

HOW TO:

Engage with International Students and Scholars in a Virtual World



TERRADOTTA



CONTENTS

Preface	3
By the Numbers	4
8 Ways to Engage Virtually	5
Using Terra Dotta in a Virtual World	12
Moving forward	13

Preface



When the pandemic shut down campuses, it also cut off opportunities for international students and scholars to build connections. No longer could they meet over coffee with their academic advisor, attend multicultural student group events, get involved in a club sport team or set up an in-person meeting with their international student counselor to talk about important visa issues.

At the same time, as the coronavirus spread around the world, they grappled with scary headlines from their home countries and confusing policy changes that seemingly threatened their continued education in the United States.

Many were left suffering. The **American College Health Association** dubbed international students among the country's "vulnerable campus populations" during the COVID-19 pandemic. The uncertainty about their status and other stressors, coupled with isolation and separation from their support network at home, are among the reasons.

After a year living with Zoom, we know that nothing can replace face-to-face gatherings. But even when living in a virtual world, it's still possible to engage with international students and scholars.



F-1 STUDENTS

650

SPONSORED J VISAS

12

J SCHOLARS

60

H-1B SCHOLARS

60-75



BY THE NUMBERS



600

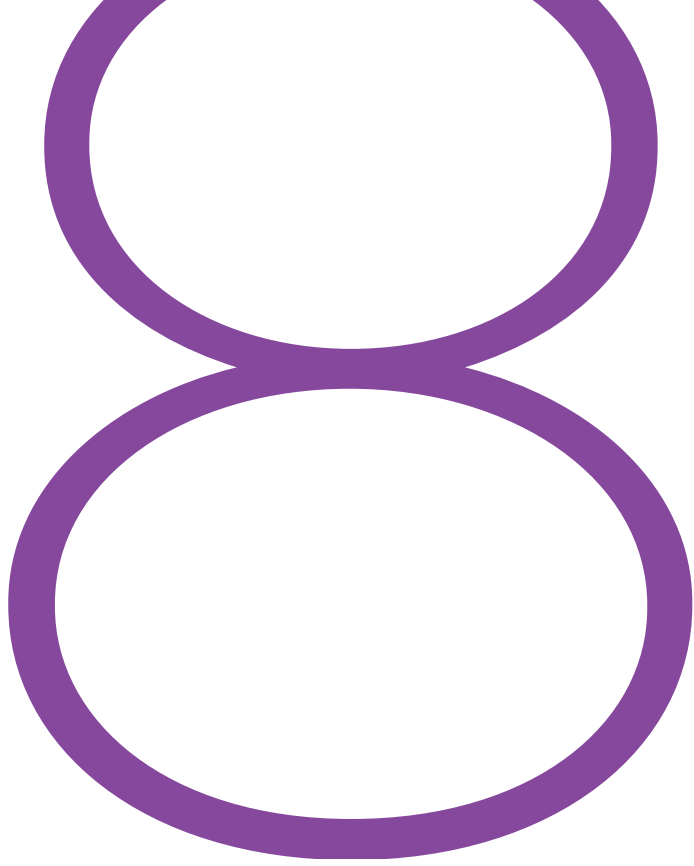
F-1 STUDENTS

16

J SCHOLARS/STUDENTS

12

H-1B SCHOLARS



Eight Ways to Engage Virtually

In the past year, administrators at **Old Dominion University** in Virginia and **Central Michigan University** have found ways to not just connect with students, but also build community and relationships. They shared their tips during a **recent Terra Dotta webinar**.

Here are eight ways for engaging with international students and scholars in a virtual world.



Open Forums

At the start of the pandemic, Central Michigan started hosting open virtual forums where nearly any subject was on the table — from important updates about new federal policies impacting international students' status to which stores still had toilet paper on the shelves.

“We wanted students to know they can depend on us,” said Megan Hofer, international student advisor at Central Michigan. “Especially students who just arrived in January, we wanted them to know our office is here for you.”

The sessions were well attended, Hofer said. “That told us that students needed us; they needed our presence.”





2

Grab-and-Go Activities

Once Central Michigan’s staff could have some limited interaction with international students, they set up a regular slate of fun grab-and-go activities. Wearing masks and gloves and keeping a physical distance, staff handed out ice cream bars and hand sanitizer pens at one. At another, students could sign up to take home a blank 8x10 canvas with paints in the color of their home country’s flag. In the fall, students picked up individually wrapped doughnuts and cider. Before holiday break, they had goodie bags with flavored popcorn, other snacks and a message. And during the long Michigan winter, students could register for game night supplies that included snacks, drinks and a puzzle or board game to complete with their roommates.

The goal was to bring a little joy to the students, Hofer said, and it’s been a success. More than 100 students engaged in the game night activity alone. “Even though it’s hard to see a smile through a mask, you can tell when someone is smiling,” Hofer said.



3 Social Media Contests

Central Michigan tried social media contests that required students to submit photos, but they didn't go so well. So, they switched it up to a Monday Fun Day feature and showcased a picture of Central Michigan swag, such as a branded winter hat or umbrella. Then they asked students to simply like the image to be entered into a drawing to win the featured item the next day.

"That has gone over great. Everybody loves freebies. And we've increased our social media engagement," Hofer said. "It's been a win-win."

4 Themed Online Meetings

Central Michigan also looked for ways to support international students through collaborations with other departments on campus. They partnered with the career development office on a session on how to conduct a virtual job interview. Another workshop focused on leadership. And with the counseling center, they covered mental health resources available on campus.

"We were a little worried about the participation just because we know students are taking online classes and Zoomed out," Hofer said. But, she said, the participation rate has been high.



5

Intentional Emails

At Old Dominion, email has been the primary way its international staff has communicated big news or compliance issues with students. But at the start of the pandemic, staff made a conscious effort to be intentional about the tone of the emails they sent out to students.

Instead of only sharing the headlines about new policies or procedures, Old Dominion staff took a different tack. “What we ended up doing was just sending a lot of assurance emails,” said Kasie Reyes, deputy director of the Center for Global Engagement at Old Dominion. “So, telling students that we know things are heavy and we get it and if you need to call and just talk to us, you are welcome to do that at any point in time.”

At the same time, they reassured students that staff was staying on top of all the latest developments and would share any important updates, including how the university would help students navigate them. “Just trying to, as much as possible, take some of the pressure off our students,” Reyes said.

6

Swag Giveaways

Sometimes it's the little things when you need a pick-me-up and, at ODU, that comes in the form of branded swag that staff gives away during designated document pickup and drop-off times. Reyes said her office doesn't have much of a budget to purchase items. Instead, they reach out to other departments on campus for leftover items.

"It's something really small, and maybe they already received it from that other office," Reyes said. "But they still get really excited about it."



7

Drop-Off Activities

Many of the scholars at ODU come with families, including kids. And ODU usually offers regular events to engage them, including visits to a local museum, a trip to see a baseball game or a pumpkin carving party. Those couldn't happen during COVID, but ODU found a workaround. In the fall, they dropped off pumpkins for students and families to carve. And at the holidays, they offered gingerbread houses for them to decorate.



8

Partner Presentations

Starting in the early days of the pandemic as federal agencies tossed around policies that would have sent international students home, the global engagement staff at Old Dominion sought out other offices to partner with on forums to give students up-to-date information. That included the university's graduate school, student affairs deans and provosts, who would open the forums with a message about how important international students are to the ODU community.

Perhaps because of the big names attached to the forums, the partner presentations drew more international students than usual, along with other participants from across campus. And, perhaps most critically, it introduced the global engagement office's staff to other administrators and faculty members on campus. In a few cases, some contacted Reyes' office separately to share their concerns about an international student who had not been showing up to classes.

"That other offices and professors were coming to us to raise a bit of a red flag for a student was super helpful so we could reach out and say, 'Hey, what's going on? Do you need assistance? Can we schedule a meeting? Do you need to talk?'" Reyes said.



USING TERRA DOTTA IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

Both Hofer and Reyes said the transition to virtual operations wouldn't have been nearly as smooth without the capabilities of Terra Dotta. The cloud-based solution allowed them to issue documents more quickly to students and, as regulations quickly shifted, update documents in batches from their home offices.

It also allowed them to better support students. At Central Michigan, counselors, for example, aren't assigned to a particular group of students; they serve everybody. As they prepared to meet virtually with a student, they could just go to the Terra Dotta portal to see who the student met with last, what comments were in their record and whether everybody was on the same page.

“Having Terra Dotta software allowed us to continue day-to-day tasks without much of a hiccup.

—MEGAN HOFER, INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ADVISOR, CMU

MOVING FORWARD

As vaccines roll out and we emerge from COVID, Reyes said she's eager to connect with international students and scholars and their families again.

... she hopes some of the new initiatives aimed at engaging with students in a virtual world will remain, especially the partnerships with high-visibility departments around campus.

"Over the years, we've really cultivated a really student-friendly office," she

said. "We wanted students to drop by if they had a question or drop off their documents in person or come tell us about their achievements or bring their babies in. We were really becoming as student friendly as possible and really enjoyed those interactions."

When ODU very quickly shut down operations, it was a difficult transition, she said. And while she's eager for the return of many of those pre-pandemic activities, she hopes some of the new initiatives aimed at engaging with students in a virtual world will remain, especially the partnerships with high-visibility departments around campus.

"It has been difficult, but we've learned a lot of things," Reyes said. "And I think some of the partnerships, especially, are things that I hope really continue into the return to the post-pandemic world because those partnerships were really huge for us in increasing visibility of our students and their issues."



Learn how Terra Dotta can help you engage with your international students and scholars in a virtual world.

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