

Welcome to everybody. Thank you so much for joining us in the celebration of international students. Joining me today, I'm coming from the Verbit team. I am absolutely thrilled to be part of the Verbit team. Prior to becoming to Verbit, I spent about 10 years in higher education working in undergraduate admissions. I spend majority of that time working with minority students, including adult transfer, military, and minority populations. I also picked Julie's brain as much as possible to learn about international students.

I'm thrilled to be sharing, knowing my passion for working with minority students but sharing more about, minority students within higher education. My work with Verbit, I am a Customer Success Manager. I work with partners within our EDU space. Verbit works with the captioning accessibility. Prior to coming to Verbit, I do have my undergrad degree in American Sign Language Interpreting. I like to say Verbit is my dream role where you get combined accessibility with higher education

and still get to work with our amazing university partners. I'm absolutely thrilled to be joined today with my mentor, Julie Merendino. We've had the privilege of working together at American University. She's really just somebody I looked up to in International Admissions and the profession in general. I could not be more excited that she's joining us today to share her knowledge and expertise when it comes to international students. I could go on and on about how much I appreciate and admire her.

But I'll turn over to her to give a little bit of background.

Yes. Thank you so much, Lindsay. Thank you for inviting me to this webinar. I'm so delighted to speak about International Admissions, including international students and supporting them through the admissions process. Thank you for inviting me and thank you to Verbit for hosting us in honor of international students. It's such an important day and it is such an important part of our campus environment. It's wonderful that you're honoring them today, celebrating them. Yes, I've worked with international students for about 15 years. I've worked at three different institutions with very different environments.

But I've always been working with students who are coming to the US from all around the world. It's specifically at American University right now. I'm working with students who come from Europe and from Africa. What I've recruited I'd work with students

from all of the major markets around the world,

and I will tell you that if you've worked

with one international student, you've worked with one international student. I don't know everything. Every day I am encountering a new scenario that I have to puzzle through with the support of my team and figure out how to make our process more accommodating, more accessible to more students. It's something that we are constantly striving for in our process. I will be the first to tell you that I don't know

everything and I will happily share my experiences, but I'm looking forward to learning

from experiences of the group today. I know that in the virtual audience, you've got a lot of different perspectives. We've got a lot of different experiences and so I hope that this can be an open conversation where people will share their, not only their concerns, their questions, but also their experiences, what's working well for them, what they've done that's really made sure that their campus, their processes have been inclusive for their international students. Happy to be here sharing, but also learning today.

Great. Thank you, Julie. I do appreciate you bringing up. If you have questions or conversation starters that you would like to bring up throughout the presentation, feel free to drop those in the chat or the question answer session, and [inaudible 00:03:47] and I will be monitoring that as Julie shares her expertise. But when we're thinking about International Student Day, one of the reasons why I wanted to bring this up to our Verbit community is because there's a lot of things changing and happening within the international student community

and a lot of these things when you're talking about a higher education institution, there is a lot of things that are on the table. A lot of times these marginalized populations don't get the attention that they deserve. Thinking about International Student Day, there is a lot of challenges that are happening and these challenges change year by year, day-by-day, policy by policy. There is a lot of things that you really have to keep your thumb on and keep them in the back of your mind. Today, some things that we're going to be thinking about and discussing is,

how to attract students to your colleges? Like Julie said, she's been working in the field for 15 years on a variety of different universities, and so her experiences range from American University that has a really robust international student population. I'm just list some smaller institutions that might not have the resources that American University would have. Then once they arrive on campus, how do you include them in the classroom? How do you make sure that their voice and their experiences are shared amongst their peers?

On top of that, how do you retain them from year to year? It's daunting to be in a different country so far away from your family and your community and what you know as home. How do you make sure that they not only feel welcomed, but included and part of the campus community? Another big issue that comes up with international students, is sometimes even more so than domestic students, is this decision to go internationally as a family decision. How are you going to make sure that your child is safe so far away?

There is a lot of family concerns, there is additional concerns that you might not be thinking about when you're thinking about domestic students. We'll talk about how the family interacts and plays a part in the decision or the student's decision on to study abroad. There is also a lot that's come up these past couple years about COVID restriction, travel bans, fares. Students might not even be able to come to the

United States. What does that look like? Does that look like doing school remotely?

Are they still here in the US but they're doing remote classes? Some institutions have been opening up just for international students. There is a variety of different ways that institutions have been looking at COVID restrictions and making their education still accessible and available to international students. Then finally, keeping up with trends and remaining competitive within the market, there is a growing need and want for international students as domestic enrollment declines. A lot of schools are

starting to turn their attention towards international students and so it becomes more and more competitive in the market place. Today, we're going to be talking about how to remain competitive, whether it's a few little things that you can do or a larger campus community conversation, but just how do you stay on top of things and making sure that your competitive within the space.

Let me go ahead and turn it over to Julie, who's going to be talking about American University and where they stand within the space, giving you a little background there. That'll lay the groundwork for our conversation. Without further ado, Julie, go ahead.

Yeah. Thanks, Lindsay. Yeah, you're absolutely right on all of those challenges that we're facing. We have been looking forward to digging into some of those with the group. To give you some context for the American University international student environment, we are welcoming a lot of students from all around the world. I mean, and part of that is due to our location. We are in a really diverse, cosmopolitan international city of Washington DC, and our campus reflects that. We've got 16 percent of our undergraduate students from around the world,

13 percent of our graduate students. But that's going to include our short-term scholars, our study abroad students, and 130 different countries are represented on campus. That's something that I've really liked about the AU International Student community is that it is so diverse. There's no one country that's dominating the international student population. Certainly, there are countries that send more than other countries. But we've always had just a handful of students from all different kinds of pockets. That makes it such a dynamic environment,

all sorts of different voices and perspectives in the classroom. That's something that is one of my most favorite things about American University's international students is that they are from so many different places and they're coming to our campus and really enriching the environment. A fun fact I love to share is that there wasn't international student in our first graduating class. This is something that's always been top of mind for AU, is making it a welcoming environment for international students. Now, I'm going to share a little bit about how we

approach inclusion for our international students through our admissions process. Again, I'll put it out that I'm coming from the admission space, and I know that there are audience members that are coming from other spaces and thinking about

different ways they make their campus inclusive. Of course, please, I'm going to reiterate Lindsay's encouragement. Please share in the chat what you're doing to make your particular space, your particular environment more inclusive for international students, how you're supporting them,

and then we can all benefit from the wisdom of the group.

I would love to hear what you are doing in your processes in your universities. But at American University from our admissions' perspective, we are thinking about inclusion, thinking about supporting international students through all parts of the application process. From recruitment from day 0 before they even, they're just thinking about applying to AU through yield, when they have their admission decision in hand, and they're thinking,

"Gosh, is AU the right school for me?"

We're thinking about inclusion through all parts of that process. For recruitment and yield, really the sales part of our process. It starts with our communication plan. Right at the beginning, we're thinking who are we speaking to, and what content do they need? We're making sure we're sending out personalized communications as much as possible. It's not one size fit all. Student, your application is incomplete. No. It's, dear Stacy, your application is missing this specific thing.

This is our policy on English proficiency. These are the varieties of ways you can meet our English proficiency requirement. We want to make this as specific as personalized as possible. We also want to make sure it's not just what's in the message, but who's getting that message? As Lindsay mentioned earlier, most of the students I'm working with, they're not applying independently to our universities. They're not just picking American University at random or on their own and

coming back to their parents with their admissions decision saying, "Hey, I got into an American University. Let's make this work." It is really something that is a community process right from the beginning. From the beginning with our communications, we need to be including that community. We have communications that are going out to parents, to school counselors that we have that contact information, and we're letting them know, okay, yes, this is what is missing in the application process, but also this is who you can contact.

I'm Julie Merendino. If you are coming to us from Malawi, if you're coming to us from France, I am your admissions representative. I'm the person that you can speak to about your child or your student's application process. Making sure that they have personalized communications, they have somebody that they can speak to directly at American University, that is key for success in our international recruitment process and making sure that the whole community knows that they are seen and that they are part of this process.

We also leverage our current international students in our recruitment process. We use peer recruitment. We are so lucky, we have our international students on

campus, and a core of them have volunteered to be part of our recruitment and yield processes. They've been trained to student interviews. They reach out for one-on-one contact with our prospective students. They can reach out via WhatsApp or text or email, whatever is most comfortable for both parties. They also lead virtual small groups

for our international students. A lot of connections between current and prospective students so that a prospective student can see, "Okay, this is what it would look like to be a student at American University." Not just a student, but an international student. This is somebody who's walked in that path before. They've gone through a visa interview, they've had to be new on-campus. They've had to walk into a very unfamiliar classroom environment, very different classroom environment than what I'm used to, so what does that look like.

These peer recruiters are so integral in our process and making sure that international student feels very comfortable and confident in the process. Then we're engaging them in all sorts of different modes. We're engaging them wherever they're at. Like I said, the peer recruiters are reaching out via WhatsApp and text and email. But we're hosting webinars. We are hosting virtual interviews, and when we can travel again, we'll probably travel and

do fairs and interviews in person and set up shop at school cafeteria, just like we do here in the US. As many touch points as possible is what we're looking for so that we're always thinking, where are the students and where can we meet them? We don't have to want to make them come to us if we can possibly make ourselves available to them where they are already at. That's our recruitment and yield process. Just some highlights of ways that we are making it a more inclusive process.

But it absolutely plays a role in our application process as well when it comes to international students. Every day, like I said, you're always encountering different kind of obstacles, different challenges for international students when they're coming to the application process, and it's our job to think critically about how does AU meet? What do we exactly need to make an admission decision? How much information do we actually need in order to assess if a student's

going to be successful and a match for American University? First of all, on deadline expectations. You have to think about where the students are coming from in the world and what the application process to university would be like where they are. In most countries in the world, applying to university is very streamlined. You're applying, you're using your exit or entrance exam,

and score from that one exam

will just tell you what tier of

schools or what specific schools you're allowed to attend, and it's very straightforward. In the US, we all know it's very different than that. We've got 4,000

of us that you're thinking about applying to, and we're all doing it very differently, so isn't that nice? We have one English proficiency policy and the school down the street has a completely different English proficiency policy and students are trying to keep all of this straight. In our application process,

we have to be very transparent and we have to be very patient and make sure that we are communicating what we're expecting from them, when we're expecting it from them, and what exactly we need from them. Do we need four years of high school, secondary school transcript, or can we get by with the exit exams from Grade 10 and Grade 12? Would that work for our process? How do we make this inclusive throughout the application process so that everybody

feels like this person sees me, they understand the context that I'm coming from, and they are going to mold this process for me as much as possible? Those are some things that we're doing throughout the admission cycle when it comes to our international applicants.

Great. Perfect. Thank you, Julie. I appreciate that. There's a lot to think about in the admission's process. Even before they come to campus, there's a lot that goes into that thought process of why are we even looking for students? What are they looking for? How are they approaching the process of selecting a school? How can we meet them where they're at? I have a couple of questions for you, and our panelists, or our guests, feel free to

drop your own questions in the question and answer. But I want to roll through a couple of questions that we hear often in our role here at Verbit. Overall, just in your experience, what are some of the trends that you are seeing in international education?

Well, first of all, there's just the shift in the demographics, especially this last year. Many schools were primarily relying on China when it came to their international student enrollments. After post-COVID, even with travel restrictions being lifted, Chinese students are apprehensive about coming to the US. They are not feeling as confident about safety in the US,

wanting to be in the US. That's something you just missed last year where there are many schools that have taken a hit from one of their most robust to international student populations. That's why it's always important. It's always something that we're always talking about is diversifying as much as possible when it comes to your international student enrollment. One huge trend in the last year is that you may not be seeing your Chinese student populations coming to the US, they might be looking at Australia, the UK, even the Netherlands.

The rise of the Netherlands is something that I'm always dealing with my international students. The Netherlands, their university recruitment process has been so robust, so streamlined for international students that I find one more every year.

I have students who say, no,

I'm going to go to the [inaudible 00:18:34] University instead.

You are seeing students that typically in the past the US could say, "I'm pretty sure these students are going to come", where through these past couple years they're like, you know what, the US is not the only player in the space. I'll show you we've got the UK, we've got all these other players that don't have some of the restrictions that the US has.

Yeah, absolutely. They have really streamlined paths to citizenship after graduating from one of their universities, and that's something that helps distinct advantage over us, where as we require students to leave within a year or so.

Yeah.

There are these other competitor countries that are really rising up and really taking a lot of the market share from us. Also, there have been shifts internationally in other universities in the way that they approach education. There are more and more universities that are offering Liberal Arts Education. That used to be distinct for US. That used to be something that we were really proud of. The fact that you had to take a little science, a little math, no matter what major you're going into. You're going to have a well-rounded college experience.

That's something that we still pride ourselves on. But now you can find schools in the UK and the Netherlands that are offering Liberal Arts Education.

In talking about the visa process or changing up the course schedule, those are larger conversations. Visa especially, outside of our control. As schools are starting to look more and more towards international students and making sure that they're included within their own community, what are some easy lifts? Like we can't change our visa policy. We can't change a lot of times in our one role within the institution,

we can't change the whole university policies, but what are one or two easy lifts that we can do to help make sure students feel included and feel part of our campus community?

It starts from admissions through onboarding really just making sure that they've seen from day 1, that they know from day 1 that they're coming into an environment that's going to be expecting to have to support them, that's going to be expecting certain things. For instance, most classroom environments around the world are very lecture-based, where the professor or the teacher is up at

the front of the classroom, deliver a lecture, the students write furiously, and are expected to regurgitate that information at a distinct point in time. But there's no conversations in between about it. It's a very one-sided relationship in most classrooms around the world, whereas in the US, of course, that's different, our professors want students that are contributing to the conversation, maybe even

pushing back or disagreeing, coming to office hours is basically a requirement. It's really a true back and forth two-way relationship

between a student and a professor in the US. Either that, just when I talk about day 1 onboarding

of an international student, making that,

just putting that out there, this is your classroom environments going to be different,

here are some closer success

in the US classroom. At AU, it's something that's actually required for all first-year students in their first semester is they take a transitions class, and one of the assignments is to go to a professor's office hours, and you journal but you come back in class

and say hey, how was that conversation with the professor?

To have that be assigned for all of the students that they have to go speak to Professor one-on-one,

just breaks the ice.

It gets you used to this is going to be a different classroom environment. This is how you thrive in the US. That's just one little lift is to maybe just include that into your orientation. Maybe just a little snippet on, this is what the US classroom looks like. There's some easy lifts like that I could say.

Great.

One thing that I've really been focused on is including the family in the process. Is really hard because there are students here, or you're here, and especially this past year, without being able to travel. How did you make sure everybody felt included as part of the process and making sure that the family felt seen and valued even when there's language barriers, there's distance barriers? There's a lot of things that families might not be experiencing if they're here in the US.

It's vital to think about a whole family, the whole community in that process. We have targeted emails that go out to our parents and we have targeted webinars that we have for our parents. We have newsletters that go to our school counselors. There are many schools outside the US

that don't have school counselors,

but if we have that information, we're going to include them on a newsletter to keep them updated about our application process, making sure that everybody knows that they have a touch point. Again, going back to making sure that they have a contact person that they know that they can reach out to, to say, "Hey, my daughter's trying to apply and it's not working out." For a lot of students that are



applying from the US, it might be strange to get a call from a mom and say, "I'm trying to get this transcript submitted for my son."

We would say, "Well, your son should go to their counselor, go to their school and get this submitted themselves." Whereas the parents that I work with internationally, they're going through a lot more work to get those documents to us. They're having to go maybe even to a notary to get certain things copied because they only have just this one precious copy of the thing that they have to turn in to us. There are just a lot more hoops to jump through. They need to have somebody that they could reach out to,

that they know is going to support them and be there for them.

Great. Well, we have a couple of questions that have come through the chat. Give me just a second as I read them. Kimberly was talking about or was asking if you could provide a few more suggestions on what to include in a new international student orientation.

There's a little bit of a cultural assimilation of when you think about the classroom. There's the classroom environment, there's also the dorm room environment, so your residence hall environment. You're thinking about the different spaces that are on campus and stepping back and say, if I wasn't from the US and I hadn't seen a million movies about what going to college looks like, what might not be obvious to me? That would be thinking about the different spaces

that they have on campus, the different physical spaces and what are the expectations there. Also safety. This is how you stay safe on a US campus. That's a big thing, and then as well as your visa and immigration requirements. I work with just admissions and then I pass the baton to my amazing colleagues in the International Student Scholars office and they host our international student orientation. I know that they spend a lot of time on making sure that a student knows

their expectations for their visa requirements. There are just a lot of technical things that need to be communicated in that space, and then orientation for the general student population might take over and talk a little bit more about other things like resident's hall expectations and so on. But for international students, I do think it's important to have at least a chunk of time where you step outside and you say, so we've talked about how if you change your address you need to inform us within two weeks. Yes, we know it's a technical thing.

But let's step outside a little bit and talk about the classroom environment, talk about what your living experience might look like. Talk about different ways that you can engage with your other students outside the classroom. Just thinking a little bit more about that cultural assimilation, just taking a little time outside, while I know it's a very busy day during orientation.

Then one thing, Julie, I remember that we talked about and thinking of this webinar

was a way to include families, because yes, students they do have to meet their English proficiency requirement when they're coming to campus, but a lot of times families want to be a part of that orientation, but it's almost daunting. I might not know English or it might not be as strong to really understand the financial aid process or safety, and so there is this divide. Can you talk about how you overcome those barriers?

Whether it's through translation services, or providing resources afterwards, or captioning or anything like that to help make sure families and students are not only understanding the information that's happening but also digesting it and be able to to really take that in.

Absolutely. At AU, the students I recruit do have to meet their English proficiency requirement like you said. I'm not currently working with students that need any translation services. But at previous institutions, I absolutely was. I was recruiting for an ESL program, and my materials, they had to be translated into the local language if I was going to go to a fair or some event for them. It was translating the materials and how to engage a translation service for that,

and then when I was physically in country at a fair, and this is something I still do at American University, is I make sure that I have a former student or a parent of a current student that accompanies me to a fair if there's going to be any language barrier, I'm going to have a partner there with me so that person can communicate to any students or any parents that aren't going to feel as comfortable communicating in English or maybe can't communicate in English with me. That's something I still currently do,

especially if I'm in person,

is make sure that there is somebody

there who can be my partner who can connect to those parents. Because maybe the students that are applying to American University don't need any English ESL services, but their parents, they might need somebody. They maybe even speak English, but it's not what they're most comfortable in. We're always thinking about how can we make people the most comfortable so you really be transparent and clear in what's going on. There's the physical materials, there's the physical events that we have going on,

but then all of our webinars that we're hosting, our official webinars that we have. We do have live captioning for them as well too. Even if it's not translated, it's still very helpful to have live captioning because, maybe you speak English incredibly well, but it's coming at you too fast, or in a virtual form, it's just not coming across right for you, so you're thinking the close captioning is so helpful to have that extra support there

and then usually you're sent a script afterwards. Just so you can review the information, you don't have to absorb it all in the moment. That's something that

we're also doing.

No, that's great. That's something that I've seen a lot in my current work is thinking ahead to graduation. A lot of schools are doing December graduations. The graduation is yes, a celebration for the students, but there's so many people that go and that are a part of the student success in getting to that point of graduation, and so I've seen a lot of our institutional partner saying, "We have a large Spanish population. The ceremony is going to happen in English. But can we have it translated so families and communities can feel part of that?"

That's something that we definitely see on a rise here at Verbit. But I think exactly what you said as well is, just having those captioning and two ways of digesting, both visually and auditorily, be able to digest that information, it gives students a peace of mind of saying, "I don't have to just be listening on pins and needles, and if I miss a word, or if I miss a topic, that's it, too bad." You could get the copy afterwards, you could digest it on your own time and space, and then circle back and ask questions.

Great point. I think a couple of good things to keep in mind. We had a couple of more questions come in.

Catherine was asking, how do you make sure that campus resources such as The Writing Center are utilized with international students? How do students make sure that they know that they're available and accessible? Like The Writing Center will understand that the student might not be the same as a domestic student and have 12 years of English before coming to The Writing Center.

Well, that is also part of our transitions class, our first-year experience class. In the first semester, all first year students are required to take this. As well, the assignment to go and speak to a professor during office hours. There are also introductions where they will actually take students to The Writing Center and to the MATLAB and to acquaint them with the resources that are on campus. That's the entire purpose of that first year experience class that's required for all of our first year students is making sure that

they know the resources that are on campus. If there's any way to introduce that, I know that that is not a light lift, it's new curriculum. That's not something that you'd just say, "Oh, yeah, easy, we'll just introduce this new class." That's not a light lift, that's something that AU was able to do over many years with a lot of thought. But that is something that's really advantageous to students, is that all of our students are really well acquainted with our resources on campus.

If you don't have a class like that that you can integrate this encouragement into, it is against something that's probably going to be loaded into your orientation to make sure that it does get space in your orientation. I would also say, but when it comes to orientation, there's just a lot of information. It's all new that you're going through in a really highly simulated environment where it's going to be impossible to absorb everything that you need.

If it is possible for your international student advisors to have a communication plan with their international students that doesn't include these other soft touch points later in the term, that's something that is highly advantageous. Not just sending them reminders that they need to register for their classes, being full-time registration by x date, but also having a communication plan that involves speaking about these resources. Saying, the counseling center is available for you,

especially when it comes to midterms, making sure that they know what resources they have available to them that are not going to be available to them necessarily in their home universities. When I spoke about the advantages to US university speaking to liberal arts, it's not just that, it's also our students services that make the US campus experience distinctly US. The fact that we do have counselors on campus, and we have our health center, we have our rec centers, we have our rah,

athletic environments in a lot of cases. There are a lot that goes into a campus community in the US that a lot of international students might not have. Making sure that they get that access to that information at the outset at orientation, but also sprinkled throughout that first year too as they may need that information, as it might become more relevant to them. That's going to be helpful. Also, if it's at all possible, in current international students are amazing. I can't say enough about them, but they are such good resources to use.

If there's any way to set up a volunteer peer mentoring situation, those students can be trained on relaying that information to a current student. That actually might be a little better fit for some students who are ignoring all your emails, which we experienced all the time. But they might be more receptive to a current international student reaching out and saying, hey, my name is Julie. I'm really interested in helping you succeed. What resources can I connect you with?

Or, do you want to just grab coffee real quick and tell me how your semester is going? Leveraging those current international students, I find that most of the time they are thrilled to be put to use. If they're happy at your university, they want to help other students, and so really use those resources that you have there.

We have one more question on going back to the first-year experience class or at the University 101.

Who's responsible?

Who sets up this class? If this is something that a campus is interested in getting set up. How often is that class typically held?

That class for our first year students is held weekly and it's held in a lounge within one of the residence halls. It's taught by a first-year experienced teacher, but they're also doubling as a first-year student advisor. At American University, the advising model is that all first year students will have a first-year advisor no matter what their major is. That advisor specializes in working with first year students. They

have a caseload of just 76 students or fewer, and they also teach sections of the first-year experience class of 19 or fewer students. They will meet with each section of their first year experience classes once a week for 50 minute class within one of our residence halls.

Great. One final question then I'm done, unfortunately. But this question I'm not sure if you know the necessary answer, but if you have any advice, or even where to start. This looks like it's coming from a smaller institution. They don't have the in-house legal departments. They're looking for more information about where they can learn more about for virtual students or faculty members teaching abroad.

What about privacy laws? Especially in the UK, business laws, foreign countries. Do you know any resources that are available for these institutions that are getting started or thinking about this?

I don't. When it comes to curriculum and the legalities around that, I don't have any resources when it comes to that. I'm so sorry. [inaudible 00:37:49] thinking of different

vendors I know,

but nothing's coming in mind

when it comes to legal issues. Sorry.

Yeah. That's a tough question just because legal issues like this, let's make sure that translations are available. Let's make sure captioning is available. Even if a student, yes, they do have to pass their English proficiency, but if we could give them a copy of the transcript after or use it for note-taking accommodation, this is a way where a student can sit back and say, you know what, I can just be a student for today and then if I need help or if I have questions or if I want to go back and look up this vocabulary where I have a copy of that transcript.

I have the captioning. It just makes our students feel a little bit more at home, improves retention, improves grades. This is something that I hear a lot in my work as I worked with these international partners. That's why I wanted to bring Julie in today and say, she's the expert, she gets this information inside and out. She could talk a little bit more about her experiences and her expertise. Julie, thank you so much for joining us today. Do you have any final words before we sign off?

No. Just a thank you. Thank you for everyone who has attended and engaged in the conversation today. I've really enjoyed celebrating international students with Verbit. Thank you for hosting.

Perfect. Well, thank you, Julie. Once again, really appreciate your expertise. If you have any questions, we will have this webinar available on our website. We'll also be doing some following up work as well. But thank you so much for joining us today and we look forward to celebrating next year as well.

