

## PLANNING STORY

# Planning Housing for International Students

## A Case Study from Oregon State University

by **Kate Dydak**

*A deliberate, metrics-based planning process can make all the difference in achieving strategic goals related to increasing international student enrollment.*

OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY (OSU) PARTNERED WITH INTO University Partnerships (IUP) to build the new International Living-Learning Center (ILLC), home of the Global Village living-learning community, in order to attract international students to its campus. The ILLC opened in September 2011 after a 22-month programming, design, and construction process. The \$52 million mixed-use facility houses 312 students in a 151,000-square-foot building that includes academic, dining, and office space. The year before it opened, OSU's international student enrollment was 1,548 students. The year after it opened, international student enrollment at OSU jumped to 2,362 students. The new ILLC has helped the university reach its enrollment goals even as it adapts to challenges caused by high room rates, the design of particular spaces, and cultural factors that impede student interaction. This article provides a comprehensive review of the planning process, both for the housing facility and for the living-learning community's residential programming.

U.S. postsecondary institutions are paying increased attention to international student enrollment for a variety of reasons. First, there is the dramatic increase in international student enrollment numbers. In 2002, there were 586,323 international students attending U.S. colleges and universities. By fall 2012, this number had increased to 819,644 (Institute of International Education 2014). This 43 percent increase in enrollments over the course of a decade is accompanied by an increased focus within the United States on the importance of preparing college students for a

global economy. The ability to understand and communicate with people of different cultures is increasingly recognized as an essential skill in the 21st-century marketplace. Lastly, in an era of decreasing state support for higher education, it is important to note that international students usually pay full price at public institutions. Therefore, U.S. schools have begun to allocate increased resources to international student recruitment and retention.

All of these factors played into OSU's strategic commitment to, in the words of OSU Provost Dr. Sabah Randhawa, "comprehensive internationalization" (Oregon State University, n.d., p. 1). OSU is a 28,886-student flagship public land-, sea-, and space-grant research university located in Corvallis, Oregon (figure 1). Diversity is one of the university's five core values, along with accountability, respect, integrity, and social responsibility. One of the themes of the 2004 OSU strategic plan was creating "an international presence through collaborative partnerships that enhance future global opportunities for education, research, and development, and that enable a better understanding of the multicultural world in which our future graduates will live and work" (Oregon State University 2004, p. 6). The university also planned on "raising the proportion of non-resident students in the student mix" (Oregon State University 2009, p. 6), a goal that encompassed both out-of-state and international students. Planning for an increase in international student enrollment was an explicit high-level university priority.



experience. This building would include academic spaces, support international food culture, provide places where students could relax and socialize, and create an on-campus destination for students interested in cultural interaction and awareness. The building would support multiple uses and user groups, and it would be designed to provide secure divisions between public and private residential spaces.

In October 2009, the planning, programming, and construction process began in earnest. The four main stakeholder groups involved in the process were OSU University Housing and Dining Services (UHDS), IUP, OSU Facilities, and OSU Campus Planning. UHDS financed the project, while IUP—the primary tenant—was responsible for marketing the facility to prospective students around the world. OSU Facilities was interested in making utilities decisions for the new facility that would align with an ongoing campus project, and OSU Campus Planning worked to ensure that the location, materials, aesthetic, and design of the new facility fit with existing campus standards. All four stakeholders understood that delivering this facility, and delivering it quickly, was a university priority.

Unfortunately, the time crunch was incredibly intense and made more challenging by the level of collaboration required. As noted by architect Kurt Haapala, the situation involved “a developing partnership collaborating on a very complex project” (pers. comm.). The sense of urgency was compounded by the fact that the university was experiencing rapidly increasing international student enrollments. OSU had spent several months trying to create a workable public-private partnership RFP, which was ultimately scrapped in favor of a public procurement process for the design team. This public process resulted in the selection of Mahlum Architects and Fortis Construction to design and build the ILLC.

Once selected, the design team began immediately reaching out to a variety of campus stakeholders beyond the project team. This effort included meetings with OSU faculty,

resident students, student government, retail dining establishments, and, of course, the current international student population. After these focus groups came a week-long campus design charrette, followed by 38 weeks of project team meetings. To clarify the relationships among the four stakeholder groups, an explicit communication chart was created that specified who was expected to provide feedback and when. It also established the three primary decision makers: Dan Larson from UHDS, Amy McGowan from IUP, and Lori Fulton from Campus Planning.

The site for the new facility was chosen quickly. The ILLC would be situated to complete a housing and dining quadrangle on the south side of the campus (figures 2 and 3). Halsell Hall, Finley Hall, and Bloss Hall are suite-style and traditional-style residence halls. They provide 228, 354, and 348 student beds respectively. The Arnold Dining Center across the quad accepts meal plan dollars and other payment options at five different dining venues. The ILLC site is located in the southeastern corner of this residential area. The ILLC building was designed in an S-shape with four main entries. The dramatic, glass-encased central entryway opens to both the campus community to the northwest and the lawn to the southeast. SW Western Boulevard connects the building to the residential neighborhood east of campus. Campus Planning was instrumental in choosing this site for the project.

All stakeholders were committed to creating a showcase facility, but, as noted previously, UHDS primarily funded the project. Therefore, there was a constant back and forth between IUP staff members, who were pushing for the high-quality, customized product they felt their students would expect, and UHDS, which wanted the project to offer a high-quality living environment while maintaining attractive rental rates for international and domestic students. IUP was drawing from its experience building international student accommodations in Exeter, England. The company used that product as an example of how universities should meet the needs of international students. However, some ideas did not

Figure 2 Map of the ILLC On-Campus Location

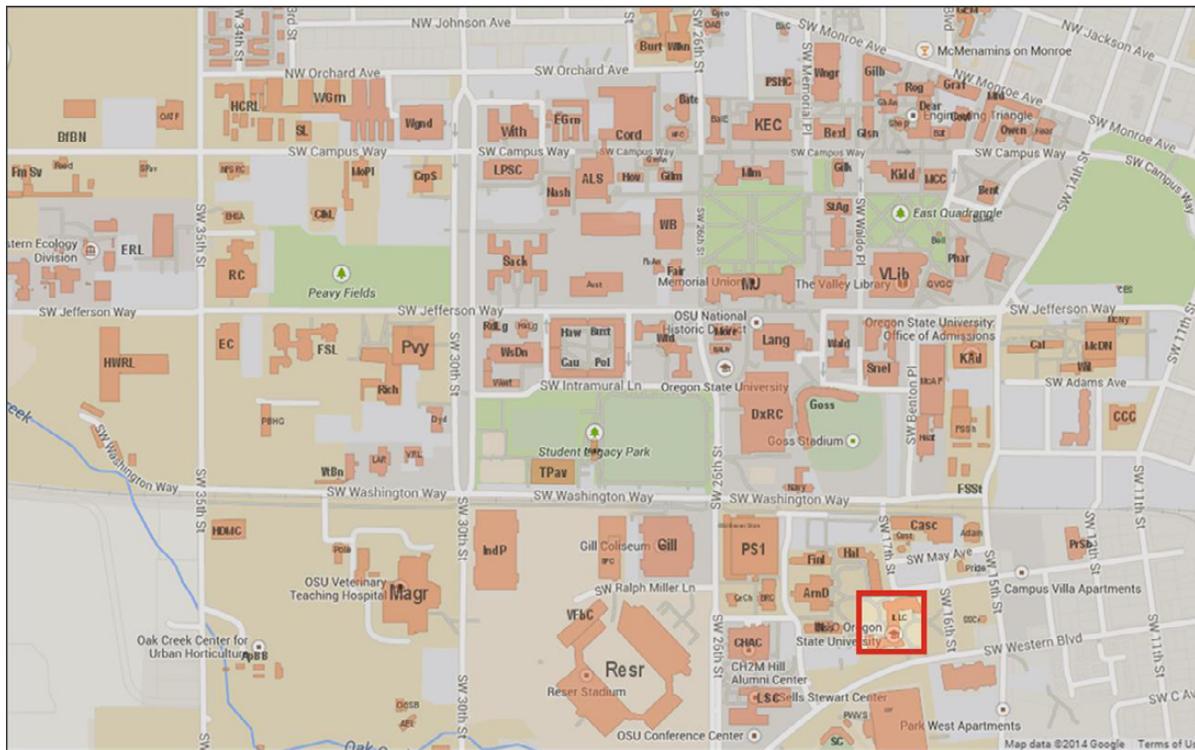
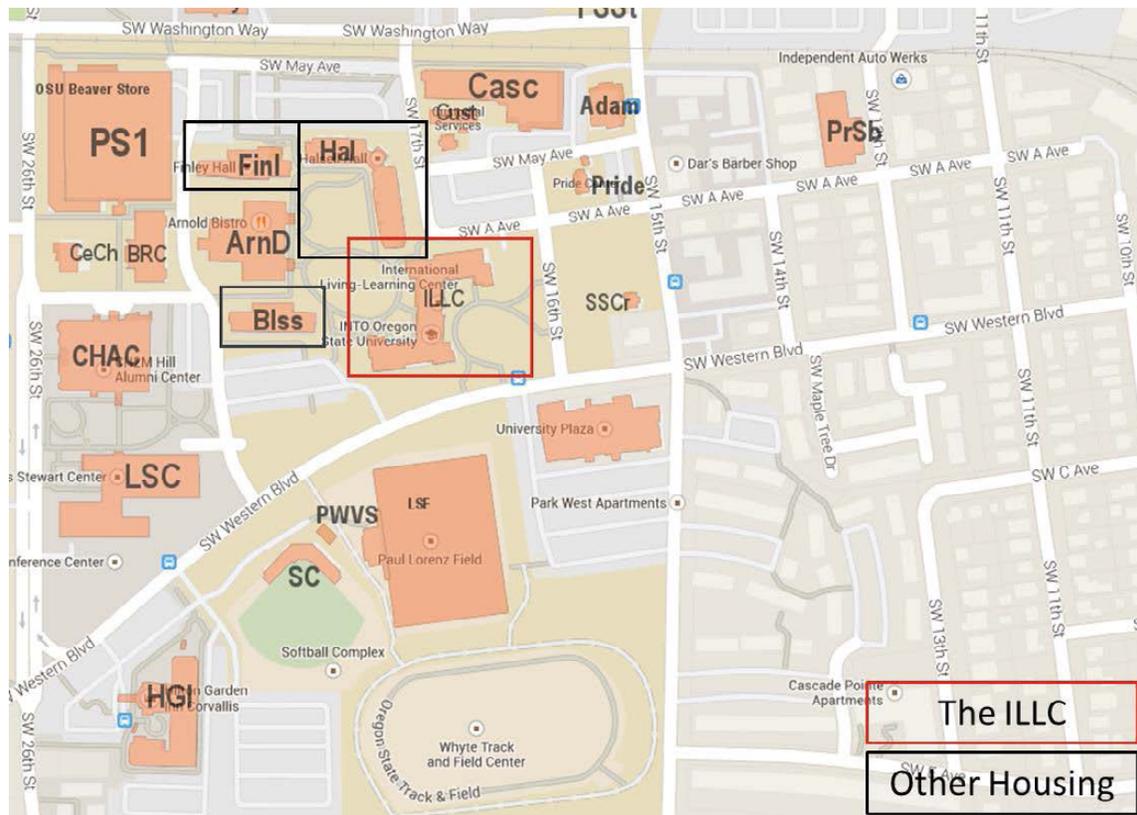


Figure 3 Map of the ILLC Site Within the Housing and Dining Quadrangle



translate well to an American context. In the words of the UHDS’ Patrick Robinson, “We wanted a project that would pencil while having IUP feel that it was getting the product it wanted” (pers. comm.). When the ILLC opened in September 2011, it was by far the most expensive residence hall on campus (figure 4).

Figure 4 **Fall 2011 Term Housing Room Rates**

Residence Hall	Double Room Rate	Variance (%)
International Living-Learning Center	\$3,199	--
Halsell, West International	\$2,635	21%
Weatherford Residential College	\$2,623	22%
Bloss	\$2,606	23%
Buxton, Hawley, Sackett	\$2,531	26%
Callahan, Cuthorn, Finley, McNary, Poling, Wilson	\$2,506	28%

Note: All rates for Fall Term 2011.

Much of this cost was due to the residential units themselves. IUP had originally pushed for all single bedrooms, a model that was working well for them in the United Kingdom. UHDS advocated for suite-style units, knowing that an entirely single-occupancy program would be very difficult to finance due to the risk if the partnership dissolved and UHDS had to fill the beds itself. In the final design, beds for 344 students were provided in suite-style units that featured their own bathrooms. The majority were four-person suites, with double-occupancy rooms sharing a bathroom. Some more expensive two-person single-occupancy room suites and one-room suites were included as well. The private bathrooms were important to Muslim students, who have faith-specific cleansing requirements. Typical residence hall amenities, such as on-floor study lounges, social lounges, and community kitchens, were also integrated into the design. The residential floor kitchens were particularly important to the international students who wanted to prepare dishes from home.

Mixed with these residential units was an extensive amount of academic, office, and retail space. IUP and OSU again differed on their visions for the center’s academic spaces. IUP places admitted students into an undergraduate or graduate “Pathway Program.” This program provides intensive supplemental English language instruction during the first year of a student’s tenure and has been shown to result in increased international student retention and graduation rates (Oregon State University, n.d.). IUP wanted small classrooms for these specialized language classes, but OSU had little need for classrooms of that size and instead wanted larger classrooms that could also accommodate lecture courses. Ultimately, the academic spaces were programmed to include one large auditorium and a total of 25 classroom and conference rooms; the auditorium is controlled by the university registrar while the classrooms are rented from UHDS by INTO OSU. This was the first campus residence hall to integrate so much academic space.

The ground floor of the building was designed to include some residential and academic spaces, including an apartment for the Resident Director, the main auditorium, and a number of computer labs. There was also a significant amount of office space for the INTO OSU staff included in the north wing of the building, which INTO OSU rents from UHDS. The ground floor of the south wing houses a retail dining facility called the International Market and Café, which is intended to offer international students more specialty food options and fresh produce. Café management has been tweaking the menu ever since it opened to provide more variety to students with cultural dietary needs. The retail spaces have also proved popular with the wider campus community. While around 350 students live in the building, over 1,400 people use the facility daily. Importantly, the design provides vertical and horizontal security and access control points to keep nonresidents out of residential areas.

One consistent design challenge in the ILLC has been providing way-finding signage for residents, many of whom have difficulty with English. Some things, like stairs, are

easy to explain visually, while others, like the presence of a footbath adjacent to a multifaith space, are less straightforward or even culturally foreign. Different cultural expectations for building layout and amenities, along with the building’s multiple uses and the presence of private areas, only complicate matters further. Trash and recycling and the related signage have been particularly tricky. INTO OSU continues to explore ways to provide better building signage and orient international students to building amenities and expectations.

The new ILLC did have the desired effect on international student enrollment at OSU. In 2010, before the ILLC opened, there were 1,548 international students enrolled at OSU. This represented 6.5 percent of total student enrollment. By fall term 2013 the number of international students almost doubled to 2,859 students, rising to 10.2 percent of the university’s overall enrollment and far outpacing the average percentage growth in international student populations at other American universities.

To assess the success of the ILLC, a student satisfaction survey was administered to residents to inquire about different aspects of their residential experience. This survey showed that most residents (53 percent) were very satisfied with their overall living experience. However, less than 10 percent were planning to return to the ILLC the following year. Their number one reason for leaving was price. They felt that room rates were too expensive, particularly when compared to the off-campus market. This led to some contractual adjustments to secure occupancy in the facility

that have ensured very high occupancy rates since the project’s construction. UHDS also administers a campuswide survey every year to assess student housing, dining, and safety issues. Other than price, the most challenging issues in the ILLC have involved some specific facility design tweaks and residential programming adjustments. The building had been planned and delivered, but the student experience inside the building still needed some fine-tuning.

### PLANNING FOR THE COMMUNITY

When the new facility opened, the plan was to fill it half with domestic students and half with international students to create a “Global Village” living-learning community. However, the first group of students to reside in the building was overwhelmingly international. Only 30 percent of the residents were domestic. This mix was not creating the level of interaction between international and domestic students that the INTO OSU program had hoped to provide. While the Global Village living-learning community had initially been planned to include the entire building, INTO OSU realized that it was going to have to be more proactive in creating specific opportunities for students interested in cultural exchange for the 2013 academic year.

Therefore, the Global Village concept was reworked to apply to a core group of around 40 dedicated students living on the fifth floor of the ILLC. This group was made up of half domestic and half international students, with other students invited to join in Global Village activities. This living-learning

Figure 5 **Change in International Student Population at OSU, 2008–2014**

	2008*	2009	2010	2011**	2012	2013	2014
Total Enrollment	20,320	21,969	23,761	24,977	26,393	27,925	28,886
International Enrollment	988	1,120	1,548	1,852	2,362	2,859	3,202
Percentage	4.9%	5.1%	6.5%	7.4%	8.9%	10.2%	11.1%

\*INTO Partnership forms.

\*\*ILLC opens.

community's three main goals were defined as exploring personal and cultural identities, understanding cultural values, and navigating cultural differences. As a part of the readjustment, INTO OSU allocated additional money to Global Village programming.

Living-learning communities come in many forms. The Global Village's programming was planned to include both academic and extracurricular elements and involve multiple campus stakeholders. Many activities are organized directly by the INTO OSU staff. Each term, every Global Village student is given a Global Village Passport. In it, the students answer predetermined reflection questions or record their reactions to activities in which they have participated. These activities include campus cultural events, such as International Education Week, or relevant lectures or performing arts events. They also include biweekly living-learning community meetings. Each term there is a different broad theme such as "language and communication" or "friendships and relationships" for these programs, which are led by INTO OSU staff and/or guest instructors. The final staff-led element of the living-learning community program is a one-credit course offered during the spring term. This course is the culmination of the full-year Global Village experience.

These INTO OSU staff-led activities are supplemented by activities planned and led by the Global Village Peer Leadership Group, which consists of six students, including both scholarship students who are chosen as honorary leaders and students elected by their peers. This group plans biweekly events for the weeks when Global Village activities are not happening. In the past, many of these outings have involved sports. Students learn and play a sport during one outing and then go watch OSU compete in that sport in another outing. The Peer Leadership Group helps the international students themselves shape their own living-learning community experience.

In addition to harnessing student leadership, the Global Village has entered into a partnership with the College of Liberal Arts to deliver academic content to students. Six faculty members lead evening workshops with living-learning community students. These workshops are open to the entire campus community and help promote awareness of global issues. By engaging other campus stakeholders, the Global Village has expanded the offerings available to students in its living-learning community.

The Global Village is constantly planning and adjusting its programming. It has several methods in place for evaluating the success of its living-learning community. First, the reflections in the Passports are read by staff and provide information on what campus events students attend. They also provide insights into the student experience that are used to plan future programming. Student focus groups have also been used to gather ideas. These groups have consisted of both Global Village students specifically and ILLC residents more generally. INTO OSU surveys its students each term about their campus orientation, housing, and dining experiences. Lastly, attendance metrics are used as a simple way to determine which programs are appealing to students and which are not. These data are integrated into an end-of-year community report and used to ensure that Global Village programming is meeting the needs of OSU's international students.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The OSU project reveals some key takeaways for institutions interested in planning housing for international students. When planning housing for this demographic, it is important not to adopt a "one-size-fits-all" model. International students have different cultural and economic backgrounds and different reasons for coming to the United States. Providing spaces that meet their specific needs while also integrating them into the larger campus community is a difficult task.

The following points highlight some lessons learned from the ILLC planning process.

**When planning international student housing, know your market and incorporate flexibility for international students with different needs.** The high housing rates and modern finishes of the ILLC met the expectations of many international students, but some international and many domestic students did not see the new facility as a great value given the cost. Any new housing facility should be planned at a price point that appeals to both international and domestic on-campus students. Likewise, international students should have housing available to them in various configurations and at various rates. OSU is currently housing international students not only at the ILLC, but in every on-campus residence. It has also introduced lower-cost housing choices, including triples, to the building's existing residential options. International student housing that is too expensive for domestic students will isolate international students and create occupancy risk if international student recruitment projections are inaccurate.

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Flexibility should be designed both into the facility and into the processes used to operate it. Consider the roommate assignment process. Some international students come to America eager to make American friends. They want to avoid being housed exclusively with international students and prefer their roommates to be American. Other students, while interested in America and American culture, want to come home to a roommate who is familiar with their cultural habits. These students prefer to be housed with other international students. Allowing students to specify which they prefer on their application, as INTO OSU does, helps customize the international student experience and increase student satisfaction. OSU also allows domestic students to request an international roommate. Creating

facilities and programs that can accommodate a wide range of international and domestic students helps bring these two groups together on campus. This spurs cultural exchange and the continued use of these programs and facilities.

**Design residential amenities for international students with an awareness of specific cultural needs.** While housing for international students should also be designed to appeal to domestic students, international students have specific amenity needs that should be explicitly considered. Many of the facility issues that continue to trouble the ILLC are a result of not understanding how specific cultural differences affect the use of certain spaces. For example, a multifaith space was incorporated into the ILLC as a residential amenity. While it was programmed to be a quiet space that would meet the needs of multiple faith communities, it is very challenging to create a space that can serve all the world's religions, given different traditions regarding gender separation, footwear, privacy, compass orientation, and so on. The result in the ILLC was a fairly bland space with curtained partitions that did not do much to create a sense of reverence or an inviting atmosphere. Effective multifaith spaces balance the needs of multiple specific religious traditions while creating an appealing place for members of any religious community.

Another less obvious space with very different cultural usage patterns is the bathroom. In many bathrooms worldwide there is no distinction between the shower area and the toilet area. Shower curtains are not used. Unfortunately, during the value-engineering process, central floor drains were removed from the bathrooms for budgetary reasons. As a result, OSU has had water leakage issues from many upstairs bathrooms. The university has had to undertake significant construction to modify the bathrooms to accommodate the international student population. Additionally, specialized plumbing fixtures such as bidets, footbaths, or shower hoses should be a program requirement and not just considered an amenity for certain groups of international students.

Understanding that food is an essential aspect of the international student experience, the ILLC included both community kitchen and dining areas. Community kitchens that open into lounge spaces were provided on every floor. This created invaluable programming options and increased international student satisfaction. However, the larger dining facilities were not planned to provide adequate variety for students with cultural dietary restrictions. The difference between providing a Halal option (ensuring that Halal students have a meal they can eat) and providing Halal options (multiple dishes that students can choose from) is enormous. It is something that the International Market and Cafe is still working to better incorporate.

### **Research examples of international student**

**housing from multiple peer institutions.** While IUP had expertise in the educational, social, and cultural needs of international students, it had only built one other international student center with a residential component. That building was located in Exeter, England, not in the United States. IUP drew inspiration from a variety of U.K. precedents, but it relied on the other stakeholders to adjust its vision to the U.S. context. Equally, the other stakeholders relied on IUP to have subject matter expertise on the residential experience of international students in the United States, even though this project was IUP's first one here. The entire planning team could have benefitted from researching other U.S. universities and the challenges they faced in housing international students. This research would have informed the planning process and built trust that the right decisions were being made. The time crunch may have been partially responsible for the lack of case study investigation. Allowing time for comparable examples to be investigated is integral to a successful international student housing project.

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**Build adequate time into the planning process schedule.** Some construction projects, traditional student housing projects among them, can benefit from being completed on an expedited schedule. However, projects that include a complicated program with unusual operational needs should be completed in a time frame that allows for the deliberate consideration of diverse options. Planning and designing the ILLC required multiple iterations of design documents and the creation of seven separate contractor bid packages. It was not an easy project. The time crunch the project team experienced underscores the importance of planning for housing facilities before an expected enrollment increase. That way, the pressure created by increasing enrollment does not force a project to come online too quickly.

**Plan for intentional student interaction.** Buildings can be designed to promote interaction, but intentional, constructive interaction requires planning. Providing consistent programming is important since international students arrive at different times during the year. This is especially true for universities on a term system. The planning structures do not have to be convoluted. Simple engagement metrics, such as attendance, are often the most effective. However, creating an international student community and developing programming that meets student needs requires a commitment of manpower, time, and money.

**Plan to create connections between international students, the campus community, and the local community.** A key aspect of the international student residential experience involves not only their connection to their existing community, but also their ability to access broader community resources. INTO OSU helps facilitate this interaction both through a student services team and its specific events and by advocating for its students campuswide. The growth of the international student community has prompted conversations about items ranging from fitness center hours to academic building bathroom design. International students at OSU have also enjoyed

participating in community service events, both on campus and off. The staff at OSU is working to incorporate more service events into Global Village programming, perhaps even an international service trip.

## CONCLUSION

Whenever colleges and universities build new housing, it is essential to understand the target market. This is true for any housing project, not just one intended for international students. However, housing international students can create unique challenges, since this target market varies greatly in its desires, preferences, and expectations. As OSU has learned, a deliberate, metrics-based planning process can make all the difference in achieving strategic goals related to increasing international student enrollment. The benefits of achieving such goals are shared by the entire university.

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