROCESS

In 2014, International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) formed a research team to identify best practices of international students' finding employment opportunities and best practices of career professionals' assisting international students' career development. In this process, ISSS also consulted with representatives from the Career Development Network (CDN), a network of career professionals on UMN-TC campus, in order to conduct a study that could best assist their work of providing career counseling to international students<sup>1</sup>. In the fall of 2014, this mixed-method study was launched with four instruments to explore the international undergraduate students' experiences of career development as well as the best practices for meeting the career needs of undergraduate international students at other institutions. The four instruments of this study include:

1. International student survey of career experiences/expectations
2. Focus groups with international students who found internships
3. Interviews with international alumni who found full-time jobs
4. Interviews with career professionals in other institutions about best practices

The participants, and specifics of the data collection process, and the contents of each instrument are as follows:

	UMN-TC International Student Data			Institutional Data
	Career Survey	Internship Focus Groups	Alumni Interviews	Institutional Interviews
<b>Participants</b>	417 international students at UMN-TC who were enrolled in undergraduate programs	19 int'l students at UMN-TC who had internship in Summer 14	11 undergraduate int'l alumni who graduated, currently working full-time	10 career professionals/ administrator in higher education
<b>Process Of Finding The Participants</b>	36 questions were assembled in Qualtrics and distributed to all undergraduate int'l students (2,730).	117 int'l students who applied for CPT summer 2014 were invited to participate in focus groups.	About 30 recent international alumni were contacted based on recommendations of int'l students and university staff.	15 institutions were contacted based on the recommendations of NCDA and NAFSA international student career working group
<b>Characteristics Of The Participants</b>	Freshmen to seniors 43 different countries 9 different colleges	Sophomore to seniors 8 different countries 4 different colleges	International alumni 2012-2015 7 different countries 4 different colleges 9 working in the U.S. and 2 in their home country	Four year colleges and universities Mix of private and state institutions 9 in the US and 1 in Australia

<sup>1</sup> Advisory Board Members from CDN include Maggie Kubak (Career and Internship Services), Becky Hall (Office of Student Affairs) and Xiaoji Zhang (Carlson School of Management).



# FINDINGS

## UMN-TC International Student Data

There are three different data sets for UMN-TC international students' experiences and best practices related to their perspectives and experiences of career development and career needs. While the career survey data provides broad perspectives of the students' perspectives and experiences, both focus group and alumni interview data sets provide more specifics of how the participants were able to secure their internship and full-time employment opportunities. All three data sets were collected and analyzed between September 2014 and February 2015. Each research instrument's contents and finding highlights are as follows:

Career Survey	Focus Group	Alumni Interview
Career Experiences	Timeline of the Internship Search	Timeline of Job Search
Career Plan	Helpful Resources	Helpful Resources
Career Decisions	Experienced Challenges	Experienced Challenges
Perceived Challenges	Suggestions for Career Services	Suggestions for Other Students
Cultural Differences	Suggestions for the University	Transition Experiences
Use of Career Services		Future Plan

## Career Survey Highlights

### Background Information

- Top 3 participants' country of origin: China (49%), Korea (16%), and Malaysia (10%)
- Top 3 participants' college: College of Liberal Arts (55%), College of Science and Engineering (21%), Carlson School of Management (9%)
- Top 5 participants' career experiences: Volunteer (67%), Student group (53%), On-campus job (43%), Internship outside of the U.S. (31%), and Internship in the U.S. (13%)

### Career Plan and Decisions

- 92% of the participants plan to find an internship before graduation.
- 75% of the participants hope to work in the U.S. after they graduate.
- Top 3 influencing people for career decisions: Myself (56%), Family (32%), and Faculty (7%)
- Top 3 people who participants rely on for career decisions: Myself (49%), Family (32%), and Career Counselor (9%)
- Top 3 important factors (multiple choice): Salary, Opportunity for Career Advancement, and Job Content

### **Top 3 Challenges that the Participants Encountered in their Job/ Internship Search**

- Visa Status (36%)
- Language Proficiency (18%)
- Lack of Connections (10%)

### **Cultural Differences**

- Top 3 employers' values in candidates in home country: Relevant skills and Backgrounds (44%), Networking (22%) and GPA (22%)
- Top 3 employers' values in candidates in the U.S.: Relevant skills and backgrounds (55%), Networking (17%) and Personality (14%)

### **Use of Career Services**

- Familiarity: About half (49%) of the participants were not familiar with Career Services before coming to the U.S..
- Usage rate: Only 27% of the participants reported having used Career Services before.
- Knowledge of career professionals: 52% of the participants thought that staff in Career Services are either very knowledgeable or knowledgeable about the needs of international students.

## **Focus Group Highlights**

### **Timeline of the Internship Search**

- Participants started to look for an internship as early as the first semester in their freshman year.
- Participants kept looking and spent about one to two semesters to search for their internship and prepare for the application.

### **Helpful Resources**

- Participants utilized various career services and university resources to find their internship including on campus job fairs, career workshops, and information sessions, resume writing, career classes, mock interview, and video materials.
- Participants mentioned websites (UMN-TC Goldpass, UMN-TC Edge, LinkedIn, Glassdoor, Google), and personal network (advisors, career coaches, professors, friends, mentors) as most helpful resources.
- Participants identified the importance of company research. It was helpful to learn about the company online and by networking with professionals in the company.

## Challenges that Participants Experienced

- Participants identified their biggest challenges as the limitation of their immigration status and communicating with companies about it.

Participant Quotes:

*“Companies directly say that they do not want to look at your resume just because of your status”.*

*Helping the companies understand what CPT was: “Recruiters said they did not know what CPT was and their HR did not know”.*

- Other challenges were mentioned around ‘feeling lost in the process’, ‘interview format and questions’, ‘decentralized structure of the university’, and ‘hearing discouraging remarks’.

## Participants’ Recommendation to UMN-TC

- Participants recommended the University:
  - a. Outreach to new international students and provide workshops for their needs early on
  - b. Provide staff training on international students’ needs and internship requirements
- Participants recommended Career Services:
  - a. Find international-student-friendly employers through international alumni networks
  - b. Make internship credit policies and career options more flexible
- Participants recommended that International Student and Scholar Services
  - a. Develop more online resources for international student career development
  - b. Provide workshops on cultural aspects of working in the U.S.
  - c. Make the CPT process more transparent and its logistics smoother

## Recommendations for Other International Students

- Know what you want for your career:
- Start early and be strategic by knowing CPT regulations and process, and utilizing career services
- Network with people in the field of your career interests
- Know about the U.S. work culture such as professional behaviors and attire in your field
- Gain experiences and know what aspects of your experience will sell you better

## Alumni Interview Highlights<sup>2</sup>

### Timeline of the job search

- Many international alumni participants got their full time job offer through their internship.
- Participants had a specific career path to pursue from their freshman to senior year.

### Helpful Resources

- Different fields of work required different job search strategies, however, overall the participants noted being proactive, asking questions, showing interest, and building relationships were valuable.
- Job search strategies also varied from applying to as many openings as possible to having someone well-known in the field make a referral.
- Participants mentioned the importance of knowing about the field and being connected with other people, such as former classmates, professors, mentors and professionals in the field.

### Challenges that Participants Experienced

- Being unfamiliar with the job search process
- Finding a company that would hire international student/graduate

### Transition from University to Work

- Participants said that they do not have control over their time as full-time workers.
- They had to learn the work culture, the language, and develop their work ethic.
- A participant who went back home mentioned the importance of learning how people communicate with different people with different backgrounds.

### Future Plans

- Participants reported that they are satisfied with their decision to stay in the U.S. for their work.
- Some participants showed their interest in pursuing higher degrees while or after their current employment.
- Participants mentioned that they are open to going back home at some point of their career and continuously being involved in the U.S. and their home country.

### Suggestions for Other International Students<sup>3</sup>

- Be flexible by taking the opportunities that come to you as that can lead to other opportunities.

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<sup>2</sup> Full profiles at [z.umn.edu/jobintlalumni](http://z.umn.edu/jobintlalumni)

<sup>3</sup> In addition to items mentioned in Focus Group on p 11

- Start building relationships with your professors, classmates and mentors and stay connected.
- Do not give up! Job search may take longer time and more preparation than you anticipated.

### **Data from Interviews with Career Professionals in Other Institutions**

Career professionals in other institutions were interviewed in order to identify best practices of providing career services to international students. The search of institutions with exemplary services for international students' career was facilitated by the working groups of international student career development in NAFSA: Association of International Educators and National Career Development Association (NCDA). Some of the institutions were recommended by the career professionals who were interviewed. These recommendations were made based on the reputation of career professionals in that institution for his/her international student career development efforts. The interview participants were career professionals with positions of a career advisor, a career counselor, a director/ manager in an office of career services or international student services in the following institutions:

1. Michigan State University
2. University of Illinois in Urban Champaign
3. Colorado State University
4. Johnson and Wales University
5. University of Colorado at Boulder
6. University of California in Berkeley
7. Purdue University
8. St. Louis University
9. Cornell University
10. University of South Australia

All the interviews were semi-structured and lasted for about one hour by phone or Skype video conference call. The interview questions were formed around three main topics: 1) career professionals' experiences of working with international students, 2) their experiences of working with employers and 3) collaborating with other service units on their university campuses. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in word documents for data analysis<sup>4</sup>. Three research assistants reviewed the transcriptions and compiled the summary of each institution's report<sup>5</sup>. The contents of the summary report was shared and checked by the interviewees

<sup>4</sup> Transcriptions support is from Drew Smith (International Student and Scholar Services), Raven Herson Ortolan (Carlson School of Management), James Armstead and Amanda Cohen.

<sup>5</sup> Research analysis assistant team include Fen Chen (Graduate School), Xi Yu (International Student and Scholar Services), and Jasmine Trang Ha (Minnesota Population Center).

throughout. For the data analysis, the research assistants were involved in determining initial coding, and then developed themes around the best practices of providing career services to international students.

## **Career Professional Interview Highlights**

### **Background Information**

- The number of international students which the institutions host vary in the range of 1,100 to 9,900.
- Six out of the ten institutions have a position dedicated for international student career development.
- Three out of the ten institutions discussed their state government's initiative to retain international students after graduation.

### **Best Practices**

1. Collaboration
  - a. Most indicated collaboration between the Career Services and International Student Services for creating and providing workshops or programs.
  - b. Other important collaborations for career services were mentioned as partnering with international student groups and other campus service units, such as ESL programs, writing centers, libraries, alumni associations and employer relations.
2. Communication With International Students
  - a. Diversified means of communication were mentioned as effective ways to communicate with international students for outreach and increased the visibility of career services:
    - i. Website for international student career services
    - ii. E-newsletter for international student career
    - iii. Use of social media (blog, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, WeChat)
3. Career Services Tailored For International Students
  - a. Programs and workshops that are specifically for international students' career development were mentioned:
    - i. Handbooks for international student career
    - ii. International student mentoring program
    - iii. International student career certificate program
    - iv. Workshop series on job search skill and global career
  - b. Networking And Career Events For International Students Were Also Mentioned:

- i. Networking events with international student-friendly employers
  - ii. Networking with successful international students and alumni
  - iii. Career fair for international career path
4. Employer Relations
  - a. In order to build relations with employers for international students' career, the following practices were mentioned:
    - i. Employer guide, handbook, resources to hire international students
    - ii. Workshops, webinar, newsletter, and one-on-one meetings with employers
    - iii. Building relations with international student-friendly employers
5. Staff Training
  - a. Staff networking among career staff and other professionals was identified as helpful to share information and resources.
  - b. Staff and faculty overseas trip to understand the educational market and culture can be helpful.
  - c. Staff training contents may include cross-cultural communication, work authorization and immigration policy, and any tips on how to work effectively with international students.
6. Challenges
  - a. The most mentioned challenges for career professionals are dealing with international students' expectations in terms of job search timeline, process and the reality of job market.
  - b. Another major challenge is that employers do not necessarily see the benefits of hiring international students.
  - c. Challenges at the organizational level include lack of focus and connection for international employer relations, lack of personnel, time, and resources, and reluctance to change and transparency.
  - d. More broadly, the challenge lies on the immigration policy related to the limited number of work visas that international graduates can obtain.
7. Future Plans
  - a. Most participants mentioned their plan to continue their successful practices that support international student career development.
  - b. Participants also mentioned their plan to look into more ways to collaborate with other campus service units.
  - c. New ideas for international students' career include trying to use the institution's overseas office for career services and preparing students for global careers.





# CONCLUSION

## International Student Best Practices

This study examined the UMN-TC international students' career experiences and carefully selected career professionals' best practices in providing career services to international students. We found that UMN-TC international students' interest and intention to stay in the U.S. after their graduation was high. Our successful students and alumni secured employment opportunities with the following best practices: attending career events, utilizing internet resources, using their personal network and showing their best performances. The study participants also recommended the following to other international students who are seeking employment opportunities.

- Know what you want for your career
- Start early and be strategic by knowing work authorization regulations and application process and utilizing career services
- Network with people in the field of your career interests
- Know about U.S. work culture such as professional behaviors and attire in your field
- Gain experiences and know what aspects of your experience will sell you better
- Be flexible by taking the opportunities that come to you as they can lead to other opportunities
- Start building relationships with your professors, classmates and mentors and stay connected
- Do not give up! Job search may take longer time and more preparation than you anticipated

In addition, this study explored the specific needs of international students' career development. The two biggest challenges that the study participants experienced are 1) knowing about the job search process and 2) having to deal with employers that lack information of hiring internationals or have policies that prohibit international undergraduate students/ alumni. The findings provide the following suggestions for international student career development:

Suggestions To The Universities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach to new international students and provide workshops for their needs early on</li> <li>• Provide staff training on international students' needs and internship requirements</li> <li>• Develop more online resources for international student career development</li> <li>• Make internship credit policies flexible</li> </ul>	
Suggestions To Career Services	Suggestions To International Student Services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find international-student-friendly employers through international alumni network</li> <li>• Help students be creative and think broader about their job options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide workshops on cultural aspects of working in the U.S.</li> <li>• Make CPT process more transparent and its logistics smoother</li> </ul>

Overall, successful UMN-TC students and alumni indicated that it would be helpful for international students to have career events and fairs with an international focus. They shared how it would be better if the campus service units are better aware of their vocational needs related to their work authorization, such as CPT. They also wanted to have a clear idea of the differences in career related services offered by Career Services and International Student and Scholar Services. Most of the participants remained open to future career opportunities in their home countries and showed their hope to make contributions to both the U.S. and their home countries and connections between the two.

### Career Professional Best Practices

The findings of this study illustrate how career professionals experienced challenges and developed best practices and future plans of providing career services to their international students. As they work with multiple parties such as international students and employers, the challenges they experienced in their effort to support international students' career development are multi-layered. The findings of career professionals' experiences including their experienced challenges are summarized in the following:

Challenges	Best Practices	Future Plans
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International students' expectations</li> <li>• Employers' reluctance to hire international students</li> <li>• Institutions' lack of focus, connections, personnel, resources, time, and reluctance to change</li> <li>• Immigration regulations and limited number of work visa</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Communication with international students via social media</li> <li>• Programs and workshops tailored to the needs of international students</li> <li>• Career events with international alumni and employers</li> <li>• Building relations with international employers</li> <li>• Staff training on cross-cultural communication, immigration policy, and tips of working with international students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue their international student career programs and services</li> <li>• Look into more ways to collaborate with other campus units</li> <li>• Use overseas office for career services</li> <li>• Prepare international students for global career</li> </ul>

In terms of the best practices of career professionals, the findings suggest they collaborate with other related units, such as international student services, employer relations, and alumni association to build a supportive community for international students' career development. Successful career professionals also identified the importance of collaborating with international student groups on campus and using various means to communicate with them through social media, such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Lastly, career workshops, programs and events need to be tailored from which international students can develop their job search skills in the U.S. and make global connections with international alumni and employers to expand their employment opportunities.

The work of the career professionals for providing services to international student is on-going and evolving. Most participants mentioned their plan to continue their successful practices, such as international student career programs and services and look into more ways to collaborate with other units on campus. Some innovative plans include their plan to utilize their overseas office for their students' career services and prepare them to have global career development that goes beyond the national boundaries of the U.S. and their home countries.

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